

# OF WHELKS AND WHIMSY

With its intricate patterns of beautifully coloured mussels, scallops and oysters, the shell house at Cilwendeg has an irresistible charm

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**D**eep in woodland in West Wales stands a sparkling little building that looks like something out of a fairytale. While Hansel and Gretel found a gingerbread house, in this clearing on the Cilwendeg estate near Boncath is something lovelier and more charming still – a 19th-century folly whose interior is decorated almost entirely with shells.

A wooden portico, shaded by climbers, supports a stepped pediment of coarsely cut white quartz, glinting in the sunshine, while arched doors and stained-glass windows add to the ethereal appeal. But if the overall effect of the exterior is magical, on entering, this impression is increased a hundredfold. The interior walls shimmer with shell and mineral inlays above a floor laid in traditional rustic style with horses' teeth and knucklebones. The walls are made up of 19 panels, each containing a gothic arch outlined by a double course of blue mussels, framing a riot of razor clams, cockle shells, whelks, scallop

shells and otter shells, many arranged in the form of flower petals, highlighted by the nacreous gleam of an oyster or the delicate pink of a conch.

Despite the sylvan setting, the seaside theme is appropriate. The owner and commissioner of the folly was Morgan Jones, whose family had amassed a fortune from tolls levied on ships passing their lighthouse at Skerries, off the coast of Anglesey.

As unique as the building sounds, when he built it in the 1820s, Morgan was actually following fashion – one that reaches back to the Renaissance when the popularity of elaborate shell grottoes started to spread throughout Europe.

At first, these grottoes were otherworldly, awe-inspiring places. Leonardo da Vinci declared, 'You should feel two emotions when approaching a grotto: fear and desire. You should fear what may be inside but desire to discover.' They reached England in around 1623 when Huguenot garden designer Isaac de Caus transformed the cellars of Whitehall

**CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN IMAGE** Symmetrical patterns transform shells into flower decorations; golden light from the colourful stained glass is reminiscent of the late summer sun; even models of owls and lanterns are covered in shells; shell artist Blott Kerr-Wilson painstakingly restored the intricate shell designs; the exotic pink conch shells needed for the restoration were sourced via public appeal; the grotto's quirky exterior hints at the promise of what awaits inside

Palace into a spectacular shell grotto where King James could enjoy drinking parties within earshot of the revels above. Working with a relative, de Caus is also thought to have created shell rooms in the 1620s at Woburn Abbey and Skipton Castle.

## OCEANIC OBSESSIONS

The graceful symmetry of shells has long been an inspiration to mankind. They feature in Phoenician, Greek and Roman art, often symbolising life, as in Botticelli's Venus rising from a scallop shell. But it was with the growth of international trading routes that exotic shells from the Indian and Pacific oceans began to be sought-after for pride of place in gentlemen's cabinets of curiosities.

Rembrandt had a beautiful, dappled marbled cone shell (depicted in an etching of 1650) in his collection and other shells such as such as the glossy, chestnut Glory of the Sea cones (once thought to be the rarest shells on Earth) and precious wentletraps

– so exotically different to our common limpets and periwinkles – were considered among the greatest prizes in the collecting world.

There's nothing like demand to fuel supply and, by the late 18th and early 19th century, shells were being imported en masse from east Asia (oil giant Shell started out as an antiques dealer, importing oriental shells for use in interior decoration).

At Cilwendeg it's not certain who built the Shell House but traditionally the ladies of the house had a hand in shell design, even if they did not involve themselves with the physical work. There are a number of examples. The Shell House in Hatfield is said to have been decorated by Laetitia Houblon in 1757 when she was only 15. In Goodwood's exquisite Shell House built in 1740 we find, picked out among the shells, the initials of the Duchess of Richmond and two of her daughters – one of whom, Emily, went on to become the Duchess of Leinster and created another shell house at her new Irish home, ▶

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Carton. And in 1798 the Parminter cousins, Jane and Mary, designed the unique 16-sided house, A la Ronde, near Exmouth. The superlative shell gallery they created has been referred to as 'the zenith of vanished feminine elegance'.

Not everyone was so complimentary about shell houses, though. A Lincolnshire lady showed her grotto to Dr Johnson, saying, 'Would it not be a pretty, cool habitation in summer?' To which the good Doctor replied, 'I think it would Madam – for a toad.'

Most of the shells used at Cilwendeg, rather than coming from the Indies, were in fact local. This proved to be good news back in 2005, when architect Roger Clive-Powell, on behalf of the Temple Trust, initiated the restoration of what was by then a forlorn and fragile structure, working from archaeological surveys to reconstruct the folly as faithfully as possible. Leading shell artist Blott Kerr-Wilson was employed to recreate the shell work and it was she and her children, together with the Trust's chairman, Suzannah Fleming (who also acted as Blott's assistant on the project), who went collecting limpets, white winkles and pectens on the Pembrokeshire beaches. Only the huge pink conch shells – native to the West Indies and now a protected species – in the centre of each panel



proved a problem. 'I realised that many were probably gathering dust on people's mantelpieces, so I made an appeal via the local paper,' says Suzannah. Happily for all concerned, donations soon flooded in from locals whose ancestors had acquired the shells – each one with a fascinating history, much like the building itself. ■

**ABOVE** The criss-crossed mussel shells around the cornice act as a ventilation grille to stop the building becoming damp

⊕ *The Cilwendeg Shell House, Cilwendeg Park, Boncath, Pembrokeshire, is open to the public on Thursdays from April to September, 9am-6pm*



## FIVE FAVOURITES SHELL GROTTOES

Enter the wacky decorative world of follies and fantasies

### 1 THE SHELL HOUSE

*Goodwood House, Chichester, West Sussex. 01243 755000; goodwood.co.uk*

You'll need to pre-book a tour to be able to appreciate the exquisite 18th-century shell work.

### 2 SCOTT'S GROTTO

*Ware, Hertfordshire. 01920 464131; scotts-grotto.org*

A wonderful series of chambers and tunnels beneath a hill topped by a summer house. Dr Johnson liked this one, which he dubbed 'a Fairy Hall'.

### 3 A LA RONDE

*Summer Lane, Exmouth, Devon. 01395 265514; nationaltrust.org.uk/a-la-ronde*

The Shell Gallery – the largest and most impressive of its kind – at this fantastically eccentric 16-sided

house can be explored by a captivating virtual tour.

### 4 THE CRYSTAL GROTTO

*Painshill Park, Cobham, Surrey. 01932 868113; painshill.co.uk*

Visit at the weekends to see this, the finest stalactite grotto in Europe, commissioned in 1760 by Charles Hamilton and recently restored.

### 5 THE SHELL GROTTO

*Grotto Hill, Margate, Kent. 01843 220008; shellgrotto.co.uk*

This grotto consists of a chamber and central room linked by passages, richly lined with shells, and was discovered by chance in 1835. To this day, no-one knows when or by whom it was created.

