

## THE RYDAL GROTTO, WESTMORLAND 1668-9

By Blake Tyson

In her stimulating book *Follies & Grottoes* (Constable, 1974), Barbara Jones remarked that "grottoes are for the south; northern England is cold enough" and described only one Cumbrian grotto, still surviving at Corby Castle, near Carlisle. This was also described in detail by William Hutchinson in his *Excursion to the Lakes* in 1773-4. Although Barbara Jones suggested that Alexander Pope's grotto at Twickenham, dating from about 1720, was probably the first true grotto in Britain, she does acknowledge that "Again and again it has been found impossible to get any clear facts about even the most ambitious grottoes". Thus, whilst recognizing the considerable value of Barbara Jones' work, the purpose of this article will be to draw attention to the tiny seventeenth century grotto at Rydal, to state the evidence for its construction and to attempt to put it into its historical perspective.

Sir Daniel Fleming (1633-1701), writing his *Memoirs* shortly after 1681 when he was knighted, described his seat at Rydal Hall as "having pleasant Gardens, Orchards, Walks, a Pond, a Mill, & a Grot, adjoining thereunto", but the grotto was not described until 1692 when the Rev. Thomas Machell, vicar of Kirkby Thore, rode through Westmorland recording the county's history. He wrote:

"About one mile North from Ambleside Chapel stands Rydal Hall...in a pretty little valley...well wooded on both sides...with good gardens and orchards so high grown that you can hardly see the house.

A runnell comes quite through it and in one of the orchards by the Gillbeckside is a little grotto...[for] retirement [consisting] of one little room wainscotted round, whose window [is] opposite the door, opening directly upon a great force or fall of water having only a small pool between them, which is very surprising."<sup>2</sup>

This description is sufficiently clear for the building to be positively identified as that still standing at NY 3663 0633. It is a small 12 feet square structure of random slate rubble almost enveloped beneath tall trees frequently dripping from excessive rainfall (fig. 1). To record his estate and personal finances, Fleming kept two meticulous account books, from 1656 to 1701, which contain many scattered references to building work on the estate.<sup>3</sup> From them it is possible to derive a relatively detailed

account of the construction of the grotto in 1668-9, using Fleming's own words. Locations are indicated on the map.

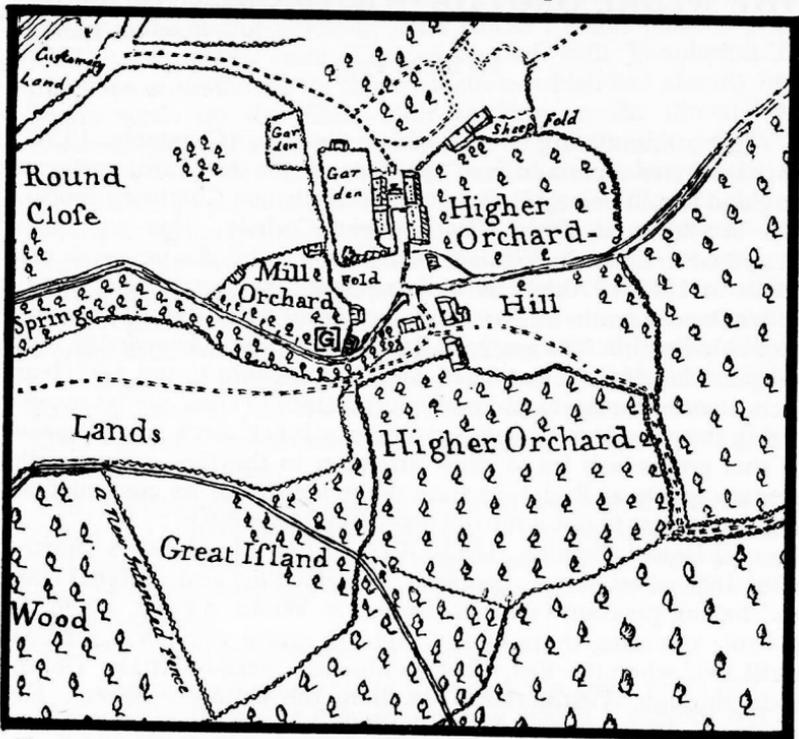


Fig. 1. Map of Rydal Hall showing the grotto [G]. It is taken from a manuscript estate plan of 1770 by Thomas Goss. (K.R.O. WD/Ry).

On 30 April 1669 Fleming paid 11s. 8d. to "Jo Green slater [of Grasmere] for 12 load of slate 3s. & 4 dayes slateing ye Grot in ye Mill-Orchard 2s. & for this year's mossing of Rydal Hall &c according to ye agreement 6s. 8d." This latter payment for twenty days work packing moss between the slates of the Hall roof, to prevent penetration of snow and rain, fell due on 30 November each year. It is unlikely that the grotto slates had been fixed before Christmas since on 24 December 1668 Fleming paid 3s. 10d. to the Ambleside wright "Michael Holme & his son for work at ye Grot-house, [and] to Dick Nicholdson for 8 dayes worke 2s. 8d." They had probably just finished the roof timbers, for only five days earlier, on 19 December, Fleming had "Paid unto Jo Holme & his son, Will Turner & his son & Tho Walker for 14 dayes walling ye sumer house at ye Caw-weel<sup>4</sup> and pt of ye walling of ye Lands @ 5d.p.diem a peice save Holmes son at 2d. a day, 25s. 8d. & given them 16d. in all £1. 7s. 0d." John Holme, mentioned in the accounts many times,

was a waller from Monk Coniston six miles away. Since he, his son and two of his men had been paid 15s. 6d. on 28 November "for 11 dayes walling of ye back of ye Mill & in ye Lands", it seems probable that they spent the first half of December building the grotto walls nearby. Although their work was quickly followed by the structural carpentry, some delay must have followed since Fleming was usually a prompt payer for labour, if not materials<sup>5</sup>. Perhaps adverse weather prevented the slaters from working. Certainly, Samuel Pepys' *Diary* indicates that there was unusually cold weather in Christmas Eve; and the 5, 6, and 12 January and 23 March 1669.

The work of finishing off the grotto is also recorded in some detail, for example on 2 July 1669, 2s. 4d. was "Paid unto Dick Nicholdson for 7 dayes worke in mending ye Grot-Door, laying ye floor over it [i.e. the grotto] & makeing curbs<sup>6</sup> for ye new lead". On the same day Tho. Ayray, Tho. Braithwaite, Jo. Ellis, Josuah Robinson, Robert Hird and Michael Watson were paid 14s. 4d. "for Roughcasting of ye backside of Rydall-house, for plastering ye Grott & setting ye new leads". Evidence elsewhere in the accounts shows that the first three of these men, paid at 6d. a day, were sometimes called "the Ambleside wallers" whilst the last two were young men learning their trade and paid 3d. and 2d. a day respectively. A week later on 10 July, £3. 0s. 0d. was paid to Fleming's steward John Bancks for paying "ye Kendall Joyner for Wainscotting of my Grott-House" and on 15 July 15s. 0d. was "Paid Christ. Parker for glasing of ye Grott & for other work". The work was concluded when on 7 August 1669 he paid 2s. 0d. to John Bancks for buying "slots for ye Grott" to secure it.

Since some of the payments mentioned above cannot be attributed solely to building the grotto, detailed costings cannot be made, but there is, nevertheless, a remarkable amount of clear fact available for such a small building. We know the names of the workmen, their rates of pay and where they came from, and the sequence and approximate timing of each job. Comfort was obviously an important consideration for the panelling and glasing cost far more than the rest of the structure put together.

Although this simple little building seems a far cry from the fashionable "subterraneous caverns...remarkable...for the beauty of...sparry incrustations" noted by Goldsmith in 1774, it does seem to form an important link in the development of English grotto form as suggested by the following historical summary.

Clifford and Hyams<sup>7</sup> indicate that the grotto has been a feature of European gardens from early times but was given new expression in Renaissance France by Bernard Palissey (1510-1589) whose patrons included the Duc de Montmorency (at Ecouen),

Catherine de Medici (at the Tuileries in 1570) and King Henry IV of France. Palissey developed a formal rectangular, sunken garden design with two crossing pathways and nine grottoes: those in the four corners were rocky caverns whilst pleached and clipped trees formed grottoes in the middle of each side and at the centre of the garden.

In this country, however, seventeenth century grottoes seem to have been solitary and had rather a different form. An early reference to a grotto was in Francis Bacon's *Essay on Building* in 1625 when, describing the design for "a Perfect Pallace" he recommended that "A Grotta, or place of Shade or Estiuation"<sup>8</sup> should be formed "On the Under Story towards the Garden", a clear indication that the grotto should be incorporated as a room within the house, if only the rear part. Barbara Jones describes two such seventeenth century grottoes at Woburn Abbey, bearing the date 1660, and at Skipton Castle gatehouse, attributed to Lady Ann Clifford, Countess of Dorset, Pembroke and Montgomery, who died in 1676. Both are well preserved but, since they were created inside existing buildings as exotically decorated rooms, she discounts them because they lack the fantastic architecture of later grottoes built in spacious grounds. Thus she considered Pope's grotto to be the first true example even though it was not decorated with shells like those which followed.

There is evidence, however, for 17th century grottoes built out-of-doors, though none seem to have survived. John Evelyn, for example, had noted in his *Diary* many French and Italian grottoes before 1650. In England, he visited one at Wilton, near Salisbury, "a fine house of the E[arl] of Pembrochs" on 20 July 1654, but gave no details. Whilst at Cornbury Park, Oxfordshire, he visited on 20 October 1664 "the famous...artificial Grotts & fountains calld Bushells Wells at Ensham:"<sup>9</sup> this Bushell had ben Secretary to my L. Verulam [i.e. Francis Bacon 1561-1626]. It is an extraordinary solitude". John Aubrey's *Brief Lives* tells us that when Bushell had "his servant...to dig a cavity in the hill to sitt, and read or contemplate...he discovers...a rock of an unusual figure with pendants like icecles...which was the occasion of making that delicate grotto" and he noted the use of artificial water effects, the presence of a Neptune statue and the excessive dampness. When Evelyn visited Warwick on 3 August 1654 he described "Sir Guys Grott, where they say he did his penances, & dyed & 'tis certainly a squalid den made in the rock, croun'd yet with venerable Oakes, & respecting a goodly streame, so...were it improv'd as it might [be], 'twere capable of being render'd one of the most roma[n]-tique & pleasant places imaginable."



**Fig. 1.** View of Rydal Grotto from below the farmyard on the east bank of Rydal Beck.



**Fig. 2.** The view from the grotto window.

There was no need for Daniel Fleming to excavate a cavern or employ artificial aids to improve his grotto at Rydal, for it was located with impeccable judgement overlooking the plunge pool of one of the loveliest waterfalls in the Lake District. Through the five feet square window he captured at once the full impact of light and shade, the sound and sparkle of falling water and the contrasted textures of traceried trees and rugged rocks as if in a picture frame (fig. 2). Indeed he had the scene painted. On 23 November 1682 he paid £1 "unto Mr Samuel Moors (Mr Adams his artist) who did take the Prospect of Rydal Hall & Garden...of ye Grotto (out of ye Little House) [and] of ye Vale...[on] Nov 20, 21, 22". This suggests that he considered the waterfall and the little building to be integral parts of his entire grotto and probably explains why the building is sometimes referred to as a summer house. Aubrey noted that Francis Bacon had summer houses similarly "wainscotted and cieled" at Gorambery House near St Albans, but they were "elegant...well built of Roman-architecture".

Fleming's grot-house was, by comparison, almost vernacular in external character but appears to bridge the gap between the indoor (e.g. Skipton Castle) and the outdoor (e.g. Wilton) type of grotto in that it took the form of a well-appointed room of a house but was located out-of-doors to make the most of solitude and scenery. Perhaps this point gains extra significance from the fact that Fleming undoubtedly knew Lady Ann Clifford as a close acquaintance. The only surviving child of George, 3rd Earl of Cumberland and Lady Margaret Russell (the third daughter of Francis, 2nd Earl of Bedford, of Woburn) she married her second husband, Philip Herbert, 4th Earl of Pembroke, on 3 June 1630. She inherited her northern estates, including Skipton Castle, in 1643 on the death of Henry Clifford, 5th Earl of Cumberland and so provides a strong family link between the three 17th century grottoes at Wilton, Woburn and Skipton.

However romantic Keat's "Echoing grottoes, full of tumbling waves and moonlight" may have been, Fleming's grotto was the creation of a very practical, well-educated man who spent money carefully. It formed a relatively comfortable retreat where he could sit, read and contemplate or even seek refuge from his ever increasing family, for his eleventh child was born only ten days after the locks were bought. Perhaps he sought solace there when his wife Barbara died following the birth of their fifteenth child in 1675. Not that the grotto was always peaceful, for on 13 May 1691 he paid 3s. 0d. "unto Cockaine for Glazing ye Grott window which was brock by the water in a great Flood".

It took nearly a century for Machell's description of the grotto to be superseded. In his *Observations on Picturesque Beauty*

(1786) written in 1772, William Gilpin, a leading exponent of the fashionable "Picturesque" movement, depicted the scene thus:

"a considerable stream, falling down a quick descent, along a rocky channel, forms a succession of cascades.

One of these, tho' but a miniature, is so beautiful both in itself, and in it's accompaniments as to deserve particular notice. It is seen from a summer-house; before which it's rocky cheeks circling on each side form a little area; appearing through the window like a picture in a frame. The water falls within a few yards of the eye, which being rather above its level, has a long perspective view of the stream, as it hurries from the higher grounds; tumbling, in various, little breaks, through it's rocky channel, darkened with thicket, till it arrive at the edge of the precipice, before the window; from whence it rushes into the bason, which is formed by nature in the native rock. The dark colour of the stone, taking still a deeper tinge from the wood, which hangs over it, sets off to wonderful advantage the sparkling lustre of the stream; and produces an uncommon effect of light. It is this effect indeed, from which the chief beauty of the scene arises".

A little earlier, Arthur Young the East Anglian agriculturalist, when visiting the west shore of Derwent Water during his *Six Month's Tour to the North of England* in 1769 recommended to fashion-conscious tourists that:

"you next land at the lead mines [at Brandelhow], which, if you have a taste for grotto work, will entertain, as a boat may be loaded with spar of various glittering and beautiful kinds".

Local folk, however, seem to have ignored his suggestion because the southern fashion for building shell and spar encrusted extravaganzas, like the grottoes at Ascot House (Berkshire), Goodwood (W. Sussex) and Oatlands (Weybridge, Surrey) in the later eighteenth century, did not reach the Lake District. Instead of such exotic stimulants, grottoes like Corby, cut into the remarkable eastern sandstone cliff of the river Eden, and Rydal relied on the excellence of the natural landscape for their effect.

It is interesting that, although Daniel Fleming's *Memoirs* reveal that he had talent for recording factual topography, he had not then learned to express his ideas on landscape. Hence his grotto must stand as the silent evidence that he possessed a sensitive appreciation of scenery a whole century before "Picturesque" tourists formalized descriptive techniques. It may also be considered as evidence that remote Lakeland was not as backward a region as has sometimes been suggested. Certainly it possesses one of the best documented grottoes and perhaps even the oldest surviving outdoor grotto in Britain.

Sadly, after three centuries of service, it now stands forlorn and neglected, its door and window now but draughty openings in bare stone walls. The roof, lacking many slates, is decaying rapidly and vandalism or rot has destroyed all but a tiny fragment of the panelling installed for comfort at such cost. Now the reek of mould and human excrement mars the enjoyment of one of Lakeland's scenic gems. Perhaps there is yet time for rescue before Nature reclaims this unique northern building.

#### NOTES

1. W. G. Collingwood (Ed.) *Memoirs of Sir Daniel Fleming*, 1928, 87. Cumberland & Westmorland Arch. & Antiqu. Society, Tract Series XI.
2. Jane M. Ewbank *Antiquary on Horseback* 1963, 133. Cumberland & Westmorland Archaeological & Antiquarian Society, Extra Series XIX.
3. Kendal Record Office, WD/Ry Box 119.
4. Caw-weel was an alternative name for Rydal Beck. In 1682 "Joshuah Robinson of Over-Hartsop", Patterdale was paid £5. 10s. 0d. for "building of Cawbridge of Stone" and in 1685 Robert Hawkrigg was "Paveing ye Dunghill places near Caw-brigg & Mossing Rydal Hall." The bridge is seen in fig. 2.
5. Two articles detailing other building work on the Rydal estate have been submitted by the present author for publication in the Cumb. & Westm. A & A Soc. *Transactions* in Vols. 79 and 80.
6. This word is difficult to decipher. The lead was carried to Kendal where Lancelot Forth was paid £3. 3s. 6d. "for new casting of 400 and 5 stone of ye old lead at 5s. ye hundred & for adding and casting of 200 & two stone 8 lb of new lead at 20s. ye hundred" presumably to provide new rainwater goods for the Hall.
7. Derek Clifford *A History of Garden Design* 1962, 79 and Edward Hyams *History of Gardens and Gardening* 1971, 137.
8. Estivate: to spend the summer in a state of torpor. Eschew: to avoid, escape or shun. Either is appropriate.
9. Aubrey said Bushell's grotto was at Enstone, 15 kms north of Eynsham, and quotes an informant from Great Tew. Evelyn went on to Di[t]chley nearby, so made a mistake.