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“A COMPLICATED BEAUTY” A NOTE ON THE GROTTO AT OATLANDS

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The celebrated Grotto at Oatlands near Weybridge in Surrey was, until its destruction in 1948, among the most complex and lavishly decorated of its bizarre tribe.¹ The Grotto was built by the architect Stephen Wright between 1765 and 1767 and formed part of a series of improvements to the park at Oatlands for the 9th Earl of Lincoln.²

A design for the grotto, signed by Wright and dated 1765, has recently come to light and has been purchased by the Royal Institute of British Architects Drawings Collection (Fig. 1).³ The drawing is unusual in being an architect's design for a grotto — a genus of garden building whose construction usually remained the preserve of the itinerant grotto builder or inspired amateur. The plan shows the upper level of the Grotto, the upper room, the vaults of the flanking underground chambers, and the ramps whereby access to this level was effected, together with a section of the entire structure. The design also reveals what may be Wright's original intentions for the interior of the building. The subterranean chambers are depicted as being unornamented but were presumably to be grottoes and encrusted with shells and minerals. These may have been formalised arrangements of shellwork similar to those found in the Shell House at Goodwood.⁴ The interior of the domed upper room is shown decorated in a conventional Palladian manner with niches, a garlanded frieze and urns on consoles. The exterior of the structure resembles a heavily rusticated Roman tomb or bath standing on a natural rocky outcrop; Wright's intention may have been to continue this theme within. With the exception of the niches it seems unlikely that this scheme was carried out in the upper room as an account of 1766 implies that some kind of shell and mineral decoration was to be a feature of this chamber.⁵

The drawing is a valuable record of the Grotto in its original form, as between 1774 and 1778 the structure was considerably altered by Joseph Lane and his son Josiah, grotto builders of Tisbury in Wiltshire. Their transformation of the original symmetrical grotto into a labyrinth of almost gastric complexity is testimony to their ingenuity. The alterations were perhaps inspired by the grotto at neighbouring Painshill, executed by the Lanes in the mid 1760s.⁶ Moreover, in 1768 Lincoln succeeded as 2nd Duke of Newcastle-under-Lyme and additional funds presumably became available for the ornamentation of the pleasure grounds at Oatlands.

Comparison between plans of the structure before and after these changes may be made using the drawing at the RIBA, a plan of the ground floor at Yale, and survey drawings of the Grotto made prior to its destruction in 1948 (Figs. 2 and 3).⁷ The Lanes were also responsible for the spectacular ornamentation of the interior of all the chambers. Their new embellishments eclipsed the original, and presumably more modest, decorations of the grotto and emphasised the irregularity of the interior. Oatlands became perhaps the finest of all Rococo grottoes. Artificial stalactites, formed of jagged pieces of spar embedded in plaster on rough constructions of lathe were attached to the vaults.⁸ Other surfaces were encrusted with swirling patterns formed of thousands of small shells interspersed with larger specimens, branches of fan coral, fossils, minerals and artfully placed mirrors.⁹

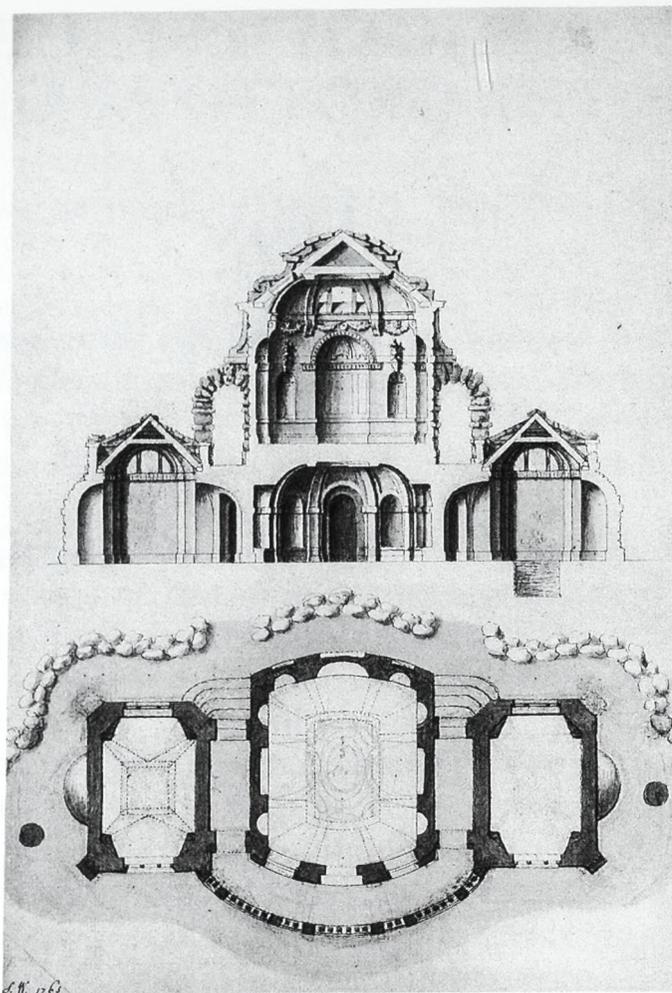


Fig. 1. Stephen Wright, design for the grotto at Oatlands, Surrey, 1765 (British Architectural Library).

The fame of the grotto was to a great extent the creation of the Lanes — all descriptions date from the period after their intervention.¹⁰ There is, however, one remarkable exception: a letter from the Reverend Joseph Spence to “Mr Hoare” (1766) which describes the rockwork, then in the process of construction and with its interior awaiting decoration.¹¹ It is interesting as an account of how the grotto was to be used.

“I do not forget my promise of sending you an Account of My Lord’s Grotto . . . The Solid part of the Grotto is already built; but the *varias inducere plumas*; the ornamenting of it, will take up two years more . . . I shall endeavour to give you some Idea of the Building itself.

The middle part of the Front, in the lower story, is above half of the whole length. This is somewhat like the Segment of a Circle: & is pierced with three rough Arches; a larger in the midst, & less on each side. The line of the Front is (chiefly) strait, on each side beyond this Segment; & each has a Nich, in the middle of them. This whole Front is above 60f long.

The Circular part of the Front with-in is a rude passage, or cover’d Arcade; over which is an open Gallery above, with a Balustrade. This is the Front in the second story; in the midst of *which*, rises the Grand Room by itself; as its Dignity, & Ornaments, will require.

The Rooms in the lower story, are three. An inferior Grotto, directly under the middle part of the Great Grotto, or Grand Room; a Cold Bath, on the Northside; & a room to dress in after bathing, to the South. Beyond the lower Grotto runs a rude Passage, for communication between the two latter; & in the midst of the farther side of it, is a larger Niche for a Bason to

receive the water, that is to be brought from the rising ground in the Park; to supply the Bath, & for some other very good purposes. The water, falling first into the Bason, will be to be seen thro' every one of the three Openings in the Arcade, in the midst of the Front; & particularly in the principal or middle one; at between 30 or 40 f, from the Front.

On each side of the Grand Front stand two old venerable Oaks;¹² both handsome, but not too much alike: between one of which & the building on one side, & just beyond the Oak on the other, a gently rising path leads you up to the higher ground; (which is almost on a level with the floor of the Upper Building;) . . . Here you are at the back-front of the building; where two or three easy steps on each side invite you to the way that leads to the open gallery, at the entrance from it into the chief Grotto. . . .

The first of these additional ornaments is near the grand Front; & is a piece of water, as clear as chrystal. . . . Thus this bason before Ld Lincoln's Grotto, will allways give you a Picture of its' Front. 'Tis somewhat longer than that; of a shape, neither too wild nor too regular: & 'tis to be inhabited by a great variety of Gold & Silver Fish.¹³ A little farther on, on each side, will be an Aviary in the Grove-work; with some of their own Country-People & perhaps Fellow-Citizens, a Set of fine well-chosen Chinese Pheasants: & all about the sides of the Area, will be scatter'd the chief beauties of his Green-House, Orange Trees, Lemons, Myrtles, &c: all the Summer, or pleasing, Season. Several of the old Trees are left . . . in the open Grovete . . . in a still Summer's-Night, what a charming effect must a great number of Chrystal Lamps have, fix't properly, & all sparkling from amidst the leaves of these Trees? All this, enliven'd with the music of the nightingales . . . or by Instrumental music, & perhaps a Dance on the Green-Carpet all over the midst of it; fill one with an Idea of pleasure not elsewhere to be met with: and if the Evening shou'd not continue fine throughout, (as our English Evenings are not too much to be depended upon,) what more charming place can there be to retire to, than the Upper Grotto? Adorn'd with a profusion of the finest Shells; & some of the most chosen Metals, Spars, & Oares: & all Illumin'd by the most beautiful Chandeliers, that hang down from the Roof all around you. The very shower, that drove you into this charming shelter, will add to the pleasures of it; for all the variety of Flowers around you, and every Rose, & every Honey-suckle that creeps up almost each tree there, will send forth new perfumes, in gratitude for being refresh't by it. And if the weather will bear it again, the Opening in ye Front of it will give you a clear view of all the beauties already describ'd about the Area . . .

Ld Lincoln . . . said it was to you, to whom he is obliged for some of the best Ornaments that are to be in the best Grotto. He added, (which I had forgot to mention in its proper place;) That all the Windows which give light to the lower Rooms, give it from above; as four also do, in the Grand Room; but in the latter, there are Two also in the front; one, on each side of the Door . . . a Description of such a Complicated Beauty as this, cannot be good for anything: you must come to see it, to enjoy it as one ought.' "

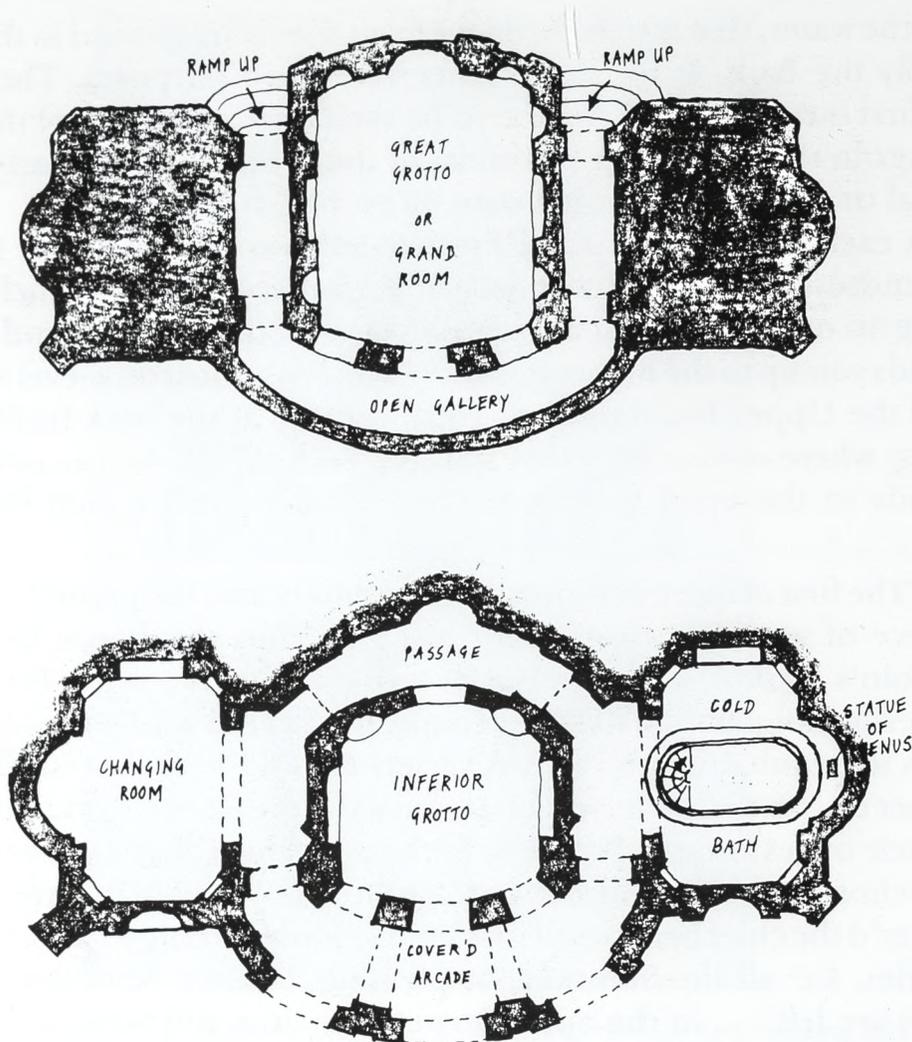


Fig. 2. Oatlands Grotto as designed by Stephen Wright, 1765-67, after drawings at the RIBA and Yale.

It appears that the Grotto was from its inception envisaged as a place of utility and recreation rather than a damp cavern for the purposes of solitude and contemplation, the function usually assigned to structures of this kind. Although contrived as a structure of natural simplicity, the Grotto was large, well-lit and contained chambers on two levels. On one hand it served to impress the spectator with the taste and discrimination of its noble owner; on the other, it provided a setting for informal diversions and amusements — a private domain of pleasure and freedom. The rockwork not only offered a display of choice natural curiosities, a cold bath and a changing room, but the upper room also served as a gazebo, a place for alfresco entertainments, and a shelter from the elements. The exoticism of the setting was further enhanced by oriental pheasants housed in the nearby aviaries and the hothouse plants which were disposed about the edifice in summer. In its diversity of uses, the Grotto at Oatlands would appear to have surpassed the Pyramid at Mereworth Castle, as described by Horace Walpole — a monument “which by a most unnatural copulation is at once a grotto and a greenhouse”.¹⁴

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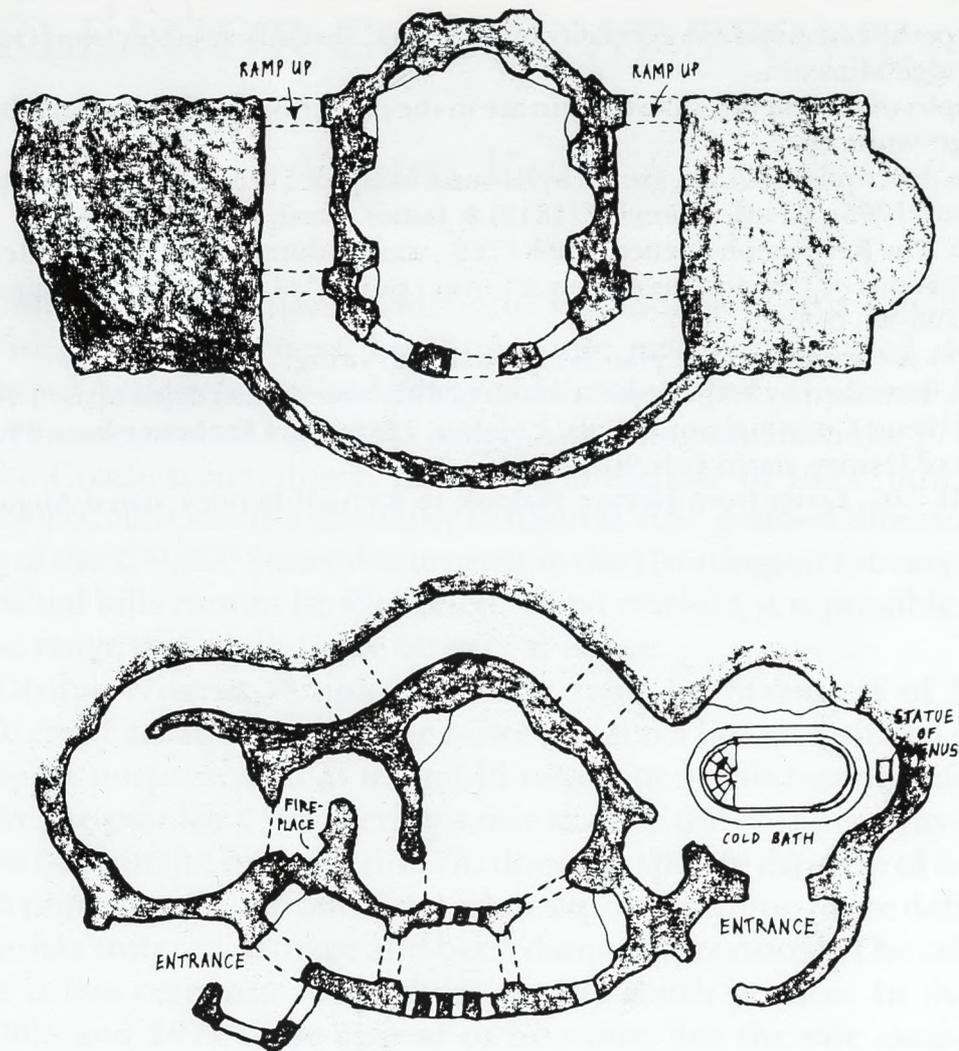


Fig. 3. Oatlands Grotto as altered by the Lanes, 1774-78, after survey drawings of 1948.

History 9, No. 2, 1981, Autumn, 137-155, has also been most valuable, as has the account of the grotto by J.W. Lindus Forge published as "The Grotto, Oatlands Park" in *Surrey Archaeological Collections* LVI, 1950, 134-140.

NOTES

1. See *Architectural Review* 103, 1948, May, 216-18.
2. Stephen Wright (d.1780) was architect and director of the Oatlands estate from about 1755. Henry Pelham Clinton, (1720-94), 9th Earl of Lincoln, became 2nd Duke of Newcastle-under-Lyme in 1768.
3. Christies' sale of December 11, 1990, lot 205. BAL/RIBADC ref CC1/118 (1991.8). Sepia pen & wash over pencil, (365x260mm) signed and dated "S W 1765".
4. The Shell house at Goodwood was decorated about 1739.
5. Rev. Joseph Spence to "Mr Hoare", 1766, Nottingham University Library, Newcastle Archives, NeC 2860.
6. The Grotto at Painshill was decorated for the Hon Charles Hamilton some time between 1761 and 1770.
7. The drawing at Yale is attributed to the Rev Joseph Spence and is dated 1766. It shows the lower level of the grotto and may be a copy of a lost drawing by Wright, perhaps a companion sheet to the RIBA drawing. (Joseph Spence Papers, Box IX. Osborn Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University). It is reproduced in M. Symes' article in *Garden History*, Fig. 10. The survey drawings of the upper and lower floors of the grotto in 1948 by J. W. Lindus Forge, RIBA, and R. Mountford Pigott, FRIBA, were reproduced in Lindus Forge's article in *Surrey Archaeological Collections*, Fig. 1. The original drawings are in Weybridge Museum. They have been redrawn for this article.

8. Artificial petrifications were a speciality of the Lanes. Several examples from Oatlands are preserved in Weybridge Museum.
9. Photographs of the interior of the grotto are in the collections of the National Buildings Record and Weybridge Museum.
10. There are descriptions of the grotto by Horace Walpole (1788), Joseph Farington (1793), William Robertson (*c*1795), Charles Greville (1818) & James North (1868 and 1875).
11. See note 5. The Rev Joseph Spence (1699-1768), was a voluminous correspondent on garden matters and a neighbour of Lincoln, his patron & former pupil. "Mr Hoare" is perhaps the painter William Hoare (1706-92) of Bath.
12. These trees are shown on the plan on the RIBA drawing.
13. This pool, described by Walpole as "a bason of dirty water", had dried up by 1848, (Horace Walpole, *Letters*, ed. Peter Cunningham, 9 Vols, London, 1880, IX, 133, Letter from Horace Walpole to the Countess of Ossory, dated July 9, 1788).
14. Walpole II, 303, Letter from Horace Walpole to Richard Bentley, dated August 5, 1752.