For one's folly

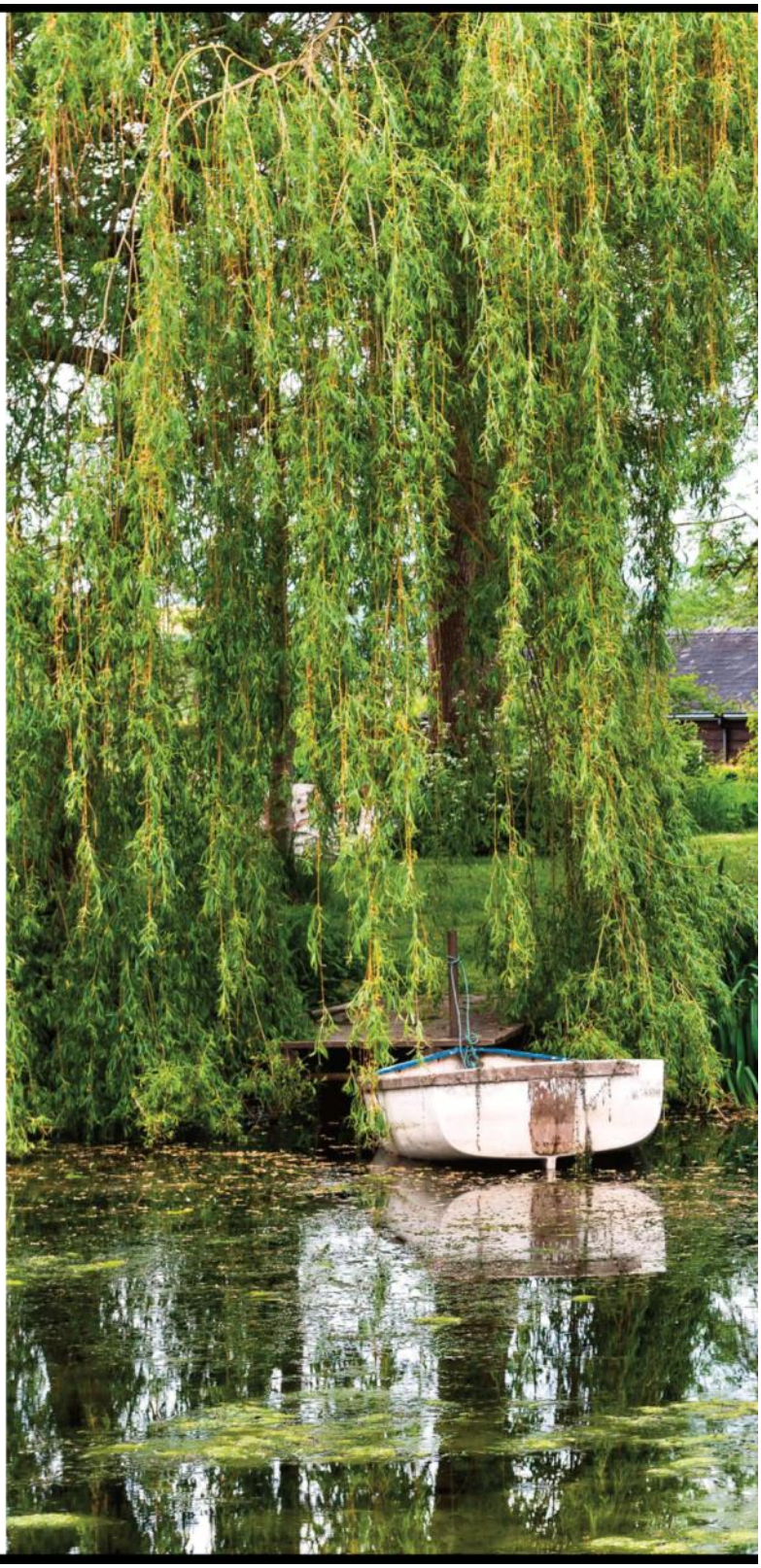
Once a vital ingredient of the 18th-century desire for Picturesque landscape design, the folly and the grotto are back on our garden wishlists, says **Stephen Wade**

WHEN Jonathan Bostock of Edgbaston in Birmingham decided to cut away a mass of greenery at the bottom of his garden last July, he was shocked to discover an 18th-century shell house, made of oyster shells and animal bones. The structure is 12ft tall, with an Oriental arch at the centre and Norman windows at both sides. Mr Bostock may not have known it at the time, but he was definitely on trend.

Working from home and learning to love our domestic interiors like never before, we have stared at our gardens and seen their potential as spaces for creativity and enterprise. Once, the garden was a place for a lawn and perhaps a border; now, it's a living space full of possibilities, a place where our values of home may be extended into Nature's realm.

Garden centres try to provide for this yearning by displaying stylish outdoor furniture, but no, the aim now is adventure, novelty and a revival of the close-up landscaping of days long gone. In other words, we want to fulfil that same longing children have for a den or a treehouse, so what can be done? Answer: bring back the folly.

The folly and the grotto were part of the 18th-century passion for the Picturesque, when estates and grand houses had fashioned their deer parks and lakes and needed a flourish —something to create interest for visitors when they took a walk after breakfast. These little buildings may take many forms, from shell houses to cave grottos and from miniature castles to Chinese pagodas. In 1800, Goethe, the great Romantic writer, opens his novel *Elective Affinities* with ➤



Good times past and present: the domed folly of wine bottles at Westonbury Mill Water Gardens, Pembridge, Herefordshire

hero Eduard asking the gardener where his wife is, to be told she is on the land: 'The moss-hut she has built by the cliff-face over against the mansion will be finished today… You get a marvellous view: the village down below, just to the right of the church…'

Goethe's story perhaps illustrates one suggestion of the origin of the word 'folly': the French *feuille*—literally 'leaf' and referring to a hut with tree branches. However, a more likely derivation is simply the French for 'delight', *folie*, which may also mean 'a favourite abode'. The origins of the grotto versions of follies mostly relate to either caves or moss huts. It is hard to resist the equally convincing meaning of 'a madness or mania'.

Naturally, follies and grottos had a real vogue in the age of the Grand Tour, when young aristocrats travelled in Europe to complete their education as connoisseurs of the Arts and architecture. Designing and establishing a folly gave them the opportunity to show off their classical knowledge, as well as their cultural good taste, by installing a feature that would stir interest and be a touchstone for informed discussion. When the passion for the Picturesque rural feast for the eyes came along, an attractive folly, sensitively placed as if one were producing a watercolour vista, would turn the heads of any guests.

That was the point—to have a view and, of course, to make something entirely useless and impractical. The idea was to revel in something artificial that was fun, making your home distinctive and different. The imagination was let loose, to make any variety of make-believe dwelling place. When Celia Fiennes visited the Earl of Pembroke's Wilton, Wiltshire, in the 1690s, she noted that the grotto 'was leaded on the top where are fish-ponds, and

Follies often impart a sense of history, as with the grotto at Clandon Park, Surrey

just without the grotto is a wooden bridge over the river'. That ambition to make a striking visual experience still exists. Alan Terrill, who runs the Folly Fellowship, has a number of grottos, including a 'tortoise house', which features the face of the creature at its entrance and a wonderful blue shell as the roof.

Many grand estates boast spectacular examples, some reaching back to the Augustan age, such as Hafod in Cardiganshire, where Thomas Johnes really went to town with artificial follies, including a druid temple and a natural cave (the latter features were sometimes the homes of resident bards or hermits, who were part of the walking experience). Even today, the follies don't have to be complete—in Nymans at Haywards Heath, ➤

Follies of desire

• A ruin by the lake at Wanstead Park in London was once a shell grotto over a boathouse. An elaborate and impressive affair, it had a domed, top-lit room accessed by a passage, where the eccentric second Earl Tylney kept his collection of coffins

• Designed by William Kent and completed in 1738, the Chinese pagoda folly at Stowe in Buckinghamshire is currently being restored

• At Highclere Castle, Berkshire, there were once 12 follies, each one linked to the numbers on a clock, designed by Robert Herbert

• The Wilton grottos in Wiltshire, seen by Celia Fiennes, were spectacular: the first, conceived by Charles I, had three arches, plus the later addition of a grotto chamber, making it an ideal place for afternoon tea, if not a resident bard. The second, an 18th-century creation, looked like a grotto, but with a door and panels. The remnants of both are now part of the School House

• In the 1750s, there was a business owned by a Mr Castles, located at Grotto Passage in Marylebone, London, complete with a showroom that became a visitor attraction in its own right. Castles's notable achievement was his grotto made for Sir Robert Walpole at the Royal Hospital

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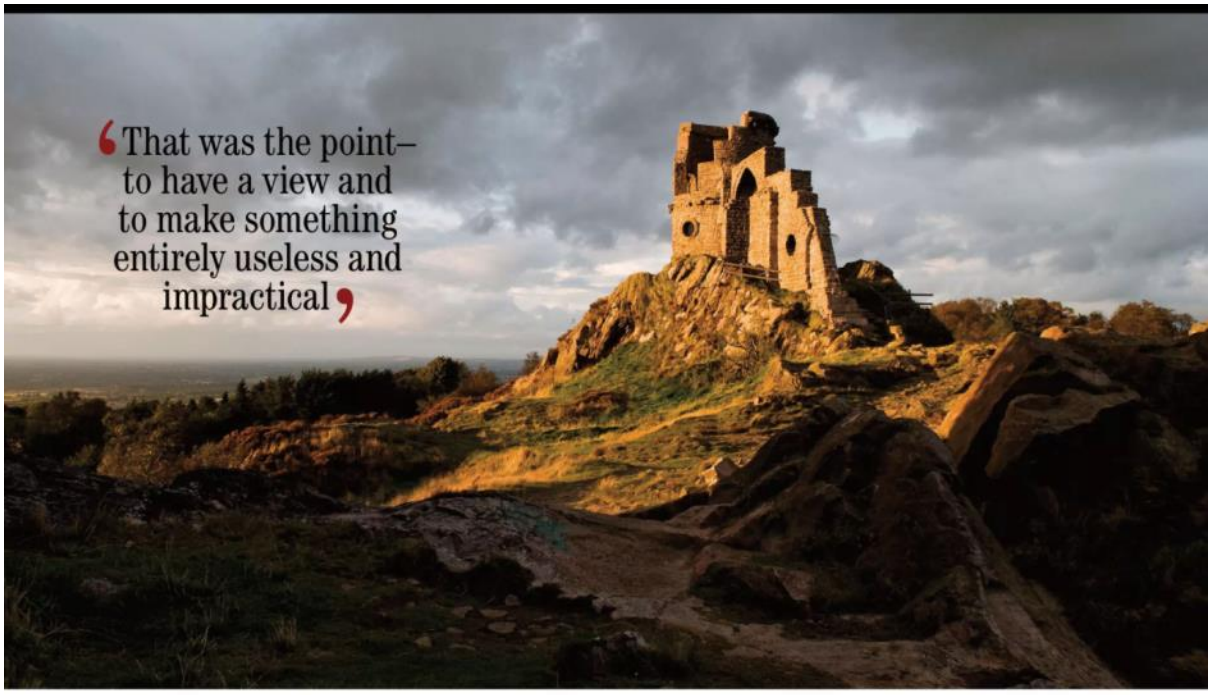

West Sussex, for instance, one invitation is worded: ‘Ruins regularly open for visitors.’ This detail is truly traditional and in keeping with one folly convention—that a certain feeling of historical wildness is simulated.

Today, many estates in the National Trust’s care and control recognise this craze for mini abodes, often providing den-building experiences for children, but they generally preserve their follies. At Saltram near Plymouth in Devon, for instance, visitors are promised ‘follies to explore’ in addition to an orangery, such as the Castle Folly, included in a sequence of paintings by William Tomkins. Acorn Bank, at Penrith, Cumbria, even offers ‘fairy houses, hidden in the woodland, to discover’.

One of the genuine joys of follies is their place in a landscaping or garden design plan, as is the case in Stephen and Amanda Clark’s garden at Seend Manor, near Melksham in Wiltshire. Here, features include a pagoda with traditional *foo* dogs to ward off evil spirits and an enchanting folly den—a reproduction African village hut with a thatched roof and mud walls. The garden designs are by Julian and Isabel Bannerman and the Oriental element reflects Mr Clark’s links with Hong Kong.

Indeed, many follies offer a narrative of the home owner’s life or favourite aesthetic pleasures and taste. They are the creations of a whim, of a sheer playful indulgence in a hobby or a fantasy. The Folly Fellowship points out that many original structures have since declined into ruins and a ruinous folly may well be part of the concept when we make our own dens today.

Top: **Mow Cop Folly on the Staffordshire/Cheshire border, built by Randle Wilbraham of Rode Hall in 1754.** *Above:* **The shell grotto at Abbey Gardens Tresco, Isles of Scilly**

The attitude of a rough-and-ready, patchwork concept is evident in the shell house. This fashion is very old: in 1624, James I had a shell grotto under the Banqueting House in London and, a century after this, one of the most famous examples was created by the poet Alexander Pope, who had a tunnel grotto with shells at his Twickenham home.

Now, the great joy of making a shell-house garden grotto is that any category of material may be brought in for use, from driftwood and spare pieces of old furniture to shells and wooden planks. The aim is to make your folly unique and special to you.

Follies stretch back a long way to classical Greece, when they were temples or sacred places. Today, a folly may take any form—the only rule is to let whimsical notions go where they will and to enjoy the journey. If I had to choose one joyfully diminutive residence, it would be the Pitchford Tree House, Atcham, Shropshire, which is perched 11ft up in a lime tree with Chippendale Gothic plasterwork. ➘

The Folly Fellowship (www.follies.org.uk)