

# The Landmark Trust

## THE BATH HOUSE, NR STRATFORD-UPON-AVON, WARWICKSHIRE

The stucco ... is meant to represent a wall worn by water drops, with icicles sticking to it. The festoons of shells are additional ornaments; or how could they come in that form unless some invisible sea nymph or triton placed them there for their private amusement? I should not wonder, indeed, that so pretty a place allured them.

Mary Delany 1754

The Bath House was built about 1748 for Sir Charles Mordaunt of Walton Hall. Like many of his contemporaries, Sir Charles enjoyed making alterations and improvements to his house and estate and took a fashionable interest in architecture. He was one of the local circle of gentlemen connoisseurs and amateur architects which included Lord Lyttleton of Hagley, Sir Roger Newdigate of Arbury and not least, his good friend Sanderson Miller of Radway.

Almost certainly it was the last of these, Sanderson Miller, who provided designs for the Bath House. The building bears a close resemblance to his known works, such as the Shire Hall in Warwick; and he had a particular fondness for rooms of octagonal form, as here. No drawings exist, but in October 1749, Miller noted in his diary that he was settling "accounts with Hitchcox about Sir Charles' Bath". William Hitchcox was both Miller's stonemason and his valet. Since he seldom worked for anyone else, his involvement at Walton provides some firm evidence for attributing the design to Miller.

Since Classical times, exotic buildings have formed an important part of garden design. In the landscape gardens of the eighteenth-century these were carefully placed to appear unexpectedly in the course of meandering walks, sometimes chanced on close to, sometimes glimpsed from a distance, adding interest and variety to the scene. On a practical level, such buildings provided shelter, and a place to enjoy the view, take a rest and have picnics. Along with temples and towers, bath houses were also popular, having strong associations with the Classical past, and the baths of Ancient Rome. They served moreover a double purpose.

At that time people took a bath mainly for medicinal reasons. We know Sir Charles suffered from gout and his doctor would certainly have advised him that a cold dip would be beneficial for this ailment. A cold bath was also held to calm the nerves, improve digestion, invigorate the spirits, and even help to retain "an equal bodily weight". Lengthy immersion was not advised, in case it resulted in a Horror!

The elegant octagonal room above the bath chamber is dominated by the plaster icicles, or stalactites, and the shell-work festoons, a refinement of the cave-like grotto below. It seems that this decoration was the idea of Mary Delany, whose sister Anne Dewes lived at neighbouring Wellesbourne Hall. Mrs Delany is better known for her paper flower pictures, but she also excelled in shell-work. She decorated her own home near Dublin in this way, and also possessed an impressive shell collection. She sent a barrel of shells to Walton in 1754, and probably helped in their arrangement, supervising her sister and Sir Charles' daughters.

Having served as the setting for many picnics and tea-parties, and even a Victorian dinner to celebrate a christening, the Bath House finally fell out of use after the Second World War. Efforts by its owners to keep it in repair proved unequal to the destructive energy of vandals. Eventually it was brought to the attention of the Landmark Trust, as a charity which specialises in the rescue of small but distinguished historic buildings. A lease was signed in 1987.

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## REPAIR OF THE BATH HOUSE

The Walton Bath House was fully restored between 1987-91 by the Landmark Trust, under the direction of architect William Hawkes of Stratford-upon-Avon. The work was carried out by Linford-Bridgeman, a firm which specialises in historic building repair. The job of recreating the plaster icicles fell to Bill Salter, of T.E. Ashworth, with support from Geoff Orton of Trumplers. Diana Reynell was our 20th-century Mrs Delany, responsible for the shell-work.

The task that had to be accomplished was a daunting one. In 1987, the vaulted ceiling had fallen in, most of the plaster on the walls had gone, and only shadows of the festoons survived. Windows and doors were broken, and very few floorboards were left. More seriously, the masonry vault of the bath chamber was in danger of collapse, and the whole building was showing a tendency to slide down the hill, causing the walls to crack. Fortunately, William Hawkes had made survey drawings before the building became completely derelict. The owners of the Walton estate had taken photographs of the interior at the same time, and had saved some of the shells. This information, together with a careful survey of what was left and historical research made it possible to work out the exact appearance of the main room.

Before any work could begin inside, the structure had to be made safe. The roof was repaired, and given a new covering of slates. The walls were patched with new stone where necessary, disturbing the existing masonry as little as possible. Lime mortar was used, although reinforced concrete was used to form a new floor to secure the vault of the bath chamber. For further strength, steel wires were threaded through several of the stones, to anchor them from above. Much of the surviving joinery was found to be sound, if battered. The window and door surrounds were repaired and put back in place. New sections of dado rail and skirting were made to match bits that were still there. A new floor of oak boards was laid. The window sashes were renewed, with the heavier glazing bars common to the mid-eighteenth century and new crown glass from France.

The exact positions of the shell festoons had been carefully marked by boards fixed to the wall, around which the new plaster could be applied. The original boards, to which the shells had been fixed with plaster of paris, were handed over to Diana Reynell, to start the process of recreating the shell-work. The new shells copy as closely as possible those used by Mrs Delany, both in type and arrangement. Each festoon is eight foot long, and some of the shells, such as the conches and tritons, are very large. This caused some alarm when the festoons were seen at ground level, but back in their proper positions on the walls, they were exactly right in scale. For the ceiling, new plaster icicles were made with moulds copied from old ones found under the floorboards. A short length of old cornice that survives above the main door, and old photographs, provided evidence for the way in which they were fixed. The central ceiling boss had vanished, and old photographs provided little evidence for its design. A new one had to be created, therefore, its form based on an idea of what its predecessor might have been like.

The chimneypiece is also a new design, since only the faintest traces survived of the original one. Its shell decoration echoes that of a chimneypiece at Wellesbourne Hall, probably the work of Mrs Delany or her sister. The central rosette contains the few surviving eighteenth-century shells.

A new drive and path were created and water and electricity brought to the building. The yew trees, planted in the eighteenth century to give an impression of antiquity, were cut back. Finally, a vista was cleared through the woods in front, to give a view of the countryside, and at the same time enable this elegant building to be more widely appreciated.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. The Bath House sleeps up to 2 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.*