

## CAVES AT FONTHILL

### WORK OF A WILTSHIRE ECCENTRIC

Letter to the Editor, "Salisbury Times"  
Writing from Larkhill, Mr. Roland A. Paxton, of Timperley, Altrincham, a member of the British Spelæological Association, says:

It is the purpose of this letter, to present to the Wiltshireman the knowledge of yet another heritage, namely, the caves and grottoes of picturesque Fonthill.

These caves were constructed intermittently throughout the eighteenth century, when it was the fashion among people of social standing to have their estates laid out with a meticulous eye for detail. Landscape designers were employed, to ensure that the fullest possible use was being made of local topographical features. The subterranean byways of Fonthill, represent William Beckford's conception of this fashion.

William Beckford was a notable Wiltshire eccentric; he spent literally millions of pounds fulfilling childhood dreams! In 1796, Beckford returned from travels abroad, and turned his attention upon the estate. Throughout the grounds appeared hermitages, caves, a lake grotto and even a subterranean swimming pool. East of the lake are larger caves which were quarried before Beckford's time. He utilised these by introducing plaster statues, depicting mythological scenes.

The cave entrances are situated in limestone, overlooking the lake. When the tunnels were made about fifty thousand cubic feet of rock were removed; enough to build two hundred detached houses! The artificial portions of the tunnels are quite remarkable. Even in the darkest depths the same attention to minute detail is prevalent, as in keeping with the historical period. For instance, the man-made rock walls have been constructed to show their lines of stratification, in precisely the same position as that of the natural rock. How much easier it would have been to construct an ordinary wall! The component stones of the walls and roof-domes have been dextrously keyed-in, a masterpiece of ingenuity that has weathered the test of time.

These costly structures of Fonthill remain to intrigue inquisitive minds, and present them with the fascinating story of the most intricate artificial spelæo-ornamentation in the British Isles.

ROLAND A. PAXTON.

Note: Spelæology—Cave science.

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## GROTTOES AT FONTHILL

### MEMORIES OF A WILTSHIRE ECCENTRIC

(By Roland A. Paxton)

Throughout the centuries landowners have pondered over problems of landscape design; and created estates in keeping with their individual characters. The passing of two centuries at Fonthill have done little to alleviate the overpowering influence of a notable Wiltshire eccentric, William Beckford, upon his estate. As man's creations are concerned with his character, it is necessary to include a brief biography of this former overlord of Fonthill!

William Beckford was born at Fonthill House in the year 1759; he was the son of one of the wealthiest and most influential men of the day. At the age of eleven, his father died; and the young boy, lacking paternal guidance, became spoilt and difficult to control. He was educated at Fonthill by the best tutors, and received instruction in music from the composer Mozart. His tutors asserted that he had a fiery artistic imagination. On his coming of age in 1780, he inherited one million pounds sterling, and an income of one hundred thousand pounds a year. But alas! The young man was conceited and extravagant; his extravagance knew no bounds! He had a flair for the mystic things of life, especially where they concerned the orient; he lived in the fantasy of the "Arabian Nights." This passion for the orient became an obsession, so he left Fonthill to fulfil his dreams of eastern splendour. In 1782 he wrote a book about the romances of a Turkish Sultan. This book, entitled "Vathek," was almost instantly acclaimed as one of the finest oriental stories in European literature. On Beckford's return to Fonthill in 1796, profoundly influenced by eastern romanticism, he set about creating his own dream estate, with an extravagance unparalleled throughout the kingdom. He built weird unstable towers of fantastic heights, and planted literally millions of trees, encasing the whole with a stone wall five miles long and twelve feet tall! Eventually, through inattention to business, Beck-

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ford was obliged to sell Fonthill; it was bought by a Mr. John Farquhar for three hundred thousand pounds. Beckford spent the latter part of his life at Fonthill as a recluse, his only companions being a Portuguese dwarf and a French Abbe. From Fonthill he moved to Bath, taking with him most of his art treasures, and his faithful dwarf. At Bath, he constructed a tower from which it is said he could see his beloved Fonthill. Even after further extravagances, on his death in 1844 he still possessed eighty thousand pounds!

#### This Fantastic Genius

All that remains at Fonthill to-day to tell the story of this fantastic and ineffectual genius are the groves of trees, stone constructions and grottoes. It would be difficult to understand the extravagance prevalent throughout these grottoes, without knowing something of their creator, and the fact that he spent over a million pounds on his estate. To enable readers and any prospective visitors to derive the fullest possible benefit from these notes, they have been arranged in the form of a circular tour, commencing at the picturesque Beckford Arms Hotel, Fonthill Gifford. All the grottoes mentioned are quite safe, and although shafts of daylight penetrate into most of them, a source of illumination is desirable, as it facilitates exploration.

From the Beckford Arms we proceed down the lane towards Fonthill Bishop for about a quarter of a mile. Here, where the lane passes through a copse, the Road Grotto crosses underneath the road. Close by, is another construction, the Hermitage.

The lofty, twisting tunnels of the Road Grotto present an atmosphere of mystery. This effect is further enhanced by two carefully-spaced daylight shafts. These shafts permit light to enter and illuminate what could have been the darkest of dark depths! The most noticeable constructional features of this grotto are in the roof; which for the greater portion of its length consists of dexterously keyed-in blocks of limestone. Where the tunnel crosses under the road, the roof height decreases from eighteen to eight feet. This is to utilise a natural bed of limestone as the roof; it gives added strength to the tunnel and further variation in design. A careful scrutiny of the walls shows a certain amount of artificial ornamentation. This grotto is remarkable, principally for its dimensions; it is large enough to permit a man on horseback to ride through most of its length!

In close proximity to Road Grotto is the construction known as the Hermitage. It consists of one large central chamber with three entrances, practically parallel to one another. The central chamber incorporates a dome; a masterpiece of architectural ingenuity! On the left as we enter is a seated plaster statue in an alcove. The statue is illuminated by a small window to its right. Opposite this alcove, on the further side of the central chamber is a

small ante-chamber, containing a fireplace. Facing the three entrances (two of which may have been intended as windows) at the far side of the central chamber, may have been an altar or table of some description. There are many signs of other ornamentation, including niches for accommodating lamps or candles.

#### An Explanation

An explanation for the construction of these grottoes may be found in the following theory.

It must have been a constant source of irritation to William Beckford, having the public road to Fonthill Bishop dividing his estate into two halves, so he built Road Grotto to enable him to travel unseen between the portions of his estate. He built the Hermitage to utilise for some form of religious ritual, possibly connected with the French Abbe, his companion of later years.

Below Road Grotto is Fonthill Lake; a placid stretch of water nearly a mile in length. Its further edge is shrouded by tall trees of William Beckford's Alpine gardens. It is in these gardens that we find the remainder of the Fonthill Grottoes. We proceed there by passing over the weir at the northern end of the lake. The first construction we meet takes the form of a lake-side grotto. The water flows inside the grotto up to a seat at the rear. Access is gained through two side entrances and a large almost vertical chimney above the seat. The artificial ornamentation in this grotto takes the form of natural limestone which has weathered into fantastic shapes.

A short distance from here we find several more stone structures, the most notable of which is a large well-illuminated stone grotto, containing an oval stone bath in carefully-worked Portland stone.

To reach the largest of the Fonthill excavations we climb up the wooded slope to some old freestone quarries, into which are hewn caverns of the most romantic forms. These caverns contain Pre-Beckford dates, and are in all probability the appendages of some former mansion. There are two main caverns forty yards apart, connected internally by means of a narrow fissure through which it is possible to walk. The smaller cavern contains broken plaster statuary depicting mythological scenes; this statuary is attributable to Beckford. The most remarkable feature of the larger cavern is the span of the roof, supported only by two rock pillars.

To complete our tour we cross Fonthill Park and the bridge over the lake; turn left up the lane which we left earlier, passing by Road Grotto back to the Beckford Arms.

These subterranean byways of Fonthill continue to withstand the passing of centuries; costly structures to intrigue inquisitive minds and present them with the fascinating story of the most intricate artificial spelæo-ornamentation in the British Isles.