

Number 12 Winter 2012

The *Follies* Journal

SHELL HOUSES AND OTHER FOLLIES



EDITOR
Iain Jackson

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CONTRIBUTORS

Hazelle Jackson is a writer, historian and researcher with a special interest in designed landscapes and artificial grottoes. She is the author of *Shell Houses and Grottoes* (Shire Books 2001) and edited *London Landscapes* magazine from 2002-2012. She currently leads the Bromley Parks, Gardens and Green Spaces Research Group for the London Parks and Gardens Trust. Her other interests include embroidery, genealogy and storm chasing.

Blott Kerr-Wilson, born in North Wales and educated mainly in England until the age of sixteen, then working in London doing many different jobs from cleaning hotel rooms to flower arranging in grand houses. Since an early age, she has been interested in shell follies/grottoes and in her late twenties she studied Sculpture at Goldsmith's College. This resulted in the creation of a shell grotto in her Peckham council house bathroom and winning *The World of Interiors* magazine room design competition. This success changed her life and Blott is now an international shell artist who loves restoring, creating new shell houses and interior spaces. She believes passionately that shell decoration must not linger in the past but move on forward. The recent launch of a series of shell pieces can be seen on her website: www.blottshellhouses.com.

Jo Farb Hernandez is Director of SPACES (Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments), a nonprofit archive documenting self-taught artistic activity on an international scale. She is also Director of the Thompson Art Gallery and Professor in the School of Art and Design at San José State University. She serves as a Contributing Editor for *Raw Vision* magazine, is a member of the National Advisory Board for the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park in North Carolina, and on the International Advisory Board for the Fred Smith art environment in Wisconsin. She has authored or co-authored over thirty books and exhibition catalogues including, *Forms of Tradition in Contemporary Spain*, (winner of the prestigious Chicago Folklore Prize in 2006) and *A.G. Rizzoli: Architect of Magnificent Visions*. Recipient of a 2008 Fulbright Senior Scholar award, she is currently writing a book on Spanish art environments.

James Howley is a director of Howley Hayes Architects. His practice specialises in the care, repair, alteration and reuse of historic buildings and places. Over the years he has been responsible for numerous high profile and award winning projects including – Russborough, Lambay, the Browne Clayton Column, the Crawford Observatory and Ard na Sidhe. He has a particular interest in country houses and historic designed landscapes and is the author of *The Follies and Garden Buildings of Ireland*, published in 1993 and reprinted in 2003 by Yale University Press.

PREFACE

Building on the papers of *Follies* Number 11, this edition continues to explore the theme of Shell houses and Grottoes.

Hazelle Jackson offers an insightful piece that historicizes the theme and offers a genealogy of the English grotto after its arrival from Italy in the sixteenth century. This work exploits her continued research into these buildings following the publication of *Shell Houses and Grottoes* in 2001. James Howley offers a report into the Shell House at Carton, Ireland. Howley has been involved in this building's restoration and in addition to the building and landscape's history we are given insight into its programme of renewal. The act of surveying a property, unravelling an archaeology of construction and using the built fabric as an archive is an exciting process. Furthermore, we are offered glimpses into the renovation task, which to date has attempted to keep the water out and to address some of the damage it has caused to the roof and chimney. This has yet to be fully completed and as a result the building is still extremely vulnerable and with limited funding its future is far from certain.

I'm delighted that we have another insight into the 'life of the artisan' in this journal and Blott Kerr-Wilson has offered a 'question and answer' format. The aim is to settle debates and quash the inner wonderings we have all suppressed about the quantities of shells required, and where on earth do the shells come from for these magnificent interiors.

There has been a desire in recent editions of the journal to offer an international perspective on the world of follies and again this has been addressed here by including a piece by Jo Farb Hernandez. Hernandez is currently undertaking a significant piece of research into numerous follies, grottoes and 'environments' in Spain, the majority of which were constructed post World War Two. The contemporary nature of these buildings and landscapes means that many of their builders are still alive and active. Hernandez has been able to conduct interviews with the artist-builders as well as surveys and photographic documentation of their outputs. The result is a vast catalogue of data (stretching to over fifty locations) and here we are offered another installment and analysis into one of these overlooked places.

Iain Jackson

SHELL WE DANCE?

BLOTT KERR-WILSON

The following are the 'frequently asked questions' I encounter whilst undertaking my commissions.

WHERE DO THE SHELLS COME FROM?

I was surprised when I did the restoration of The Cilwendeg Shell House what fun it was to *work backwards*. What do I mean by this and what has it got to do with the question?



Restoration work underway

Cilwendeg had been abandoned for quite a while, it became a secret countryside place to hang out in. The shells were deliberately picked or dropped off the walls and then to accelerate the demise of the grottoe further, a tree fell on to the building bringing down the roof and giving the rain the freedom to get in.

This could have been the beginning of a rather sad end for this wonderful grottoe. Many years later, when the Temple Trust¹ finally managed to secure custodianship, the original decoration was so dilapidated and scarce it initially looked like we would not be able to determine the original pattern and arrangement of the shell decor. It was fortunate that locally obtained shells (at that time) had been mainly used, so the surviving indents left in the small remaining pieces of lime mortar were easy to correlate to the type of shell that was once inserted. It was clear that the shells used at Cilwendeg had either come from the dining-room table or had been found locally.



l-r. Abalane and asses ears shells

Nowadays it is difficult to find the same sized shells that existed back when the shell house was decorated. The flat oyster shells which run around the bottom of the wall had years of growth before ending up in a shell house. It is now nearly impossible to find the same size oyster shells unless they are specially commissioned to size.

One of the main problems that arose early on was locating two shells. The otter shell, pictured opposite, which must have been plentiful at the time, was nowhere locally to be found.² Around 600 otter shells needed to be replaced. In practice, this meant finding twice that amount so as to be able to choose the right sized shell for each specific location. Furthermore, the otter shell is a bivalve so has a left and right shell. The original design depended on both these sides being used in equal quantities. For some peculiar reason it is always easier to find lots of one side when gathering: in this case it was the left-hand side. It was a real feat to find enough right-hand sides that were not damaged or too small. It is often the same story with many bivalves that one shell side must be weaker than the other and therefore not so many reach the beaches intact.

When trying to locate the areas where the shells could be found it was only the older local people in the area who remembered seeing this type of shell from their childhood. It took four days of driving around, chasing false leads and numerous disappointing trips before we stumbled upon a gypsy with six lurchers on a mucky lane. He told us where he thought we could find them... two hours further up the coast of Wales. Having no other options we had to take his work for it – but thankfully, he was right! I regret having never got his details so he could have been invited to see the finished place.



Panel detail featuring oyster shells

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Panel detail featuring oyster shells



Upper panel detail

There were a few problems to overcome collecting this shell. The precise location was a sandy rivermouth where the tide came in very fast. It was also incredibly windy and our faces were 'sandblasted' just picking the shells up. The car was also parked a long way away meaning that buckets of shells had to be lugged by hand on several trips. We were so happy to have found this shell at last, but the biggest problem was they only were available to be found and collected when the tide was very low which seemed to be only three or four times a month. It took us just under three months to manage to collect the quantities we needed. Luckily they had been cleaned by the sea and by collecting them within three months I managed not to go over the contract time.

The other important shell missing was the conch shell – in total seven were absent. This shell was unavailable to buy from shell dealers as there was an import ban. After trailing around antique shops I put an advert in the local paper and the conch shells arrived with fabulous histories attached to them. The owners were so pleased to be part of the ongoing historical life of the little shellhouse that the shells were generously donated.

When I have to buy shells they come from dealers in France, England and America. The shells I use are in abundance at the time of use. I have no interest in using collectors' shells which are often gathered to order whilst there is a creature still living inside.



Cilwendeg Shell House

I was asked to talk at a shell show and met a man who had swapped an expensive car for a very rare shell and kept it in a safe along with other rare specimens. It was at this point I realised how passionate shell-collecting and collectors can be, perhaps to the point of being obsessive.

The shells I buy mainly come from the Indo Pacific and are from (a) the waste product from the seafood industry, (b) they are gathered at low tide by locals and sold to the shell companies, or (c) the shells are collected by local fisherman for food. The shells are saved and delivered to a shell company who pay a small amount to the 'harvesters'. Even though I work with shells all the time I still get enormous pleasure from picking shells off the beach on a daily basis. Certain jobs have beaches nearby and clients like to have local shells incorporated into their projects. I love cycling along beaches looking for good shell areas. The gathering of shells is very seasonal. If the sea has been very cold or too hot then that changes the shell cycles and the subsequent availability. Then there are the tides and general weather conditions and of course the dreaded pollution. Shells also seem to have their own seven year cycle. For some time no pink shells have been readily available on the market for example. At home I have two tons of mussel shells waiting to be cleaned. Because I use so many I buy them dirty and empty imported from Ireland. The major cost is the transportation of the shells, but I think I have a lifetimes supply now...

How do you clean shells?
(this is always asked)

The shells don't need to be cleaned
the only thing one should do is

ARE THE SHELLS CLEAN?
No the shells I use are not

DO I DRILL HOLES?

I think it is enough to clean them
without adding to the work. I
am asked so often if I drill holes
drill an oval shape.

The abalone shells are drilled
in and out. That's why they are
with its gills inside. The shells
around. So the holes are drilled
when the abalone is alive. The
was once thought that the
holes stay more or less the same
opens another at the same time.

And the question is...

HOW MANY SHELLS?

Blott Kerr-Wilson

1 See: www.thetempletrading.com

2 The name of the shell is...
that cited this species, the ir...

HOW DO YOU CLEAN THE SHELLS? (this is always asked by men)

The shells don't really need cleaning once in situ. Dust does not seem to show and the only thing one needs to control are spiders. A feather duster is perfect for this.

ARE THE SHELLS TREATED?

No the shells I use do not need to be enhanced they are perfect as they are.

DO I DRILL HOLES IN THE ABALONE SHELLS?

I think it is enough of a task sticking hundreds and thousands of shells on surfaces without adding to the workload by drilling tiny holes into each abalone shells; but I am asked so often if I have drilled the oval holes into the shells (is it even possible to drill an oval shaped hole?)

The abalone shell has natural holes, the holes in an abalone's shell let water flow in and out. That's important because an abalone has to take oxygen out of the water with its gills inside the shell. The abalone fastens itself to a rock and doesn't move around. So the holes let it get rid of its waste, which flows out with the water. And when the abalone lays eggs they come out through the holes in the shell. The abalone was once thought to be half of a broken bivalve. As the shell grows the number of holes stay more or less the same, whilst the animal closes one hole at the lip end it opens another at the other end.

And the question that really gets to me is when I am asked:

HOW MANY SHELLS I HAVE USED...

Blott Kerr-Wilson

1 See: www.thetempletrust.org.uk

2 The name otter shell is based on a spelling error. The animal has nothing to do with otters. However in the very first publication cited this species, the intended name Lutaria (from lutum = silt) was accidentally changed to Lutraria (from Lutra = otter).

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