

THE GROTTTO, OATLANDS PARK c. 1778-1948

BY

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BY the middle of the 18th century, England was in the grip of a rigid Palladianism. The brief flowering of her Baroque was over, and the soil which lay obediently heavy on Vanburgh had proved even less kindly to the rococo. For the landowner who wished to rebuild or "improve" his country seat, there was no alternative to an impeccably Vitruvian portico, flanked by sash-windows as rigidly marshalled as Frederick the Great's giant grenadiers.

The result was inevitable: the stronger the emotional strait-waistcoat, the more determined the struggle to escape. The terraces and the topiary were the first to go, when Kent "leaped the fence and found that all Nature was a garden," and although the new landscaped parks were at first decorously sprinkled with correctly classical temples, more unorthodox structures soon began to lurk amid the undergrowth. At Pains Hill, Hamilton erected a Gothic Pavilion, a "Turkish Tent," a log hermitage (complete with unwashed hermit), a thatched bath-house and, most significant of all, a Grotto.

It is John Evelyn who is reputed to have first introduced the grotto into the English landscape, but these curious structures only became really popular when they brought a welcome touch of fantasy into the age of reason, their surrealist architecture a gesture of defiance to a culture governed by the five orders and the heroic couplet. North Surrey, with examples at Pains Hill, Claremont and St. Anne's Hill, is particularly rich in these conceits, but the finest of them all, at Oatlands Park near Weybridge, was wantonly destroyed in January, 1948, so that this article is, alas, at once a description and an obituary.

The Estate of Oatlands, with its memories of "Bluff King Hal" and Elizabeth, was acquired in 1747 by Henry Pelham Clinton, ninth Earl of Lincoln and subsequently Duke of Newcastle-under-Lyne. The new owner immediately started to "landscape" the grounds, originally laid out by his brother seventeen years before, and this date has thus been repeatedly quoted by county histories and guides as that of the building of the Grotto "by an Italian and his two sons," a labour variously estimated as requiring "seven," "twenty" or even "forty" years to complete. Nor was this statement, whose source is unknown, ever questioned until Mr. Marcus Whiffen, in an article published in *The Architectural*

Review, pointed out that the building is not mentioned by Bishop Pococke (1757), Charles Lyttleton (1758), or even the compiler of *The Description of England and Wales* (1770), all of whom visited Oatlands and are careful to refer to grottoes in other parts of the Kingdom.

The clue to the real builders is given by Joseph Farington in his diary entry of 30th October, 1793 :

“. . . The whole was put together by a man of the name of Lane and his son. They were common masons by trade, and lived at Westbury in Wiltshire. They were constantly employed six years about it. . . .”

If Manning and Bray are correct in their statement that Oatlands Grotto was constructed by the same men who built Charles Hamilton's still extant grotto at Pains Hill, it is, as Mr. Whiffen points out, “not rash to identify the elder of Farington's Lanes of Westbury with . . . Josiah Lane of Tisbury,” who, according to John Britton (*Autobiography*), carried out the masonry of the cascade *à la Poussin* to Hamilton's design at Bowood. As the grotto at Pains Hill was finished by 1770, that at Oatlands was presumably constructed between this date and 1788 when that connoisseur of the unusual and the grotesque, Horace Walpole, wrote to the Countess of Ossory (9th July) :

“. . . I am to go thither to-morrow to see The Grotto, which I have neglected doing hitherto though . . . much within my reach . . .”

—a visit which was, perhaps, anticipated too eagerly, as it was followed by :

“Thursday.

“Woe is me ! I don't know whether it is that I am grown old and cross, but I have been disappointed. Oatlands, that my memory had taken into its head as the centre of Paradise, is not half so Elysian as I used to think. . . .”

The death of Newcastle in the same year was followed in 1790 by the purchase of Oatlands by the Duke of York. There is a vivid picture of that impecunious, unconventional household in the pages of Charles Greville, whose diary chronicles fairly regular visits until 1820, when the death of the Duchess was followed by the sale of the estate to the “Golden Ball”—the immensely wealthy dandy, Edward Hughes Ball Hughes. Later in the century the Grotto was carefully repaired and maintained by Mr. Justice Swinfen Eady, who laid out the formal garden which is now incorporated in the grounds of Oatlands Park Hotel.

The Grotto was constructed on a core of red brick, and it is curious to observe that even here the Georgian passion for symmetry was not to be denied, for the irregular chambers and serpentine corridors were cunningly compressed into a double-storeyed central block, flanked by two lower wings each ending in

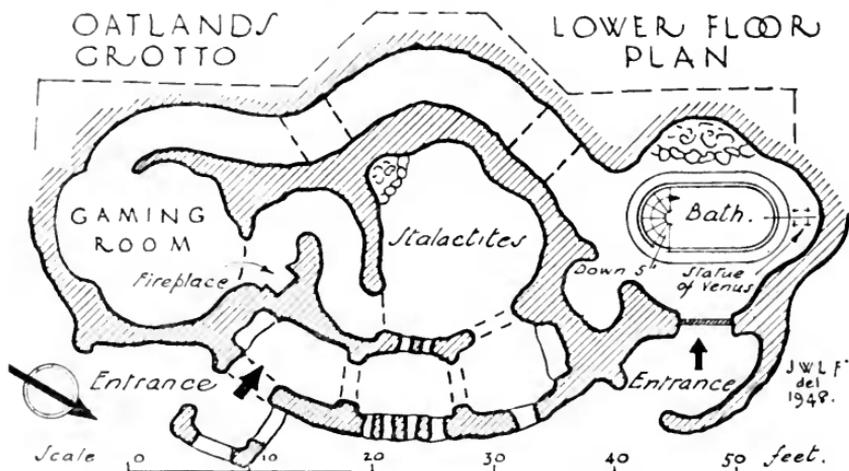
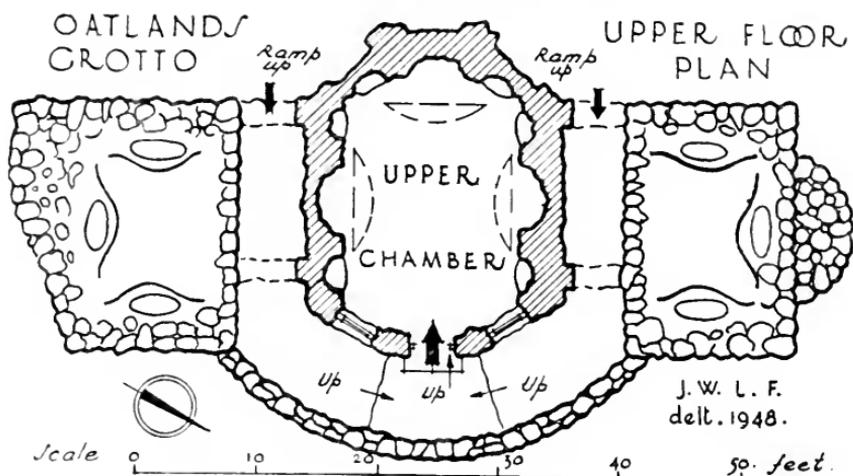
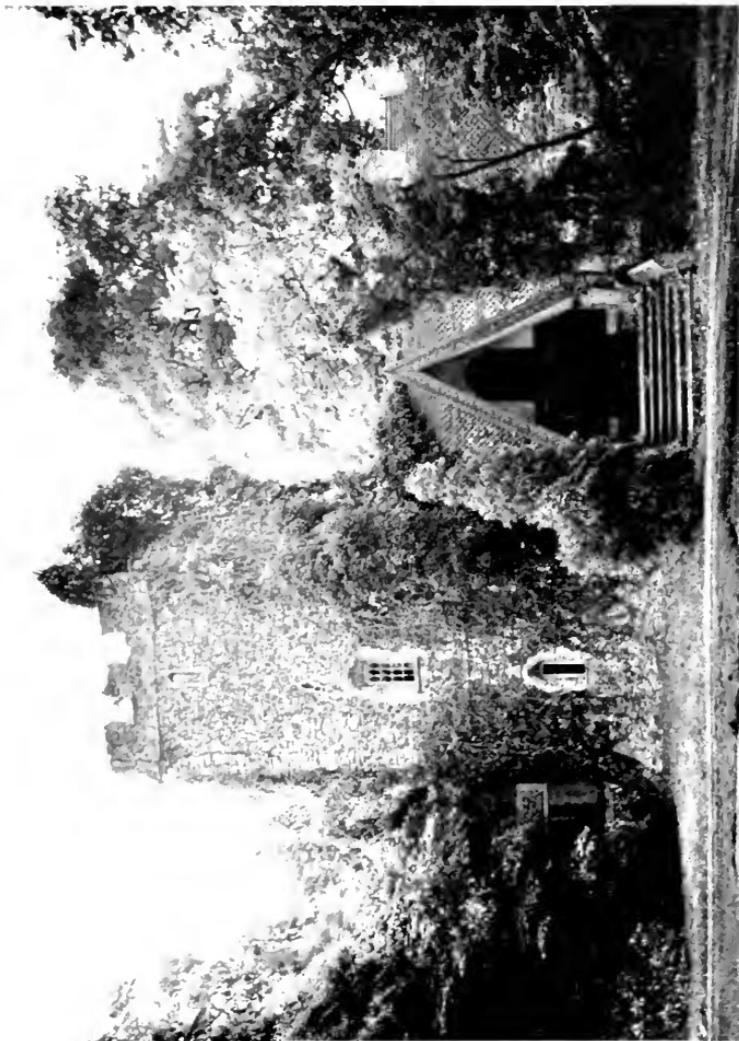


FIG. 1. PLANS OF UPPER AND LOWER FLOORS.

an apse. As the building was constructed against a steep slope, the lower floor was entered at the level of the ground at its foot and the upper by ascending two gentle ramps which united in a terrace before the doorway.

Beneath the terrace the ground sweeps round to form a natural basin, and here a little lake was constructed, fed with water by a pipe from St. George's Hill and bright with darting gold-fish. The whole composition, which now we can only see in prints, must have been very charming on a summer's day, when the surrounding trees and the grey stone-work were reflected in the clear surface; but in 1838 the construction of the cutting for the London and Southampton railway interrupted the water supply



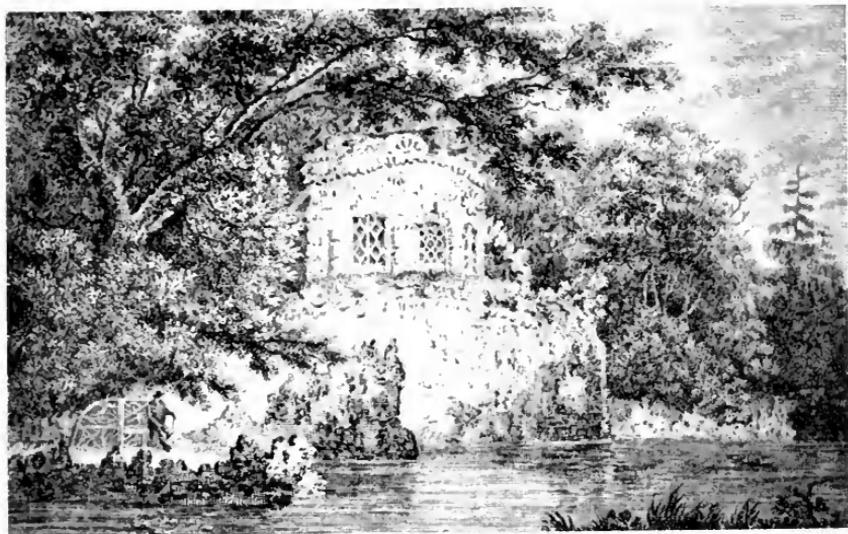
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(A) — THE HERMITAGE.



From the collection of the Duke of Devonshire, at the Art Gallery, Manchester.

(B) — THE BATH ROOM — THE STATUE OF VENUS.



From a print in the Author's collection

(A) THE GROTTO FROM THE SOUTH-EAST. PRINT C. 1793.



Specially taken for the Society by Mr. Maurice B. Cookson

(B) THE GROTTO FROM THE NORTH-WEST.

and a thick coppice replaces what the jaundiced Walpole rather rudely terms "a basin of dirty water." Lining the shores of the lake and the neighbouring paths are the tombs of over sixty pet dogs, which together with numerous parrots and monkeys, consoled the loneliness of the Duchess in the absence of her warrior lord: a taste appreciated by Queen Victoria who, when she visited the Grotto in 1871, suggested that the little cemetery be rescued from decay and restored.

Externally the building was faced with a much-pitted stone which the guide-books are unanimous in terming "Tufa," a volcanic rock which would presumably have had to be specially imported from Italy or Iceland. Sir Arthur Russell, however, who has made a special study of the geology of artificial grottoes, informs the author that these facings are almost certainly, as far as can be judged from photographs, of a much weathered limestone, which confirms Farington's note that they "came from Bath and Cirencester." It was certainly most effective in the two cyclopean arches which guarded the foot of the twin ramps, while the pock-marked wall-surfaces were diversified by blind windows and string-courses of dressed stone, giant ammonites and specimens of "brain" coral.

In *The Chronicles of Oatlands*, published by James North in 1875, we have a description of the Grotto at a time when the statuary and furnishings were still largely intact. Skirting the shore of the lake and entering through a grille in the south-east corner, the curious traveller would find himself at one end of a wide corridor, running in a gentle curve round the east side of the central block and divided by arches into three bays, each with an elaborately patterned roof of satin spar (selenite), red calcite and a blue vitreous material. By 1947, the dust of a century and a half had dimmed the original gaudiness, and the "arms of Cecil, with quarterings, encircled by the Garter and motto," which glowed in stained glass from one of the narrow windows overlooking the lake, had vanished along with "some good wood carvings, a figure of Venus reclining in statuary marble and a statue by Torrigiano."

At the end of this corridor, an arch on the left hand gave on to the central chamber, which was at once the most impressive and the most beautiful. The ceiling was a solid mass of stalactites, varying in length from three or four inches to as many feet, very naturally grouped and each constructed on a conical fan of laths, anchored to the brick vault at the top and covered with glistening spar imbedded in mortar. Two concealed *yeux-de-boeuf* in the roof gave just sufficient light to enhance the mystery of these bright daggers stabbing downwards through the gloom without betraying the extent of the "cavern," which was only fourteen feet across, or revealing the entrance to the little passage whose stygian windings led further into the labyrinth.

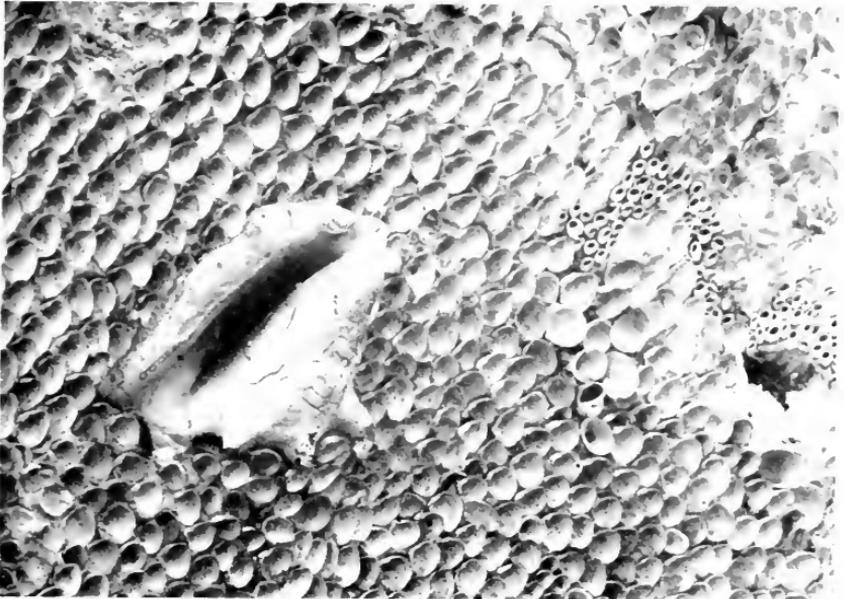
Groping his way between the spar-encrusted walls, the visitor would suddenly find the passage widen to reveal, of all incongruities in a grotto, a fireplace complete with dog-grate. Nor was a cheerful blaze probably unwelcome, for these lofty semi-subterranean halls and corridors could strike chill on all but the hottest days, and after an hour or so the occupants felt in cordial agreement with Dr. Johnson's verdict on such whimsies. "A very pleasant place," the Sage thundered, "for Toads!"

Beyond lay the gaming den which was the scene of those gambling parties which appealed rather more strongly to the Duke than to the local tradesmen, parties which were apt to be cut short by those unreasonable and mercenary spirits stopping all supplies until their accounts were settled. The high vault, ornamented with bold star patterns and zigzags worked in spar, must often have echoed to the stentorian mirth of the Royal host, who took a simple delight in bawdy stories, while he and his cronies lolled on magnificent cushions, "worked by the Duchess's own hand."

From this second chamber, a corridor wound round the back of the stalactite hall to a corresponding room in the opposite wing of the building. Here was a truly noble bath, 10 feet 9 inches long and 5 feet wide and deep, whose waters Charles Greville found on 4th August, 1818, "as clear as crystal and as cold as ice." As in the gaming room, light entered through three round windows in the roof, whose cast-iron frames were probably not original as they closely resemble those used in the mills of the early 19th century; while should he so desire, the bather could enter directly through a door from the shore of the lake, instead of traversing the rooms and corridors we have described. The walls were entirely lined with small shells, set inside-out into the plaster and punctuated at intervals with giant cowries, while room was found somewhere for a "terra-cotta of the infant Hercules," "a dug-out canoe from the South-Sea Islands," and "a stuffed alligator." Here too was the glory of the Grotto, a 2nd-century copy of the Venus de Medici who presided over the head of the bath, and of all the building's treasures alone survives, brooding over the newspapers in the Public Library, and until recently kept shrouded in a dust-sheet lest her near nudity corrupt the morals of the simple town-folk.

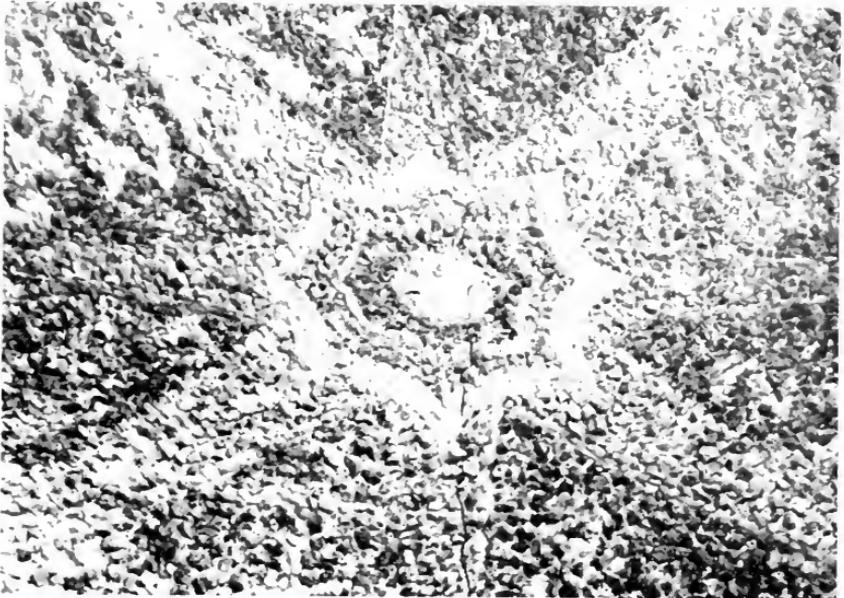
The upper chamber, as we have seen, was approached by two ramps studded with horses' teeth (said to have been collected, for some obscure reason, from the field of Waterloo), and crossed by a few shallow steps which scarcely warranted Walpole's gibe ". . . and which never happened to a grotto before, lives up one pair of stairs." This room, the largest (22 feet 9 inches by 18 feet) and least uninhabitable in the building, was the favourite retreat of the Duchess of York while her husband was busy, if legend speaks true, marching his men to the top of the hill and marching them down again. Here great candelabras swung from the lofty

PLATE XVI



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A SHELL-WORK ON THE WALL OF THE BATH ROOM.



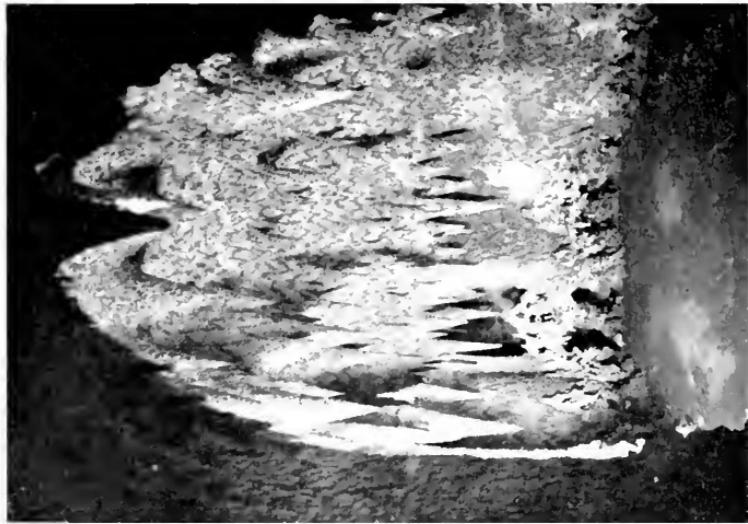
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B PANEL IN COLOURED SPARS, ROOF OF ENTRANCE PASSAGE.

PLATE NVII



(A) STAR DECORATION IN THE APSE OF THE GAMING ROOM
(Specially taken for the Society by Mr. Maurice B. Cookson)



(B) THE CENTRAL CHAMBER.
(Taken by Mr. Herbert Felton and reproduced by permission of the Architectural Press)

ceiling, their hundred tiny flames reflected a thousand times from the mirrors on the walls, and striking fire from the gleaming crystals of satin spar which hung pendant in stalactites from the roof and framed windows rich with the gules and azure, argent and or of heraldic glass. No Drury Lane transformation scene can have exceeded the splendour of this "pleasure dome" on a gala night, such a night as occurred in 1815 when the Grotto knew its greatest hour and four kings sat down to dine with the heroes of Waterloo.

After this it is something of an anti-climax to read that the room contained, besides "Chinese furniture" and stools most horribly contrived from giant shells, a "Roman battle-axe from Coway stakes," "an ivory model of a man-o-war," the skull of "Eclipse" ("first and the rest nowhere"—now preserved in Weybridge Museum), and a brace or two of stuffed lizards.

This opportunity may also be taken for mourning the destruction of "The Hermitage," a cottage *ornée* which stood not far from the Grotto and which vanished unhonoured and unsung some time between the wars. A hall and porch with fantastically steeply pitched roofs and windows enriched with lurid stained glass, and a more orthodox two-storeyed block, flanked a large but unsubstantial tower, forming a picturesque group which, when the author knew it as a boy, was as ivy-clad and ruinous as any romantic might desire. Within, according to our guide of 1875, were once "a terra-cotta of the struggling satyr," "a Roman cinerarium from Pompeii," formerly at Strawberry Hill, and a "seat formed of . . . white marble from the Mausoleum of Akbar . . . at Agra" [*sic*]. This last item more probably came from Agra Fort, where Lord William Bentinck ruthlessly pulled down magnificent specimens of Mogul architecture, selling the marble to contractors and shipping a few selected pieces home to the Prince Regent.

Unfortunately, the Grotto stood quite close to a road open to the public and, during the recent war, when fences remained unrepaired and gates were left unguarded, it became the prey of hooligans. Whether the culprits were soldiers, boys from a nearby "approved" school or just local "toughs" is uncertain and now immaterial. Doors and windows were forced, barbed-wire barriers severed and the delicate ornament of the upper room made a target for missiles, so that by the end of 1947 it had been completely ruined and bore all the appearance of damage from high-explosive rather than the hand of man. This fate, incidentally, is one that was nearly shared by two other historic monuments in the same district, Byfleet Manor and Waynflete's Tower, Esher, both of which were only rescued by occupation from the attacks of individuals also actuated by a maniacal urge for destruction, and who were apparently prepared to labour indefatigably with crowbar and wire-cutters to accomplish their perverted ends.

In the face of these repeated attacks the directors of North Hotels decided to demolish the building rather than spend any

more on its maintenance. This decision was the more regrettable since, even if a good case might have been made out for the destruction of the upper storey, by now a practically featureless shell, the lower chambers were very little damaged and might have been made reasonably secure by the blocking-up of the window openings, pending consultation with interested bodies and a public appeal for a restoration fund.

On the grounds that certain portions of the building were unsafe and forgetting an old undertaking to inform Surrey County Council before taking any such action, Walton and Weybridge U.D.C. recommended to the Ministry of Works that a licence be granted for the demolition. Getting wind of the affair, the Georgian Group made strenuous efforts to halt the work of destruction, a few interested residents endeavoured to overcome the usual local apathy in such matters, and some questions were asked in Parliament which elicited from the Minister the reply that, until the preparation of the necessary schedules required under the Town and Country Planning Act, he regretted that he could take no action in the matter. All that could be done, therefore, was to make as complete a record as possible of the building during the few remaining weeks of its existence. Through the courtesy of the directors of North Hotels and with the co-operation of their architect, Mr. R. Mountford Pigott, F.R.I.B.A., the author was enabled to prepare a plan based on a measured survey, and to arrange for Mr. Cookson, of the University of London Institute of Archæology, to take a series of photographs which were later supplemented by others taken by Messrs. Brian and Norman Westwood, A.A.R.I.B.A.

And so the picks crashed into the meticulously fitted shell-work, and the exquisitely contrived stalactites plunged down to impale themselves in the growing heap of rubble. The brick core, however, put up an unexpectedly stout resistance and a pneumatic drill had to be summoned before it could be levelled to the ground. Now all that remains of this quaint and in some respects lovely essay in architectural fantasy are a few stalactites, some specimens of shell-work, an iron window-frame and several other pitiful fragments which Mrs. Grenside, the Assistant Curator, has rescued for inclusion in the Collections at Weybridge Museum.