

DESIGNED BY



The Giebe, photo by Robert Sanderson



SHELL STOCKED

Shelling by Blott Kerr-Wilson

Words by Julia Burdet

The humble mussel is an unexpected barometer for some of the most pressing environmental and political issues of our times, but shell artist Blott Kerr-Wilson knows her shellfish.

"When I first started, 36 years ago, there were so many shells available to buy, but now they're very limited. It's much, much harder than it was to find shells, as the seas are heating up. Towards the end of the time when I was living in France, a few years ago, almost all the mussels died because of bacteria. The seas are also becoming more acidic, and shells are made of calcium, so they're now much more fragile. The difference in mussel shells in particular is really clear — they're finer and more brittle. I've noticed this happening for the last ten years and over the past two years now it's become even more apparent. I fear that in the future some molluscs won't be able to make shells at all because of the acidity."

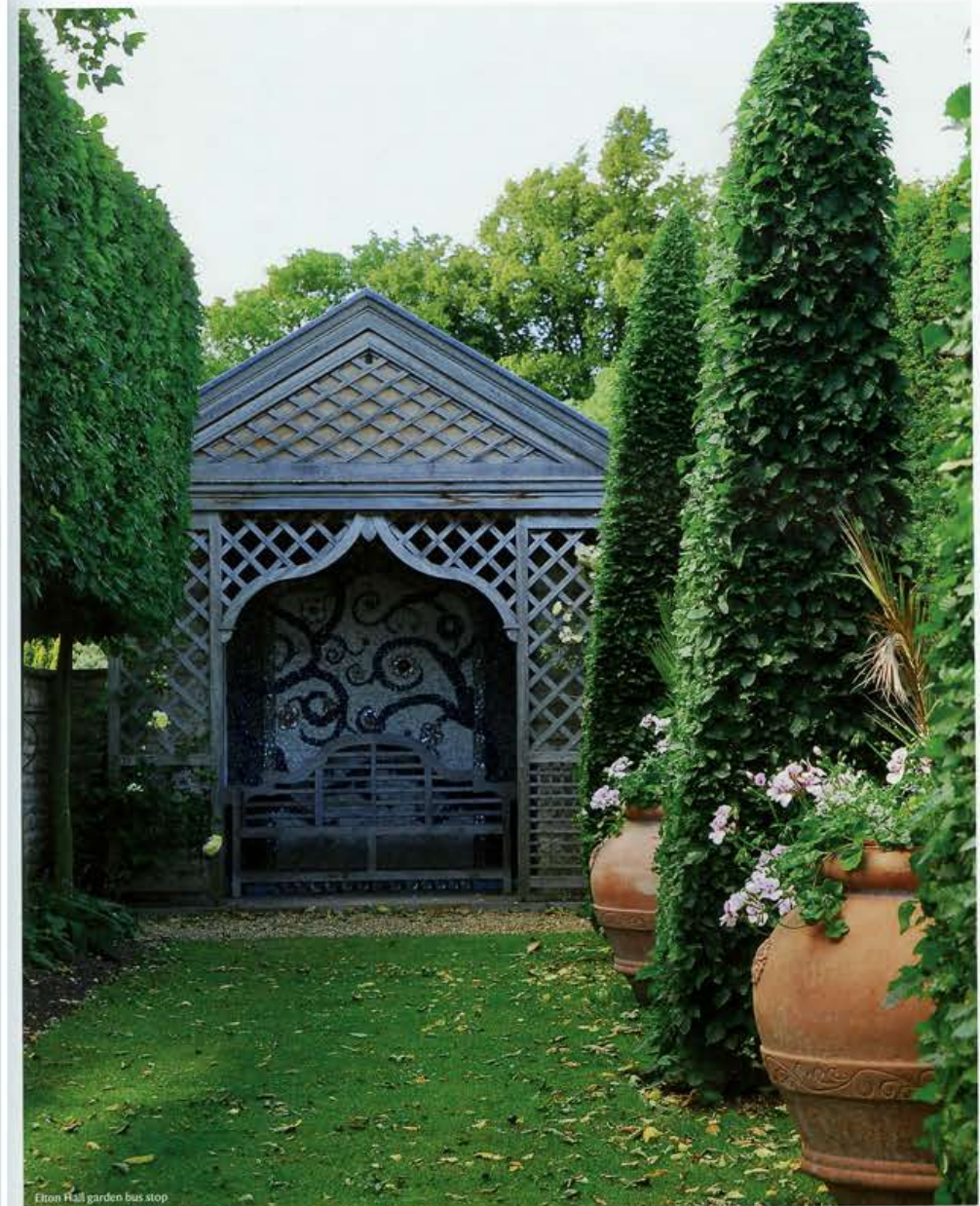
The UK's departure from the EU has also had unexpected ramifications for Blott. "Since Brexit it's really difficult to get hold of common shells. I used to buy one tonne bags — now I'm buying shells singly. Mussel shells are the worst nightmare to source. I was getting them from a paella supplier in Spain, and before Brexit people would have given them away. Now oyster and scallop companies have collapsed too. I went to a fishmonger and he said they don't get scallops in shells any more, and the farmed shells I used to find just aren't there."



The perils facing our seas and oceans and its plant and animal life are the paramount concern to Blott, but her shell stocks at least are healthy. "I have stock. I've got glass bottles of shells like a sweet shop and a big metal container mainly full of mineral and British shells." Some abalones and conch shells are now on the CITES list of endangered species, and Blott uses shells that are still found washed up on shores and sold through bona fide sources. Others are from shellfish farmed in the Philippines for food.

"When I turn up on a job all my materials will arrive ahead of me. It is a great process to have to unpack and organise the shells into a new environment as it reminds me of what I have. There are some shells that come on every job and I never use because I just can't get them to work for me. I love mother-of-pearl and Asses ear, a curved shell. But my favourite shell is the blue mussel shell – I love the colours inside and out. I use it flat on its back, on its tummy, on its side... it's a bi-valve, so it can 'flow' in either direction."

The popularity of shell grottos dates back to Italy in Renaissance times, though in 2007 an Ancient Roman domed cave adorned with shells, mosaic and marble was found under the Palatine Hill. The 17th century trend for having a shell grotto in the garden of grand houses spread through France to England. The 1626 Woburn Abbey grotto is the first known shell room in the UK still in existence, though it's not known how old the famous Margate shell grotto is, and some believe it may have been associated with the Knights Templar with a construction date of the mid 12th century. Blott is curious and would like the mystery to be solved. "Everything can be carbon dated!" she insists.





Steam room interior, photo Benjamin Krebs



"Most grottos on big estates were built as follies for entertainment. The most wonderful grotto is the Goodwood shell house from the 1740s because I believe it was done by a woman. It's very fine. Women did not go out and stick shells in walls during the times when these shell grottoes were being made. I don't have any proof – this is my reading of it – but Goodwood is like a tapestry. I believe if the then Duchess, Sarah, wife of the 2nd Duke of Richmond didn't do the grotto herself, then she oversaw it."

Blott does more than oversee her own shell projects. When we arrange a call, the timing is dependent on the process – "How about now, before I mix the cement?" – and on another call we take a break in the conversation before it dries too hard for Blott to reposition the shells. The cement constitution is all-important to the result. "If it's a restoration project I'll use lime mortar. I get the mix made up to the lime content of the surrounding area; otherwise I use a tile cement or silicon glues. It's very specific depending on the surface."

This particular cement is for a shell project in Blott's own bathroom in her Norfolk home, where she moved after returning from France. The 're-decoration' has taken a little longer than anticipated due to Blott regularly being called away to design and build another shell marvel. "When a client rings up and says, 'We have a bus stop we would love shelled!'... off I go." The bus stop is in the gardens of Elton Hall near Peterborough. "It was built as the clients wanted somewhere for visitors to sit out of the rain or just enjoy the view and listen to the animals in the field. I wanted there to be an extra surprise so I painted the ceiling a vibrant red. The inspiration for this was taken from what a joyous and peaceful place it was to work as the garden had not opened for the season yet."



The Glebe photo by Robert Sanderson

The Glebe is a cone-roofed folly in the gardens of a Grade II listed house in the Cotswolds. The garden was by Rosemary Verey, the revered English garden designer, writer and creator of Barnsley House garden, and was totally overgrown when the current owners bought it.

"This little folly was discovered and saved," Blott recounts. "The wonderful owner Lady Anne Evans asked for one thing in the shell design... a pheasant, because one used to live in the garden. This was such a fun job as Lady Anne got so involved by bringing me minerals and shells to include. We agreed I would not tell her where I had used her gifts and it was up to her to discover. I think there are still some she has not yet found. She came to see me twice a day to chat and discover what I had been up to. I could always hear her arriving as she had a massive bunch of keys attached to her belt that clinked as she walked."

"This job was very special to me as when I first started my shelling career I had tea with Rosemary Verey, who was a gardening superstar to me, in her grotto, so to be actually working in one of her gardens and buildings was a big wow. On most jobs, I start with the ceiling as that gives me the thinking time I need to get to know the place. The peacock for this job came about as I was asked to come to the house to help choose some wine for a restaurant the clients were opening. As I bent my head back to sip the wine I noticed a fabulous tapestry with a peacock and I knew that the bird was going to be my next shelling adventure. I know nothing about wine but it is always fun when asked by clients to join in random things."

One small project in the south-east of England led to unusual solutions to its particular challenges. Rye has a yearly scallop festival celebrating local growers. The owners of The George pub in Rye, Katie and Alex Clarke, along with the architect, Maria Speake from Retrouvius, decided they wanted a celebratory scalloped shell 'bridal loo' as part of its restoration. "The George hotel was badly damaged in 2019 and it has been beautifully restored by these brilliant visionary people," says Blott. "This sort of free flowing shelling looks so random but in fact is probably the most difficult type of shell decoration as it has to look intentional and not just 'shell dashed' (Blott's term for a background of shells). Unfortunately, due to Brexit there was a shortage of scallop shells, but luckily Katie did a mad dash to a restaurant near Canterbury for some, and wonderfully they had been cleaned in their dishwasher! I think these loos should be gender neutral as both the men's and ladies' are so worth visiting."

Blott's work usually involves using many different types of shell, but on a project in France she experimented using just one shell, which of course was her beloved mussel. "This wonderful wooden horse was stabled in a gigantic old steam room which the clients asked if I was interested in shelling. Because the building was near La Rochelle in France, and moules is the local dish, I decided to go for that magnificent shell. I remember the talented sculptor Tom Verity giving me some words of advice: "There is an 'ugly stage' when working and you have to work through it to see what is really happening". To get to the ugly stage on this project was frightening, as it was such a massive job and took a lot of work before I realised it was going to work."



The George, Rye, photo by Robert Sanderson



Shell pots

Morston

Many of Blott's projects are smaller studio commission artworks, which can take the form of shell cones, furniture inlays or sculptural framed pieces. Sea Lavender is a circular wall relief. "Sometimes there are projects that are totally ridiculous and I should not undertake them, but – fortunately for me! – I believe in saying yes. I was so proud of the Sea Lavender as I never know what the outcome of doing this sort of piece will be and it worked so well. It looks so soft but in fact is like touching the ends of sharpened knitting needles. It used tiny white tusk shells and the smallest sea urchin spikes that look like little trees." Morston is another circular piece, made with Asses' ears and purple Cay Cay shells in a swirling sea tempest pattern.

Blott also crafts shell pots and wears the experience of making them as a badge of honour. "Throughout my shell career, if I mention I do shell decoration, most people say: "Oh yes my granny used to shell pots" or "Oh – remember those figurines with wobbly eyes?!". During lockdown I decided that I wanted to shell some pots and vases. They gave me so much pleasure to create but the lead work was such hard work, with hours of banging out the metal to make it stretch and curve. I could not believe how difficult it was to make sure the pieces looked right from every angle, and they were so heavy to handle. So yes, I have shelled pots.... and I am proud of that."

There is a small cadre of shell artists working in the UK, and Blott is keen to spread the word about the decorative art. "I'm trying to get the verb 'to shell' as in 'to decorate with shells' into the English language. Maybe if I get interviewed enough and keep using the term 'shelling', it'll become common usage. It would be fun to have it as a word in the Oxford English Dictionary!"

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