



The Jealous Wall at Belvedere House, Co. Westmeath. Photo: Josephine McMorrow



Issue 45:
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Events calendar:

- **8 September—Garden Party picnic at Stowe Landscape Gardens:** Details from www.follies.org.uk
- **22-23 September—Lisbon (Portugal):** A weekend visit to the extraordinary gardens at Sintra (Lisbon). Details from pfgodfrey@gmail.com

Heritage Open Days:

- **6-9 September—England and Northern Ireland**
- **All weekends in September—Scotland and Wales**

The Folly Fellowship

Articles, pictures, comments and feedback for the e-Bulletin should be sent to andrew@follies.fsnet.co.uk. All other correspondence should be sent to membership@follies.org.uk.

Sham Ruins

Of all the building types that make up the genre, the most puzzling, most perverse and most difficult to explain are sham ruins. Why would anyone want to erect a building that looks like it is falling down or build something that is less than perfect, and why choose to place a crumbling pile at the centre of a newly created landscape park?

Any rational analysis of these questions leads to the conclusion that sham ruins are useless, expensive and unnecessary—all the qualities we love in a good folly! So, while their popularity across Europe is seen as a curiosity in itself, and they are attributed with all sorts of socio-political interpretations, it is little wonder that sham ruins are often regarded as the most treasured of all our follies.

The first known example was built in the sixteenth century by

Girolamo Genga for the Duke of Urbino. It is described in Giorgio Vasari's *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri* (The Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Painters, Sculptors and Architects, from Cimabue to Our Times), telling how 'The Duke caused the Palace at Pesaro to be restored, and also the little park, making within it a house representing a ruin, which is a very beautiful thing to see.' Despite its success, the notion of building fake ruins failed to capture the imagination of the Duke's friends and contemporaries so if any were built at all at that time, they were as stage sets or 'ruin rooms' like the one in the Palazzo del Te in Mantova (1534).

All this changed in the eighteenth century with the rise of the European picturesque. It began in 1728 with the unveiling of Joseph

Effner's **Magdalenenklause** in the grounds of Schloß Nymphenburg (Munich), a hermitage that was designed for Maximilian Emanuel, the Elector of Bavaria. It was one of a group of follies that he built there and at first sight it appears to be a messy combination of brick with crumbling stucco, into which artificial cracks have been created to raise the illusion of decay. With our current expectation of perfection, that crumbling appearance often causes it to be misunderstood and many tourists ignore it whilst walking round the rest of the grounds.

One of the first people to encourage the development of sham ruins was Batty Langley, whose *New Principles of Gardening* book (published 1728) argued that they provided a successful means of terminating an avenue or vista. His view was that 'Ruins may either be painted upon canvas, or actually built in that manner with brick and cover'd with plaistering in imitation of stone. And since we are to build no more...[than]...the shell, as is next to our view, I therefore recommend their building before their painting, not only as the most durable, but least expensive (if the painting is performed by a skilful hand) and much more to the real purport intended.'

This principle was adopted by Alexander Pope, whose **Grotto at Twickenham** (completed in 1725) was recorded in John Serle's book *A Plan of Mr Pope's Garden* (1745) saying: 'the entrance of the



Carl von Lebschée's lithograph of the Magdalenenklause c. 1830

grotto, next the garden, are various sorts of stones thrown promiscuously together, in imitation of an old Ruine; some full of holes, others like honey-combs, which came from Ralph Allen's Esq; at Widcomb near Bath.'

Neither Effner's hermitage nor Pope's grotto conform to our usual vision of a sham ruin, which commands the imitation of an ancient castle built in the Gothic style. That expectation stems from Sanderson Miller's **Ruined Castle at Hagley Park** (Worcs), which he completed in 1749 for Lord Lyttelton. Joseph Heely later referred to it as 'a deception' and wrote in his book *Letters on the Beauties of Hagley, Envil and The Leasowes with critical remarks and Observations on the Modern Taste in Gardening* (1777) that 'Upon first

glimpse of this becoming object, which adds so much dignity to the scene, one cannot resist an involuntary pause—struck with its character, the mind naturally falls into reflections, while curiosity is on the wing, to be acquainted with its history; and I make no doubt that an antiquarian like my friend, would sigh to know what era it was founded, and by whom:—what sieges it had sustained;—and would lament that hostile discord, or the iron hand of all-mouldering time, should so rapaciously destroy it.'

Heely added that 'to keep the whole design in its purity—to wipe away any suspicion of its being any otherwise than a real ruin, the large and massy stones, which have seemingly tumbled from the tottering and ruinous walls, are suffered to lie about the different parts of the building, in utmost confusion. This greatly preserves its intention, and confirms the common opinion of every stranger, of its early date; while, to throw a deeper solemnity over it, and make it carry a stronger face of antiquity, ivy is encouraged to climb about the walls and turrets.'

Naturalisation, chiefly by ivy, was a key element in achieving the 'sham', implying that nature herself was one of its architects. When William Chambers built his **Ruined Arch at Kew** in 1760, an unsigned contemporary account speaks of how the 'briars and other wild plants...[merge with]...a quantity of fragments spread over

The Ruined Castle at Hagley. Photo: Neville Hawkes Collection. FF Pic.Lib.



William Chambers' sketch of The Ruined Arch at Kew .



the ground, seemingly fallen from buildings.’ Most of these fragments have been removed today on health and safety grounds!

The Rev'd William Gilpin was especially interested in this combination of man-made and natural. His *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel* (1794) talks about ‘the picturesque eye...[being]...most inquisitive after the elegant relics of ancient architecture; the ruined tower, the Gothic arch, the remains of castles and abbeys. They are consecrated by time; and almost deserve the veneration we pay to the works of

nature itself.’

His earlier *Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* also stressed the role that nature has in creating a successful ruin, saying ‘after all that art can bestow, you must put your ruin at last into the hands of nature to finish. If the mosses and lichens grow unkindly on your walls—if the streaming weather-stains have produced no variety of tints—if the ivy refuses to mantle over your buttress; or to creep among the ornaments of your Gothic window—if the ash cannot be brought to hang from the cleft; or long,

spiry grass to wave over the shattered battlement—your ruin will still be incomplete—you may as well write over the gate, Built in the year 1772. Deception there can be none. The characters of age are wanting. It is time alone, which meliorates the ruin; which gives it perfect beauty; and brings it, if I may so speak, to a state of nature.’

Equally, the socio-political significance of eighteenth century sham ruins should not be forgotten. Writing to his friend Richard Bentley in September 1753, Walpole famously referred to Hagley, saying ‘There is a ruined Castle built by Miller that...has the true rust of the Baron’s Wars’. David Stewart’s essay *Political Ruins: Gothic Sham Ruins and the ‘45* (published in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 55 No.4, 1996) argues that this represented the suppression of Catholic England and its defeat by neo-Classicism championed by protestants like Lord Lyttelton and his friends. It was an argument that James Howley continued in *The Follies and Garden Buildings of Ireland* (1993) reminding us that ‘for many advocates of the classical taste, the rival Gothic style was only acceptable in a ruined and defeated state.’

The Sham Ruin at Wimpole Hall, Cambs. Photo: Peter Church on Geograph

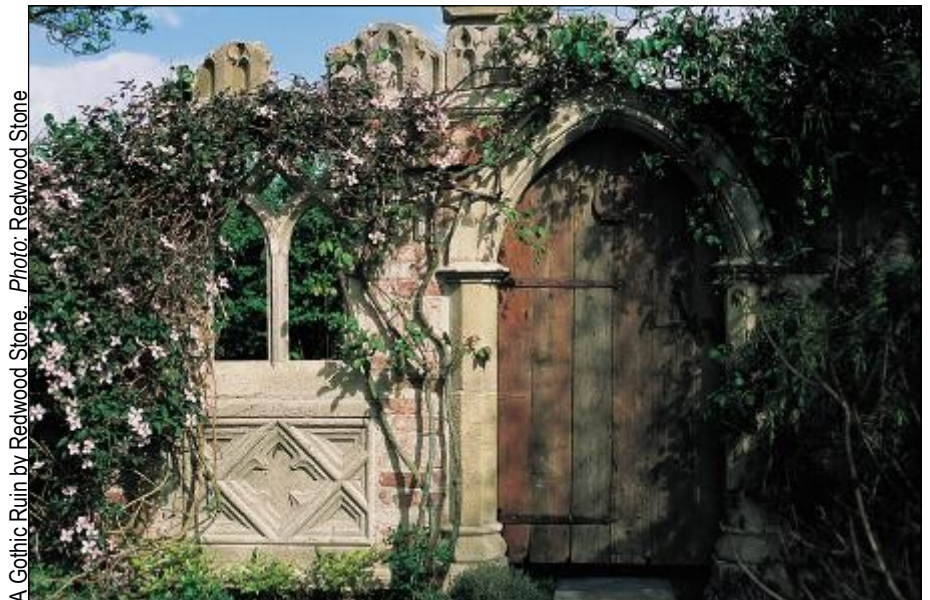


These comments remind us that during the eighteenth century the purpose of sham ruins was not just the creation of pretty artefacts in the new landscape. They signalled an understanding of nature and a willingness to work with her; they also demonstrated respect and an understanding of our past, including our challenge to Catholic doctrine. Lastly, with all of the hierarchical changes that were taking place, sham ruins allowed new gentlemen to create an impression of heritage and a long association with their land.

At that time the wish to build sham ruins often resulted in the dismembering of real ones and in their reconstruction back home. William Shenstone did this with Halesowen Priory, taking it to his garden at The Leasowes (Worcs) in the 1750s, and a decade later Thomas Dummer did the same with the north transept of Netley Abbey, moving it to Cranbury Park in Hampshire. Modern sham ruin builders can avoid this thanks to catalogues that offer a range of high quality, ready-to-use components.

The success of these pick-n-mix kits is evident from the number of sham ruins that appear in garden magazines and newspaper supplements. They provide a low-cost opportunity for anyone to build follies, often without the need for an architect. So why do they fail to excite us in the way that they did in the past?

Today's sham ruins are still built to impress our friends and our



A Gothic Ruin by Redwood Stone. Photo: Redwood Stone

neighbours, and some still follow the advice in Timothy Lightoler's *Gentleman and Farmer's Architect* (1764) by shielding 'disagreeable Objects' from view. Most follow the preferred Gothick style and many even meet the Gilpin test with ivy happy to mantle over their buttresses. Where many of them fail is through their lack of historic accuracy making them look messy and unconvincing, thus failing the Heely test by failing to deceive. Moreover, they show that simply putting together a kit of parts, no matter how well they have been sculpted, is never enough.

Gilpin warned us of this in his *Lake Tour* (1772), saying: 'It is not every man who can build a house, that can execute a ruin. To give the stone its mouldering appearance, to make the widening chink run naturally through all the joints, to mutilate the ornaments, to peel

the facing from the internal structure, to shew how correspondent parts have once united; though now the chasm runs wide between them, and to scatter heaps of ruin around with negligence and ease, are great efforts of art; much too delicate for the hand of a common workman; and what we very rarely see performed.'

**The Trustees of
The Folly Fellowship**

request the pleasure of your company at the **Twenty-Fourth Annual Summer Garden Party** at Stowe Landscape Gardens, Buckinghamshire on **8th September 2012**

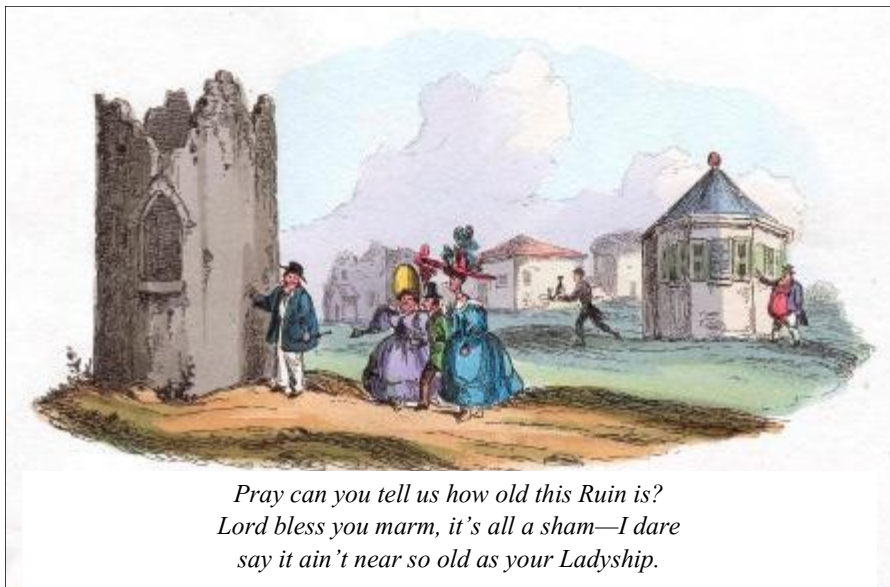
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This year's garden party follows a different format from usual and involves a group picnic—please bring your own.

RSVP to Jill at philjil@mac.com

Full details are available from Jill. Details will be included in the Autumn edition of the magazine and on the Fellowship's website www.follies.org.uk.

NT members should bring their current membership card to avoid payment of an entrance fee. Dogs are welcome but must be kept on a lead.



Caricature of the sham ruin at Kingsate, Kent, c.1820s.

*Pray can you tell us how old this Ruin is?
Lord bless you marm, it's all a sham—I dare
say it ain't near so old as your Ladyship.*