



**SPECIALIST PROFILE**

## Blott Kerr-Wilson

A self-taught shell worker whose creations are painstaking and intricate

Shell houses originated in Ancient Greece as shrines to water nymphs. Nowadays, their role is purely decorative - a type of folly, embellished with intricate shell decoration. Blott Kerr-Wilson is one of only a handful of people who specialize in shell houses and other decorative shell work. 'I'm hugely lucky - it's something I happen to be able to do, and I love it,' she says.

Her career began when she won *The World of Interiors* 'Design a Room' competition with the shelled bathroom of her Peckham council house. Entirely self-taught, Blott was inspired by shell houses in the gardens she visited as a child. At the time, Blott was doing a variety of jobs, from envelope stuffing to cooking - she trained as a chef after leaving school at 16. But her life quickly changed when publicity from the competition brought commissions.

Her projects have been diverse. At the Ballymaloe Cookery School in Ireland, she created a shell house that the owner commissioned as a showcase for four Gothic windows. At Eaton Hall, Cheshire, she transformed a fernery into a 'shelled underworld' for the Duchess of Westminster. 'You look through the archway and it seems as if the shells are pouring down into a pool at the bottom,' she says. She also decorated a folly at Belcombe Court in Wiltshire in a labyrinth design that employed only two or three types of white shell. 'The effect was very

simple and pure - you rarely see that type of modern shelling.'

Although she prefers 'from scratch' projects, Blott occasionally does restoration work. To return a shell house in Cilwendeg, Pembrokeshire, to its original appearance, Blott and her husband spent five weeks collecting shells from local beaches. Ordinarily, her shells are delivered cleaned and sorted into type and size. However, local shells were required for an authentic restoration. 'Different species crop up on different beaches, and getting them depends on the tides and what the sea is doing,' she explains. One type of shell that was common when the shell house was built can now be found on only one beach for 50 minutes when the tide is low. 'Some days it just wouldn't get low enough and we'd have to go and eat cake instead.'

Although the projects evolve in different ways, Blott always works from a design that takes account of both the client's likes and dislikes, and the history of the house. Most jobs take three or four months on site, and cost between £8,000 and £50,000. Blott never works on more than one at a time. 'I love the challenge of it, the starting and the finishing - it's so satisfying,' she concludes. **JENNIFER GOULDING**

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