

## Sheer follies: a very British eccentricity

As Halloween looms, we celebrate the streak of creative madness that has haunted British gardens for centuries: the folly, and meet some present-day whimsical builders

By Ed Cumming

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Richard and Sally Pim inside the bottle dome at Westonbury Mill CREDIT: Photo: Christopher Jones

Working in the desert, Richard Pim dreamt of water. A hydrogeologist, his job was to find H<sub>2</sub>O under the sand, but his thoughts kept returning to damp parts of England.

"When you're in the Sahara you tend to fantasise about babbling brooks," he says. In 1969 he gave in to these longings, and bought a derelict mill just north of Hereford. A stream ran beside the house, and a water meadow lay below. It was, he says, "a fantastic place for a garden". Work kept him away from the idyll, however, and it was 30 years before he seriously tackled the undergrowth and went about creating a space that visitors would enjoy.

The engineer in him proved hard to suppress. In the clean-up, he found an old iron water wheel. "I saw it and immediately knew it needed to be used for something. It was set up for a belt drive, so I made a bucket chain, one of those things that lifts water up and drops it at the top. Then I needed somewhere for the water to go, so I built a stone tower. The water comes up in the buckets and fills a tank at the top. When the tank is filled, the water sluices out through gargoyles. It's very jolly: people watch it for hours. I had some help from a mason, but I carved the gargoyles and made all the mechanical parts myself."



Richard Pim with his tower folly

The tower was the first of Richard's follies at Westonbury Mill, but not the last.

"I like lateral thinking – working out problems and solving them," he says. The next project was a bottle dome. "It sounds horrible, but it's actually rather marvellous. It's like a hot cross bun, with a concrete 'cross', and then the rest is filled in with hundreds of wine bottles. The sun makes a complete pass across it during the day, and the effect of the light on the glass is really quite magical."



The bottle dome, like a 'hot cross bun'

His most recent project is an elaborate cuckoo clock – "A half-timbered tower with a wacky mechanism," as he puts it, describing a whole system of pressured air, levers and pulleys, cogs and whistles. "Every hour the doors open and it plays two minutes of birdsong. People love to be entertained in the garden."



Richard with the musical mechanism for his cuckoo clock

The inspiration for the clock was the Villa d'Este near Rome, a Renaissance garden with spectacular water features. "There they wanted the workings to be invisible, but I wanted people to see how it all works. Visitors love all the follies, but I think the garden has enough now. It is a garden, rather than a kind of theme park. I don't want the follies to detract from everything else here. "Follies are a British quirkiness," he adds. "There is something fascinating about these Heath Robinson devices, machines that go to a tremendous amount of fuss to do not very much at all. The definition of a folly is that the style and elegance of a thing, rather than the function, is its purpose. Immediately it does something useful, it's not a folly."



The giant cuckoo clock viewed across the garden

Richard might be right about his eccentric contraptions, but for follies as a whole, the story is more complicated. The Folly Fellowship, the British (of course) group dedicated to their preservation, which has been going for 25 years, states that most were built for pleasure rather than purpose. It has recorded around 1,800 grottoes and follies. "Some make us laugh," reads a statement on the website. "Some provoke contemplative thoughts, some can frighten. Some are mere whims, others demand to be taken seriously." The original meaning of "folly", however, was derogatory, not whimsical. In 1228 Hubert de Burgh, Justiciar of England, built a new castle near Monmouth, Wales, only to be ordered to tear it down by Henry II. He christened his building Stultitiam Huberti, or "Hubert's Folly". Thanks to the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the Civil War, the English landscape has long been dotted with appealing ruins. For visitors on the Grand Tour in Europe, there was also the chance of finding a piece of older architecture – parts of a Roman temple, for example. By the time of the industrial revolution, the folly had been adopted by the Romantic movement as a desirable decorative feature. The great designed landscapes, such as Stowe in Buckinghamshire or Stourhead in Wiltshire, attempt to evoke a lost world – of Albion, but also of Ancient Greece and Rome.

The great era of folly building – from the mid-18th to the late-19th century, also coincided with a period of unprecedented wealth for British landowners. Freshly minted colonial barons wanted to show off, and follies were a good way to do it. One of the most famous, the pineapple at Dunmore, near Falkirk, is a perfect example. It was built by John Murray, who had been Colonial Governor of Virginia. What better way display your exotic wealth than to build an enormous exotic fruit?



The Dunmore pineapple, one of the UK's most famous follies



A Redwood Stone folly at Capel Manor Gardens

Our definition of follies is elastic enough to accept buildings that look pointless – but which are, in fact, rather handy, elegant garden features. Earthmovesdesign makes cob wood "roundhouses", Hobbit-style garden rooms constructed using pre-medieval techniques, with natural materials and living roofs. At once traditional and modern, they are often used as playrooms. Jimmy Doherty (of Jimmy's Farm fame), has one on his estate in Essex. Though they might work like conventional garden rooms (albeit with a more eco-friendly flavour than the garden offices popular in planning-permission-averse cities), the roundhouses look bizarre, as if straight from Middle-earth. Passers-by grin involuntarily.

This is the secret to a folly, whether a pointless-looking building that has a secret purpose, or a purposeful-looking building that has a secret pointlessness. They force visitors to think about the landscape. Garden-lovers are used to appreciating a landscape, but often passively. A ruined church is intriguing. An artificial ruined church that has been specially built, even more so. Combining history, architecture and gardening, all in a slightly batty way, to provoke contemplation: it is hard to think of a more British art form. Maybe William Blake, that great British eccentric, had it right. "The fool who persists in his folly will become wise."

Westonbury Mill Water Gardens, Herefordshire, open April-September 2014 ([01544 388650](tel:01544388650);  
[westonburymillwatergardens.com](http://westonburymillwatergardens.com))