



## William Beckford and his Follies



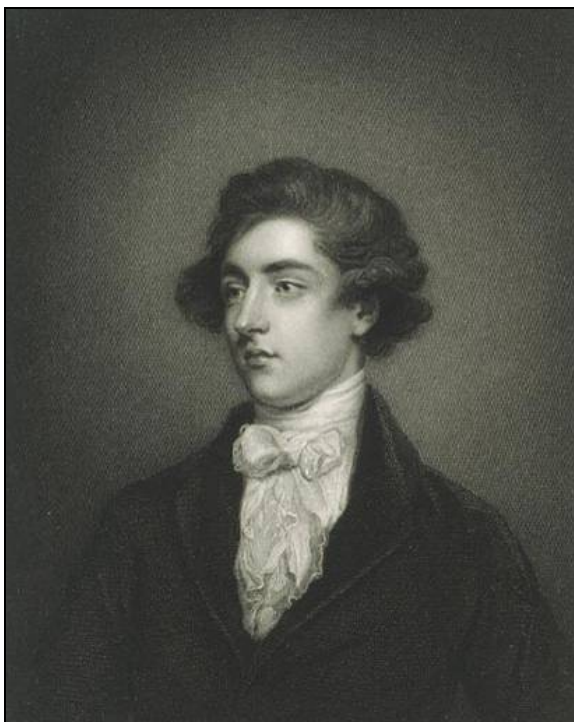
**I**n his foreword to the 1976 William Beckford Exhibition catalogue, Kenneth Clark described Beckford as “one of the first men in England who could afford to be an eccentric on the grandest scale. He had none of the inherited responsibilities of the great landowners...was intelligent and had a genuine love of art and architecture, and in the building of Fonthill Abbey performed a daring, if unstable, act of patronage. He was a collector of genius and a writer of considerable talent.” Lord Clark went on to ask: “Would one have liked him? Yes, perhaps in old age: but in his youth he must have been unbearably arrogant. He followed his

whims to the exclusion of everything and everyone. He had no patience with mediocrity, and the word ‘egalitarian’, if he had heard of it, would have seemed to him ridiculous.”

**T**he Beckford story begins on a small sugar plantation in Jamaica owned by William’s grandfather, who was Speaker of Jamaica’s House of Assembly. When he died unexpectedly in 1735, the estate passed to his son (William’s father, also called William) who soon after taking control of the plantation moved to London to run the business from there. Despite the long distance

between him and his plantation, Beckford proved to be an astute businessman and he managed to expand his estate to nearly 22,000 acres farmed by nearly 3,000 slaves, earning in the process huge profits. These were boosted yet further during the Seven Years War with France (1756-63) when the usual supply of sugar through French merchants was disrupted and the home market was forced to buy from British traders instead. With mid-eighteenth century Britain having a particularly sweet tooth, the war gave entrepreneurs like Beckford the opportunity to gain control of the market and enjoy massive windfall profits. In his particular case, the then Alderman Beckford and twice Lord Mayor of London invested his rewards in money lending and shipping enterprises, and to finance a campaign that saw him elected first as the MP for Shaftesbury, and later as one of the Members for London. With his newly acquired political influence Beckford was able to protect his business interests and defend his use of slaves in the face of growing opposition.

The family's use of slaves has always been controversial. The author James Lees-Milne points out in his book *William Beckford* that the family first began using slaves as early as the late 1660s, and used them for almost 200 years. When the use of slaves came to an end in 1834, the Beckfords, like other white plantation owners, received a lump sum of £200,000 compensation for their losses, while the slaves themselves received nothing.



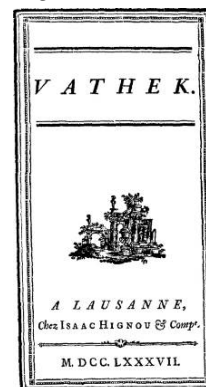
**W**illiam Thomas Beckford was born in London on 29 September 1760, and was the only legitimate son of Alderman Beckford. He was a precocious child and his natural talents were openly encouraged, including piano lessons from the nine-year-old Mozart, and tuition

in art and architecture from prominent architects like William Chambers and William Cozens. Such things were easy for the family to afford, and for William himself to obtain after his father died in 1770, leaving him an estimated fortune of £1 million (the equivalent of £350 million today) giving him a disposable income of around £100,000 per year – the illegitimate children received a lump sum of £5,000 each. Not surprisingly, newspapers of the day described William as “the richest commoner in England,” although biographers have questioned whether the inheritance was as large as this.

In 1777, William completed his education with a course of study and travel across central Europe, including a tour of Flanders, Germany and Italy before returning to Geneva. In all of these places he bought art treasures on a massive scale and began his famous collection. This was clearly a fun time for William who appeared to have the world at his feet and the funds and time to enjoy it, but judging by his life story this was probably the only time that he was free and happy: from this point onwards it is clear that he was torn between his wants and his duties, and found it especially difficult to cope with his obvious bisexuality.

When he returned to England in late 1778, he was introduced to William Courtenay, the eleven-year-old son of Viscount Courtenay, and later the 3<sup>rd</sup> Viscount Courtenay of Powderham and 9<sup>th</sup> Earl of Devon. There was an instant attraction between the two and a long assumed physical relationship that William did little to hide. In 1781 he appears to have encouraged gossip and speculation about the relationship by hosting a lavish three-day Christ-mas party at Fonthill in young Courtenay's honour, something that would come back to haunt him later in life.

About this time William wrote the first of his novels: a Gothic fantasy tale of *Vathek*, the heir of Caliph Haroun al Raschid who enjoyed a decadent lifestyle and a passion for learning. When an evil looking Indian magician came to his court, Vathek's desire for knowledge grew stronger in the hope of his finding the secret to the traveller's magic power. In pursuit of the secret he sacrificed the fifty most beautiful children in his realm despite it being contrary to the law of Islam. When the Prophet Mohammed gave him a last chance to repent of his evil act, disaster awaited him if he failed to do so.



The book echoed the eighteenth century's obsession for all things oriental, and was inspired by the writings of Voltaire whom William met in 1778, and by Antoine Galland's recent translation of *The Arabian Nights*. What singled it out from many of the other Gothic tales of the time was William's successful linking of oriental elements with the Gothic styling of Horace Walpole's *The*



*Castle of Otranto* (1764). Although it was written in 1782 when William was 21, it was not published until 1786 and remains his most successful book: it is the one book on which the whole of his literary reputation is based.

#### Major works by William Beckford:

##### Novels

1787	Vathek
1796	Modern Novel Writing; or the Elegant Enthusiast
1797	Azemia

##### Other

1783	Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents
1807-22	Life at Fonthill
1834	Italy with Sketches of Spain and Portugal
1835	Recollections of an Excursion to the Monasteries of Alcobaca and Batalha

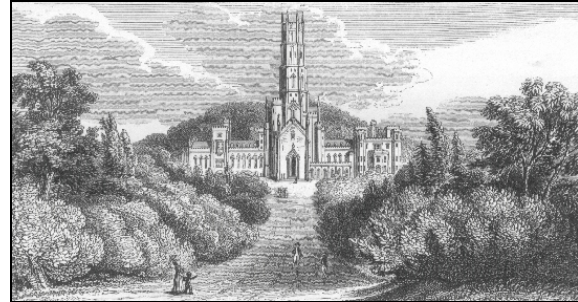
Towards the end of 1784 it was expected that William would be elevated to the peerage, but any hopes of this were dashed in the autumn of that year when news broke publicly of his love affair with William Courtenay. He was charged with sexual misconduct, but the allegation remained unproven despite every effort to pursue it by Lord Loughborough. The scandal of it was nonetheless significant enough to require him to leave England for Switzerland in mid-1785, and live there in exile. It was there in May of the following year that his wife died of puerperal fever (a serious form of septicaemia) which she contracted after giving birth to their second daughter.

## Fonthill Abbey

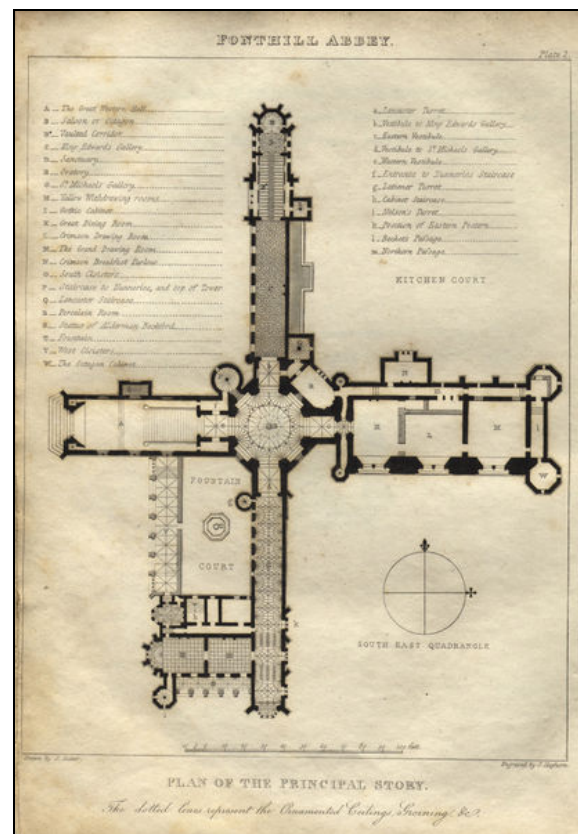


From 1796, after his return to England, William devoted all of his energies to the building of his Gothic 'abbey' at Fonthill. The 500-acre Fonthill estate had been purchased by his father in 1735, and he had a large and expensive mansion built there to entertain friends and guests. For a style-setter like William, the house was regarded as old-fashioned and far too small to display his collection of books, paintings and other treasures. William also wanted something that would properly reflect his status: while his family had middle class

origins, and possibly as a reaction to his losing his peerage in 1784, William wanted to build something that would allow him to claim an honourable lineage stretching back many centuries. He even invented a large and noble family tree. In the end he used his architectural expertise to decide that all of this was best reflected in a house built in the Gothic Revival style.



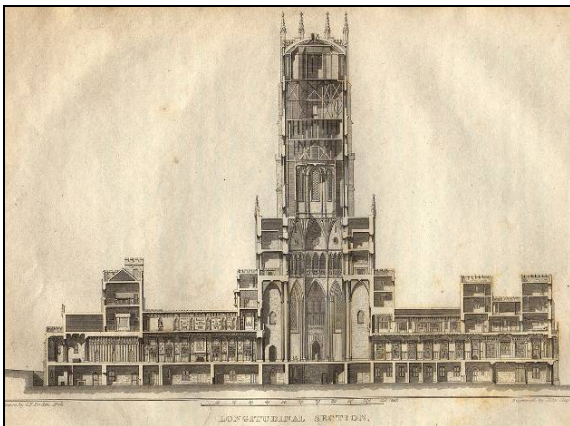
The leading architect of the day was James Wyatt (1746-1813), and was the natural choice for a man who could afford the best. Wyatt leaned on his considerable knowledge of medieval English architecture to create a building that was immense. When the plans were published the house gained immediate celebrity status, becoming the talk of social and architectural circles across the country, especially its long cross-plan wings and the vast central tower that was based on the octagon at Ely Cathedral.



Construction work began in earnest in 1795, but not before William had built a 12-foot-high wall around the 7 mile boundary of his estate to keep

out any unwanted spectators and visitors. Although he was project architect, Wyatt was well-known for not inspecting the building work often enough, and having to accept work that was less than perfect. On this occasion it allowed William the opportunity to assume control and dictate what happened. It was a recipe for disaster. An early example of this was his decision to reuse the foundations from an earlier summerhouse instead of forming new ones to support the enormous loads from his vast new home. He also decided that timber and cement render should be used instead of brick and stone because it was quicker.

In the beginning William employed 500 men who were required to work shifts throughout the day and night to ensure quick progress. But this was still not enough for the impatient William who bribed 450 more labourers to leave the building of St. George's Chapel in Windsor and to help out, promising them an increased ale allowance on top of their wages. He also commandeered all of the local handcarts and wagons so he could move greater quantities of building materials to the site, compensating their owners with free coal and blankets during cold weather.



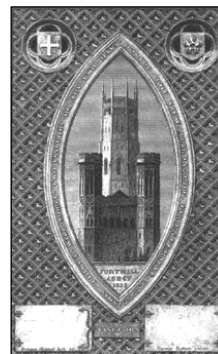
Despite using second-hand foundations, a group of workmen who were either drunk or at best hung-over, and using materials that were clearly inadequate for the task being asked of them, work seemed to progress reasonably well. The main challenge was always going to be the building of the central tower, and so it proved. In 1801, after six years of work, it had reached the height of 300 feet (91m) but collapsed spectacularly to William's obvious disappointment, saying courageously that his only regret was that he didn't see it fall. Not to be deterred, William simply commanded his workmen to start again. Almost six years on, with the tower again nearing the 300 feet mark, the replacement tower also fell to the ground, telling William that he needed to use something more substantial than rendered timber.



Again William started work on his third tower, but this time he used cut stone and finally saw it completed in 1813 when the building was declared as finished.



Beckford lived alone at the abbey using only one of its many bedrooms and seemingly few of its colourful and ornate rooms. He was effectively a recluse, using his time to collect even more curios, furnishings and works of art, and reading the vast library of the English historian Edward Gibbon



(1737-1794) which he had purchased in its entirety. Despite this his kitchen staff was instructed to prepare food for twelve people each day, even though William dined alone. With the exception of a well-publicised visit in 1800 by Lord Nelson and Lady Hamilton, when he also entertained a substantial number of guests, William's only other visitors were his

small circle of male friends, and the occasional tourist. William even had tickets printed (left) for those who came to visit the great house.

The house was expensive to maintain and to run: at one point William claimed that the running costs were £30,000 per year. A particular problem was that the cement render kept falling off the timber frame, so in the end William agreed that the outer walls should be clad with a thin coat of stone.

By now most of William's fortune had been used up, and he was struggling financially. In 1822, after losing a legal battle that saw him forfeit two of his Jamaican sugar plantations, it was inevitable that he would have to sell. The buyer was John Farquhar, an eccentric gunpowder millionaire from Bath who bought the house and its contents for £330,000, a fraction of its true worth.

During the early morning of 21 December 1825, the main tower collapsed again, but this time bringing down almost all of the rest of the house too. An eyewitness told that *'The manner of its collapse was very beautiful; it first sank perpendicularly and slowly, then burst and spread out over the roofs adjoining on every side.'* Farquhar was asleep in the Lancaster Tower at the time and heard nothing, only discovering the disaster when



he drew back his curtains in the morning. It is said, however, that he died of apoplexy the following year. The rubble was finally removed in 1845 by the Marquess of Westminster who used some of the materials for his new house nearby.



It has long been believed that the building collapsed because the foundations were inadequate, seemingly supporting a dying confession by the Clerk of Works for the project. That theory was tested during the *Lost Buildings of Britain* series on Channel 4, which found that the foundations were very deep and were founded on bedrock. The more logical explanation for the collapse is that the timber-frame walls were unable to support the huge loads that they were expected to carry and that they eventually buckled and split. In part too the fault lies with James Wyatt who failed his client by not inspecting the work regularly and controlling its standard.

None of this was lost on William who was at times exasperated by his architect and on at least one occasion threatened to strangle him. William gave him the nickname of 'Bagasse' (the pulp left after sugar cane stalks are crushed to extract their juice), and fought constantly to get Wyatt on site to perform his inspection work. And when he did visit the site, William was unenthusiastic about his company, writing once *'Certainly if I could be bored, it would be in his company. Ah my God, how slow, silent and null he is!'*

All that remains of Fonthill Abbey today is the Oratory, the Sanctuary and Lancaster Tower, which combine to make a delightful home in an amazing setting. It also provides a snapshot of the scale and detail of Fonthill, and a memory of an extraordinary man and of his extraordinary vision.



Yes, FONTHILL, yes ; pre-eminent, unvierd,  
Thy splendors beam, all rival works to chide ;  
Alone, unequal'd, to a wond'ring World,  
Thy endless glories all have been unfurl'd ;  
Thy view, like some giant-ensign, high array'd,  
Throws Tow'rs, Cathedrals, Castles, into shade,  
And, save the remnants of old Greece or Rome,  
Or Bu'narotti's boast, or Wren's high dome,  
No age, no land, no genius e'er brought forth,  
A nobler fane to gild the breathing Earth.

*From: John Jefferson's poem of 1824*

## Lansdown Tower

**A**fter selling Fonthill Abbey William moved to Bath, to live at 20 Lansdown Crescent. It must have felt remarkably compact after the voluminous Fonthill, but it had the major attraction of a mile-long (if rather thin) garden that stretched all the way to the top of Lansdown Hill. The end of the garden was the perfect spot for a new tower, and although William had lost much from his labour at Fonthill, he retained his passion for towers and commissioned the Bath architect Henry Goodridge (1797-1864) to design one for him.

Although he had already built an oriental summerhouse behind his new house, and added an embattled gateway with iron-studded doors, the opportunity to build a new tower must have been irresistible to William. Working with Goodridge, he was able to create a well-designed, well-detailed, and well-built tower, suggesting that either William had learned a lot from Fonthill, or Wyatt was not the genius architect that history has painted him.



Goodridge designed a 154-foot-high tower that James Lees-Milne describes as "a quarter Italian, a quarter Byzantine, half Greek and wholly Picturesque." It was what John Wilton-Ely described as a "highly original version of the austere neo-classical taste of the time...[combining a]...form closely resembling certain Italian Renaissance *campanili* with a lantern derived from two celebrated Greek monuments – the Tower of the Winds and the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates, Athens."



Work on the tower began in 1825 and was completed by 1827. Added to it was a kitchen, a bedroom, a vaulted passage, scarlet drawing room, crimson drawing room, Etruscan library, sanctuary and beautiful staircase (below). Since William had been able to keep some of the more important pieces from his great collection, the tower became an architectural display cabinet for some of his greatest treasures, including Giovanni Bellini's painting of Doge Loredan, which he sold to the National Gallery shortly before his death.



After William's death on 2 May 1844, the tower was sold to a local publican, who turned it into a beer garden, much to the disgust of William's daughter the Duchess of Hamilton. When she was able to buy it back, she gave the tower and site to Walcot parish so they could use it as a cemetery, thus allowing William's last wish of being buried by the tower to be fulfilled. His tomb (also designed by William) consisted of a massive sarcophagus of pink polished granite with bronze armorial plaques, and stands on a mound in the centre of an oval ditch, and is rumoured to be on un-consecrated ground.



In 1771 William told the artist Alexander Cozens how *'the time will arrive when we may abstract ourselves at least one hundred days from the world, and in my retirement give way to our romantic inclinations...we shall ascend a lofty hill... There I hope to erect a Tower dedicated to meditation, on whose summit we will take our station and survey the vast range of countries beneath.'* Who would doubt that William succeeded in his wish, or deny him his wish.

*Some people drink to forget their unhappiness. I do not drink, I build. And it ruins me.*

William Beckford

## Beckford Weekend

### Sat 20 – Sun 21 September

This is a weekend wallowing in the work of William Beckford and understanding the genius of his architectural ideas. Saturday starts with an introduction to the man himself by Leo Vaughan-Williams, and is followed by a tour of Fonthill Estate by Lord Margadale. This is an excellent opportunity to see the bridge, boat house, the lake and the grottoes.

Over lunch (please bring a picnic) Min Wood will add more flesh to the bones of Beckford and in the afternoon, by kind permission of the Fonthill Abbey Estate, there will be a visit to the Abbey and the site of the beacon.

On Sunday we visit the Lansdown Tower, built by Beckford to overlook the City of Bath, and include a guided tour that will be led by Amy Frost, Curator of the Beckford Tower Trust. The afternoon will be left free to explore Bath and all its treasures – retail or otherwise!

Details from Susanne Harding at The Old Stores, Noade Street, Ashmore, Dorset SP5 5AA (Tel: 01747 811364) or to [susanne.harding@ukf.net](mailto:susanne.harding@ukf.net).

Tickets:	Members	Saturday £13*	Sunday £5
	Non-members	Saturday £15*	Sunday £7

\* includes a bacon sandwich/pastry with morning coffee



## Folly of the Month: Leech House, Bedale, North Yorkshire



**I**n the shadow of Bedale Bridge, on what is known as the Aiskew side of Bedale Beck, stands a castellated folly that at first sight looks like an eighteenth-century summerhouse. In fact, the small brick building has a somewhat bloody history being erected by a local doctor as a cool place in which to store leeches ready for bleeding his patients. In this regard the building is rare, if not unique, and is why it has been listed in grade II.

The folly was restored in 1985 by the Bedale District Heritage Trust, but put up for sale in 1993 when the trust was wound up. It was acquired by Hambleton District Council who open it on Heritage Open Days, which this year is 11-14 September: to check opening times, contact Hambleton Council on [info@hambleton.gov.uk](mailto:info@hambleton.gov.uk), or the local tourist information office.

## Gobbets:

- Is your home better than most and would you like to use up your five minutes of fame? If so, Tim Brocklehurst is looking for amazing homes and their owners to take part in a series for Channel 5 that seeks to discover some of Britain's best private homes. The first series was broadcast this Easter and was won by the owners of a Carr Hall Castle (an eighteenth-century folly at Halifax, West Yorkshire – [www.carrhallcastle.co.uk](http://www.carrhallcastle.co.uk)) who walked away with the £25,000 prize. For their second series, Tim is looking for other extraordinary homes to feature. So, if you are interested in taking part, call Tim on 0207-861 8432 or 07879 898830, or write to him at [tim.brocklehurst@talkbackthames.tv](mailto:tim.brocklehurst@talkbackthames.tv).



- Colin and Gloria Powell recently visited the new garden at Arundel Castle and kindly sent me pictures of the controversial pavilion built by Julian and Isobel Bannerman in memory of the 14<sup>th</sup> 'Collector' Earl of Arundel. The garden was opened earlier this year by Prince Charles, who used the Bannermans to create his Stumpery at Highgrove.

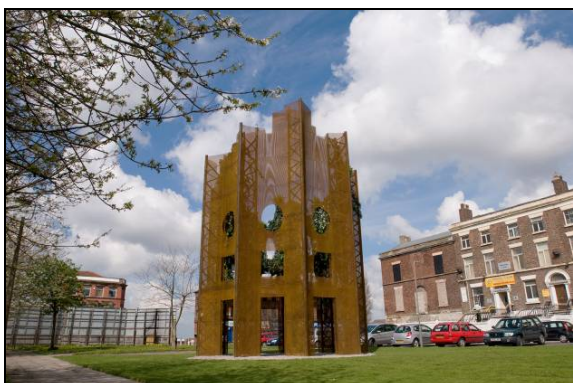


- I am grateful to the eagle eye of Pat Patrick who wrote to tell me that work is well under way on the new folly being built at Larmer Tree Grounds, near Salisbury, Wiltshire. His picture allows us to appreciate the scale of the arch, which is greater than might normally be expected in a historic park.

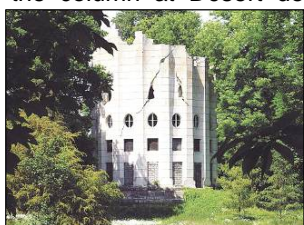


- As part of its European Capital of Culture celebrations, Liverpool Council is building three specially commissioned pavilions in three of its neighbourhoods: one at Rotunda at Kirkdale; one at Edge Hill Station at Kensington, and one at the Wellington Street School at Garston.

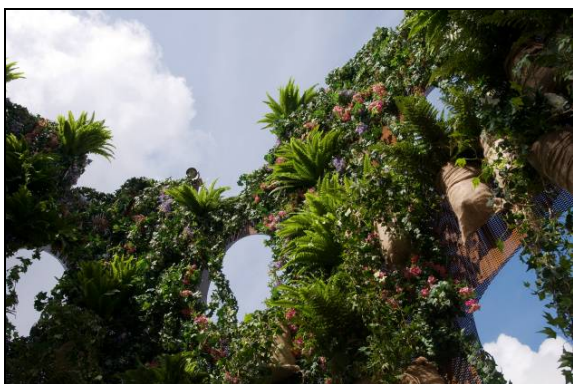




Working in partnership with the Edinburgh based landscape architects Gross Max, Rotunda is building a community garden on a strip of derelict land adjacent to their building, including a 'folly' that closely resembles the column at Désert de Retz at Chambourcy, near Paris. The one in Liverpool differs in that it has a vertical garden inside the central space that is otherwise used for events and activities.



The next phase is to create a series of 'bar code' gardens, on which local groups can create a 'multi-textured environment' for the community to enjoy. These are to remain open throughout 2008.



## Forthcoming F/F Events:

**Saturday, 8 November 2008** – Visit to Hardwick Park, a fine example of the mid-eighteenth-century landscape garden, located close to the village of Sedgfield in south-east Co. Durham.

The 40-acre park was created by John Burdon from 1750, and included temples, follies and grottoes set around a central 17-acre lake. Many of these were



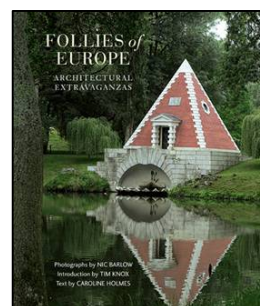
designed by some of the best architects of the day, such as James Paine who is attributed with the design of the principal buildings and the park layout. In more recent times the park has been restored with the help of lottery funding, including the Gothic Ruin, the Serpentine Lake and Bridge, and the sites of the Statue of Neptune and The Grotto. Among the highlights on this visit will be James Paine's Temple of Minerva (restored from almost total collapse) and the Gothic Ruin, both of which will be opened for us to see their interiors and climb the tower.

Further details on the visit are available from Karen Lynch at [lynch.k@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:lynch.k@tiscali.co.uk).

## Other Events:

**02 August – 29 October 2008**

– An exhibition of photographs of European Follies by Nic Barlow, at Petworth House, West Sussex. The exhibition will then move to Hove Museum and Art Gallery from 24 January to 3 May 2009.



**11 – 14 September** – Heritage Open Day. Details from [www.heritageopendays.org.uk](http://www.heritageopendays.org.uk).

**20 – 21 September** – Open House London weekend. Details from [www.openhouse.org.uk](http://www.openhouse.org.uk).

## Corrections:

- **Foll-e Issue 15** (July 2008, p.5) – The Menageries article inadvertently knighted Humphry (not Humphrey) Repton, and put Taymouth in Devon instead of Scotland.

- **Follies Issue 71** (p.19, Membership) – The details about membership categories in the last magazine were incorrect. Unfortunately a change occurred in the layout during the final preparation, despite being correct in earlier proofs. The correct membership categories are:

- A** Individual or joint member, who has declared ownership of a folly
- C** Individual
- D** Joint (two people at same address)
- F** Corporate
- G** Life
- H** Honorary
- J** Sister organisation/trust or individual who has made a contribution to the world of follies

The numbers that follow these letters record the year you joined, the region you live in and your individual membership number, which is held on a database and maintained by the membership secretary. It is for F/F use only and is not released to any third party.

*Picture credits: Fonhill today – Rictor Norton / David Allen; Lansdown Tower (top) – English Heritage; Lansdown Tower (staircase) – David Lewis-Baker; Beckford's tomb – Renaud Camus; Leech House – phill.d; Carr Hall Castle – [www.1885therestaurant.co.uk](http://www.1885therestaurant.co.uk); Liverpool Rotunda (2) – Catherine Braithwaite of Lethal Communications; Other pictures by the editor or from the Folly Picture Library: our grateful thanks to all for the use of their excellent pictures.*