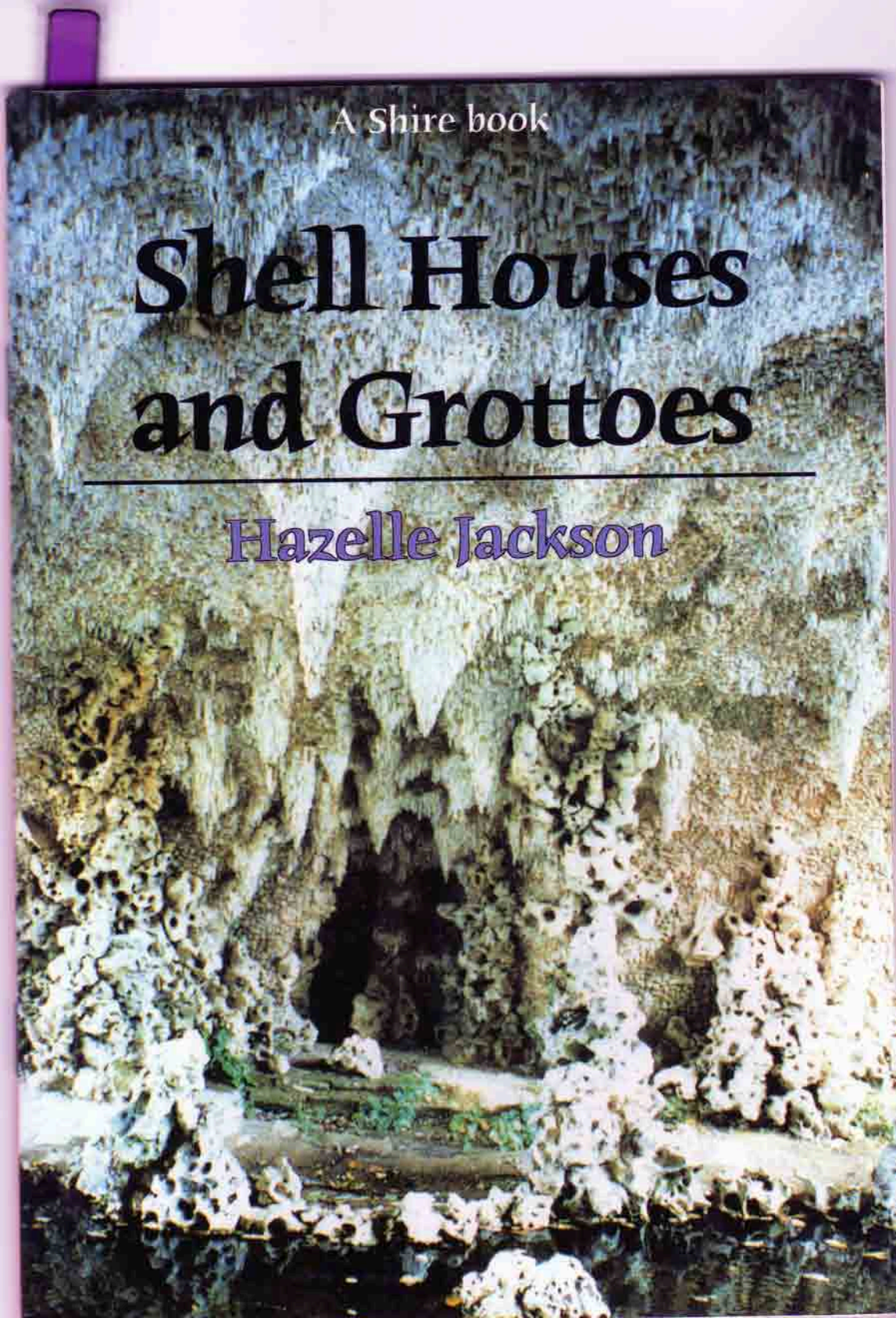


A Shire book

Shell Houses and Grottoes

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The grotto overlooking the pond at Kingstone Cottages near Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire, was built by the owner, Michael Hughes, in the 1980s. Entered via a twisting passage, the main chamber has a window that opens directly on to the pond.

Amateur grotto-builders also revived the form: in the late 1980s Michael Hughes created a shell grotto overlooking a pond at Kingstone Cottages outside Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire. At Horton in Northamptonshire the late Gervase Jackson Stops restored the Menagerie, an eighteenth-century banqueting house by Thomas Wright, and created a shell room in the basement, reached by stepping-stones over black waters symbolising the river Styx.

In the late twentieth century Diana Reynell, an art teacher, restored the shell grotto at Marlborough and embarked on a career as a grotto-builder and restorer, reviving the tradition of the female grotto-builders of the



Far left and left: The eighteenth-century Menagerie at Horton in Northamptonshire was restored in the late twentieth century by Gervase Jackson Stops. In the cellars is a twentieth-century shell grotto entered over a dark pool (representing the river Styx) and guarded by Charon, the mythological boatman. Inside, fashioned with shells, lurk Cerberus, guardian of the underworld, and Apollo with his lyre.



The islands in the rockery at the Lost Gardens of Heligan in Cornwall have been reconstructed using unusual specimen rocks from different areas of Cornwall. On summer evenings candles were lit in the grotto, causing the crystals in the rocks to glitter and cast a soft glow over the rockery islands.



Far left: The grotto at Portmeirion in north Wales is below the Belvedere. Facing the sea, it has a maritime feel, with oyster shells, a mermaid fountain and glass bottle tops reflecting the sunlight.

Left: A faun with pan-pipes in the shell grotto made by Peter and Wendy Dare in the 1980s at Mill Dene in Blockley, Gloucestershire. Water is piped over the top to create a cascade.

eighteenth century. Other contemporary female grotto-builders include Belinda Eade, who worked with Diana Reynell on the restoration of the shell house at Hampton Court House and created the grotto at Nantclwyd Hall in Denbighshire, Wales, and Blot Kerr Wilson, a shell artist, who created exquisite shell houses at Ballymaloe House in Ireland and Belcombe Court in Wiltshire in the 1990s.

Nineteenth-century rock grottoes were also swept up in the revival of the form: major restorations included the grottoes at Heligan and Trevarno in Cornwall, at Glansevern in Powys, Wales, and at Carr Bank Park, Mansfield, Nottinghamshire.

Grottoes can be built anywhere – cellars, bathrooms, conservatories or back gardens. They can be as small as a rockwork fountain in a conservatory or as large as an excavated purpose-built cave lined with shells. Once again, in the twenty-first century as in the eighteenth, the only limits are the budget and the imagination of the owner.

Intricate shellwork was added to the original eighteenth-century pavilion at Belcombe Court in Wiltshire by the shell artist Blot Kerr Wilson in the 1990s. Belcombe also has a 'grotesque' rock grotto with a central cave overlooking the lake.

