

# 'Ruinous by Nature'

## THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE GROTTA AT CROOME LANDSCAPE PARK

Rob Woodside

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ADVISER

### Summary

*At Croome Park, Worcestershire, the National Trust, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, has undertaken major restoration of the park. Archaeology has been central to the research and recording programme to supply the accuracy of detail for the conservation and restoration process. Recent work has focused on the eighteenth-century Grotto.*

*'Grottoes being ruinous by nature...are very subject to ruin' - DEZALLIER D'ARGENVILLE, 1709*



*View of the Grotto surrounded by undergrowth and weeds.*

DAVID NORTON/NTPL



*The Grotto, Croome Landscape Park, following excavation, analysis and recording.*

T. OLIVER/NATIONAL TRUST

### Background

Croome Landscape Park, Worcestershire, was 'Capability' Brown's first independent commission. It was here that he was able to establish his style that was to transform landscape design throughout the mid to late eighteenth century. Following the work of Brown and others, including Robert Adam and James Wyatt, only a few changes were made to the landscape leading up to the present day. Whilst time and grant-led agriculture have left their toll, much of Brown's landscape lies intact, a 'sleeping beauty' ready to reawaken. The Trust, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, is undertaking a major restoration of the park to show how it may have appeared at its height sometime in the early nineteenth century.

The restoration has been led by Project Manager and Landscape Architect Tom Oliver, whose meticulous eye for detail and demand for accuracy and authenticity has brought an intellectual rigour to the project. Archaeology has been a key tool in researching, recording and analysing the evidence needed to accurately inform conservation and restoration. Nowhere has this investigation been so intense as at the Grotto.

### Origins and construction

The Grotto is the centrepiece of Brown's Lake Garden, one of the key elements of the designed landscape. Before the 1750s the ground that was to become the Lake was little better than marshland. It was subsequently drained and made into a lake to meet the serpentine 'river' laid out by John Phipps and Brown. The Grotto was set out at the north end of the lake, screened to the rear by a bank of yew and accessed by a gravel path that circumnavigates the water's edge. Consisting of roughly dressed blocks of lias limestone, tufa and Daglingworth stone, it forms a gently curving arc with two 'caves' and other insets, rising in the centre to accommodate a raised, rubble stone screen.

Work on the Grotto began in the mid 1760s. No architectural drawings survive from the time of its construction, but it is believed that Lancelot Brown was the architect, not Robert Adam, who was responsible for other monuments in the park, notably the Temple Greenhouse and Island Pavilion. Brown's other architectural works included the remodelling of the exterior of Croome Court and the church of St Mary Magdalene, which overlooks the park. The accounts of 1765 record the delivery of 'rock stones' for the grotto, whilst in 1767 the mason, Robert Newman, was paid for undertaking works on the structure.

Documentary records show that between 1781 and 1786 the Grotto was inlaid with spars, shells and fossils. It is thought that this was the work of architect James Wyatt, working under the direction of Barbara, Countess of Coventry. Records also show that sometime between 1777 and 1779 a Coade-Stone Nymph designed by John Bacon was added, based on Sabrina, Milton's nymph of the Severn in Comus. The lyrical theme was enhanced in 1810 when a plaque was set in place bearing an inscription from Virgil; *En - scopulis pendentibus antrum, Intus aquae dulces, vivisque sedilia saxo, Nympharum domus* - 'A cave with overhanging rocks; inside are springs of sweet water and seats of living rocks - the home of nymphs' (*The Aeneid*, Book 1).

### Later history

The later history of the Grotto is less well understood; repairs are thought to have been undertaken in 1805 and 1810, but by 1887 'Gardening World' reported it as being in a poor state of repair, with many of the inset decorations robbed away. Whilst repairs were undertaken in the early 1970s, their extent was not recorded and by the late 1990s it was unclear what was Brown's original construction, and what represented Wyatt's alterations or subsequent repair. Being 'ruinous by nature' was certainly the case at Croome, and it was evident that the only way to ensure a faithful restoration was to undertake a thorough investigation of the structure, to help unravel its history and return it to how it may have appeared in the early nineteenth century.

### Twentieth-century archaeological investigation

In 1999 Project Archaeologist Rob Cleary, ably assisted by a strong team of volunteers, began investigations to the front of the Grotto. The entire area between the structure and the lake edge was excavated to reveal the line of the original footpath made up of rubble hardcore and ungraded river gravel, set in a deposit of reddish brown, silty clay. Within the larger of the two caves Rob found evidence to suggest that a stone seat was set at the back around a table. The floor of the cave was laid in regularly set cobbles to the rear, and more randomly set cobbles to the front, suggesting a period of disturbance and relaying. Certainly, it was clear that the cave had been disturbed by either robbers or souvenir hunters who had prised off almost all of the spars and fossils that had been inserted in the 1780s. A wrought iron gate had been set in place in the 1760s, but at some time in the late nineteenth century, this was replaced by an iron cage across the cave entrance, presumably as a deterrent to further vandalism. Nonetheless, the excavation revealed many fragments of spar crystals, predominately white calcite, purple amethyst, Blue John (feldspar), fossils, shell and coral, which were found surviving amongst the floor detritus.

Water penetration to the rear of the cave led to the investigation of a raised platform behind the front elevation before it was sealed with a new lead flashing. It was unclear whether the compacted earth that covered the platform was natural windblown deposit and tree litter, or if it was deliberately laid as a planting bed for vegetation to grow up behind the raised screen elevation. Excavation showed that beneath the top detritus lay a deposit of friable red-brown clay with incursions of angular limestone fragments and brick which may have been laid down as drainage to facilitate planting. Precedents for this type of planting are known elsewhere, notably Dido's Cave at Stowe and the grotto at Painshill in Surrey.

### Sabrina - 'nymph of the Severn'

Whilst the smaller of the two caves appeared to be a more sober affair, with set cobbles but no spar stones, the furthest inset appeared to be very interesting. Here the original opening had been blocked. Placed in front were three large Coade-stone blocks, clearly intended to be a plinth for the water nymph, Sabrina. Adjacent was a block of modern concrete in which the impression of a sizeable clam shell, now removed, could be seen into which the nymph was supposed to pour the sweet waters of the River Severn and thence into a semicircular sunken pond. The archaeological evidence showed that the 'cave' to the rear might have been blocked after the water feature had gone out of use, and that Sabrina's plinth possibly moved, presumably during the last phase of repair in the 1970s.

How the water was supplied to the nymph statue and thus into the pond remained a mystery. Despite an initial investigation by Rob it was clear that further excavation was needed. In July 2001 Oxford Archaeology were contracted to tie up the work on the Grotto, as well as to undertake a series of other tasks throughout the park. Led by Project Officer Andrew Croft, the Oxford team undertook an excavation to the rear of the structure, revealing a limestone-covered land drain at a depth of 1.2m, presumably associated with the original draining of the marsh in the 1750s or with the preparations for



*One of the lakes at Croome Landscape Park seen at dawn.*

DAVID NORTON/NTPL



*Excavations of the water supply to the Grotto, Croome Park.*

T. OLIVER/NATIONAL TRUST



*View over a section of parkland at Croome. Part of the 675 acres acquired by the National Trust in 1995/96. The Georgian landscape garden is under-going a ten year restoration plan.*

DAVID NORTON/NTPL



*Excavated gate on path leading to the church at Croome Park.*

COTSWOLD ARCHAEOLOGY/NATIONAL TRUST

laying foundations for the Grotto. No evidence, however, could be found of the original arrangements for supplying water to the statue; it would appear that this was lost when the Grotto was last repaired in the 1970s, and only a modern ceramic pipe survives. The excavation did reveal the line of the culvert laid out by Snape in 1797 running into the lake just to the far western end of the Grotto. It was clear that the purpose of the culvert was not to supply water to the statue, rather to bolster a failing water supply to the lake. Documentary research suggests that the water was supplied from a reservoir in the neighbouring 'New Field', which itself was fed along a complex arrangement of culverts from springs to the north of the park, recently traced by consultant hydrologist, Nick Haycock.

#### **Later structural changes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries**

The excavation did shed more light on changes made to the Grotto at some time in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. It had always been assumed that Wyatt made structural changes to the Grotto to create a setting for the water-nymph statue in the 1780s. Certainly, the archaeological evidence showed that the western end of the structure had been considerably altered, but mostly by later repair works. Nonetheless, evidence survives of a construction cut which corresponds to a late eighteenth-century date. However, new evidence emerged following the excavation that has put this assumption into doubt. Whilst the documentary records give a date for the nymph statue of circa 1779, a date stamp discovered by Tom Oliver on the base of the statue (currently in store) reads 1802. Could the existing statue be a replacement, or might the work on the Grotto have been undertaken much later than previously thought?

#### **Informed conservation - the importance of a good archaeological record**

Without good archaeological or documentary evidence to prove a date one way or another, it seems unlikely we will find an exact answer. Nonetheless, the archaeological investigation has given us a far greater insight into the history of the Grotto; we know now that much of the structure was heavily repaired and altered several times over its history. The jumbled coursing of tufa and limestone makes the structure difficult to interpret, but Rob Cleary's meticulous measured drawings have been able to show us what's original and what's not. Judging by the amount of cementitious mortar found, it would certainly seem that most of the loosely bonded upper courses are a modern rebuild. The arrangements for the original water supply to the nymph sadly remain unclear, but its replacement will be based on a far better understanding than previous repairs.