The landscape at Fonthill: An assessment of the grottoes and their builders

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The landscape at Fonthill

An assessment of the grottoes and their builders

Michael Cousins

Alderman Beckford’s early works at Fonthill

The part played by Alderman Beckford in the development of the park at Fonthill is typically overshadowed by the later works of his son, particularly the move westwards relative to the site of Fonthill Splendens and the building of Fonthill Abbey and its surrounding new park. It is not the intention here to focus on the latter, but rather the Old Park, as it is called, and the contributions there of Beckford, father and son.

For Britain, the eighteenth century heralded major changes to tastes in, and commentary on, gardening. Indeed, as a follower of the formal fashions brought over from the Continent at the start of the century, the middle period saw Britain leading the landscape revolution, particularly with the appearance of Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown and his contemporaries. This outdoor evolution typically went hand-in-hand with the prevailing trend of building new houses in the Classical style, and vice versa.

At the start of that new century, the Fonthill estate was owned by Francis Cottington (made 1st Baron Cottington in 1716), and upon his death in 1728 it passed to his son, also Francis. It may have been during his tenure that the house, with its stable block, received an early-Georgian remodelling, before Alderman Beckford acquired the Fonthill estate.¹ John Loveday of Caversham, a prolific traveller and observer, noted in 1738 during his tour of Wiltshire: ‘In a bottom Mr Cottington has a very large old Seat of Stone at Fonthill […] many Workmen are now employed about It; Sure this Gentleman has a considerable Estate at Blewberry in Berkshire.’²

Two paintings by George Lambert, one certainly of 1740,³ show this altered house (see Chapter 3 Figure 3.15), but the extent of Cottington’s interest in the garden and park appears limited: the earlier gate lodge east of the house (as depicted
in Robert Thacker’s painting; see Chapter 3 Figure 3.8) had gone by this time, to be replaced by a pair of gate piers closer to the road, as had a slender canal that lay between the gate lodge and the house, running north–south, which appears to have been filled in. To the south of the house lay a flat lawn, east of which Cottington built a tetrastyle, pedimented garden temple in the middle of a raised terraced walk, also on a north–south axis. Cottington sold the estate to Beckford in 1744/5. While Beckford’s subsequent work on this house is reasonably well recorded both visually and in writing, his work on the park has received little attention, but it was clearly a contiguous development.

The changes in garden design that flourished in the early eighteenth century in England seemingly bypassed Fonthill – Charles Bridgeman’s schemes, for example, typified by geometrical patterns, long walks and radiating avenues, amphitheatres and elaborate parterres found considerable acceptance elsewhere, but not here. Indeed the decline of such layouts approximates with the time when Alderman Beckford’s design for Fonthill gained momentum, in the incoming natural style, of which Stowe ably demonstrates the transition. Elements of Bridgeman’s work were gradually done away with, and replaced first with William Kent’s Elysian Fields and Alder Valley in the 1730s, followed by the Grecian Valley formed by the head gardener in the 1740s, one Lancelot Brown. A shallow valley is an apt way to describe the principal part of Fonthill’s Old Park.

One of the Alderman’s first acts, presumably set in motion before travelling to his plantations in Jamaica, was ostensibly philanthropic in nature, with the building of a new church (see Chapter 4 Figure 4.3). On his return from Jamaica, he set about other works. Col. James Pelham, cousin of Thomas Pelham-Holles (1st Duke of Newcastle), wrote of a visit to Claremont by, among others, ‘Two M. Beckfords that are brothers to my Lady Effingham’, noting one ‘has a Plantation on Jamaica, his Seat here is I think in Wiltshire where he is making fine Gardens &c. I never see a Man in Such Extacies as he was with Claremont, they were all prodigiously pleased with every thing.’ Beckford’s ‘fine Gardens’ were visited four years later by the peregrinatious Richard Pococke, then archdeacon of Dublin:

Beyond the park & opposite to the Grand front, Mr Beckford has built a Church, on the plan of Covent garden which is a good termination of the prospect.

There is a large lawn that way & plantations to the west, an open Temple on the Side of the hill; & an open rotundo is building higher up on the hill; To the east is a broad serpentine river with a very handsome bridge of free Stone built over it of three arches, with a Stone Baluster. To the north is a grand gateway near the village, from which there is a gravel walk to the Grand front about a furlong in length.

Pococke’s description, and our understanding of the park at Fonthill, is enhanced by two paintings of the scene about the house around this time, now attributed to Antonio Joli (ca. 1700–77; see Chapter 11 and Chapter 3 Figures 3.18 and 3.20).
The Alderman’s activities were extensive. The creation of an artificial ‘serpentine river’, by damming a length of the Fonthill stream, a tributary of the River Nadder, is in itself a significant feat. Running parallel to this was a slender water course, almost a leat, which widened just south of what was actually a five-arch bridge; at this point a sham rustic bridge with a spectacular cascade was used to manage the overflow, or spill of the main water, a feature used in other parks like Wotton and Stowe. In reality, the ‘serpentine river’ didn’t flow anywhere: the southern end of this water terminated at a pond head with the leat merging into the original stream again. The former public road was conveniently moved to the other side of the water from the house, rejoining the original route via the bridge. Here a narrow tunnel passed under the road, allowing private passage to the southern part of the park, circling back via the rustic bridge-cum-cascade (Figure 14.1). Passage from Fonthill Bishop to the north, therefore, was by one of two routes: the public road running east of the water over the aforementioned bridge (although there was a turnoff via a ford to reach Fonthill’s outbuildings), and, for visitors to Fonthill Splendens, the private road through the magnificent gateway.

The garden-temple shown in the two Lambert paintings was presumably still extant at the time of the Alderman’s acquisition of Fonthill. It would have acted as a suitable stopping or resting point during a walk, or from which to view the house and water. When Pococke visited Fonthill in 1754, and as depicted in the two Joli paintings, he described ‘an open Temple on the Side of the hill’. Close examination of these paintings suggests that the original building seen in Lambert’s view was taken down, and perhaps re-used as part of a new building on gradually sloping ground, nestled in a backdrop of trees, further away from the main house. Hence

![Image of Fonthill House showing the sham bridge and cascade.](Private collection, photograph © Jon Stone.)
by ca. 1754 a prostyle portico fronting a five-bay structure can be seen in Joli’s view, possibly planned as part of the garden work that was being undertaken in 1750.\(^\text{11}\)

South-west of the house, at the highest point of this wooded sloping ground, was another temple. This building has previously been described as a pagoda, and so it appears in a later engraving taken from one of the two Joli paintings.\(^\text{12}\) Closer examination of the paintings, however, indicates an open columned structure, almost certainly the rotunda noted by Pococke, albeit with a more conical-looking roof than a dome (Figure 14.2) – this would date the paintings to 1754, unless the artist was asked to add the feature before its construction, hence the atypical form of the roof might be his notion; or, it was painted in later.\(^\text{13}\) Facing the house across the water to the east, deliberately set back on rising ground and paled off, was an equestrian statue on a monumental plinth (Figure 14.3). It is a feature that has received little commentary (see Chapter 3 for a suggestion even that it was not in fact ever built); it is quite enigmatic, and totally apposite to the character and flamboyance of Beckford senior.\(^\text{14}\)

This then was the Alderman’s Fonthill. Following the destruction of Fonthill House by fire in February 1755 he was freed from any vestigial constraints carried down through the constant remodelling of the original building and its surroundings. But he seemed in no hurry about its replacement: five years after the
fire Philip Yorke remarked of the new house, ‘the shell … is finished but no part of the inside fitted up’.¹⁵

While creating the new Fonthill ‘Splendens’ in sumptuous Palladian style, a combination of frivolity and rustication emerged in the park.

There has been much speculation as to when the grottoes at Fonthill (Figure 14.4) were created, and by whom. It becomes quite clear from two previously unpublished contemporary accounts that Alderman Beckford, and not his son, was responsible for those rockworks to the west of the river, as well as confirming that he instigated other features (such as the boathouse; Figure 14.5).

The first description, made by Edward Knight junior (d. 1812), the eldest son of a leading Midlands ironmaster, dates to 3 or 4 July 1761:

Fonthill – Beckford’s Rustic Gateway — New-House 140 by 650 __Coll.¹⁰ 10 pairs of P.¹ join the house & offices — Ionic Port. 4 P.s 16 In Diam¹ Inter.¹
4..6–5..9 –4..6 behind a room 14 by 28 – View of the Water, Bridge &c. Shrubry ab 3 Miles round — Subterraneous passage — Umbrella Seat — Rockwork — Church — Doric Rotond 8 P.¹ 22 In. D.¹ Interc.¹ 5..3_3 mutules – view to the House, water, lawn &c __Boat_House & Rockwork.¹⁶
Fig. 14.4  Map of Fonthill showing location of grottoes, etc.
© Michael Cousins.
Knight was describing the grounds west of the river, making an anticlockwise circuit: subterraneous clearly indicates a passage going below ground, rather than an arched passageway above; the ‘Umbrella Seat’ must have been nearby, even possibly on top of the rockwork that would correspond to the Hermitage and which may have been under construction. After reaching the church, which also acted to terminate a prospect, Knight turned back on himself, ascending the hill to the rotunda to look onto the house. His final path would have taken him north of this to reach the boathouse with its rusticated, or rockwork interior ornaments. It is fitting to ascribe the construction of this and the seemingly contemporaneous gateway to the Alderman’s time, although their architect is still unknown. We hear no more of the ‘Umbrella Seat’ after its mention by Knight, but it may have followed the design of that at nearby Stourhead. The rotunda – under construction in 1754 and clearly completed – conformed to a fairly standard model. It may have replaced an earlier prospect tower shown in one of the two George Lambert paintings (see Chapter 3 Figure 3.15). The Alderman was an early practitioner in using the church as an eye-catcher and garden feature, and the example here bears comparison with those at West Wycombe and Nuneham Courtenay.

Edward Knight was a friend and correspondent of William Shenstone, and possessed an enthusiasm for architecture and gardens, as evinced by the accounts of his travels wherein he recorded key details of the noted estates of the time. It is probable that his interest would embrace aspects relating to the picturesque, for his relations included Richard Payne Knight of Downton, and Thomas Johnes II of Hafod.

The second description, written in the summer of 1766, possibly comes from the architect James Essex:

M.’ Beckford’s House was not finish’d, but appeared to be intended as magnificent as most in England … The Bed Chambers particularly grand. … You ascend a Flight of steps to the House, which bring you under an Ionic Colonnade – the Offices are united with the House by a Piazza of the Doric Order. __

The Chimney Pieces in the the [sic] Work of Moore of London, cost 400£ each – Caryatides support the entablature.

There are two very fine Rooms, one intended for Music, in which there is an Alcove for the Organ, the other for a Picture Gallery. … The Garden are [sic] pretty – there is a subterraneous Grot winding 30 yards. ____ The Hermitage adorn’d with Shells and Spars, is well imagined.19

Again, our visitor kept to the western grounds, but by now the Hermitage had certainly received its essential and striking decoration, some of which was noted much later, in 1834.20 Embedded fragments and impressions of shells still remain today in the roof of the main chamber: on the left, an alcove with an inclined shaft passing to the outside throws light on the battered torso of a statue, to the right, a small
Fig. 14.5  The boathouse interior showing the cold bath.
Photograph © Michael Cousins.
antechamber fitted out with a fireplace. Inserted in the rear wall of the Hermitage, framed by a flattened ogee arch, is a reclining figure of a bearded man, possibly meant to represent a hermit (Figure 14.6); below this is evidence of a projecting sill or bench, long gone.

That Fonthill House was still not finished is not altogether surprising as from ca. 1762 the Alderman was diverted with the building of a second house at Witham designed by Robert Adam. Cost did not appear to be of any concern in this, according to his Stourhead neighbour the banker Henry Hoare: ‘The day Lord & Lady Pembrooke dined here they stop’d at M.r Beckford’s & His Lordship told Them He wallow’d in money & therefore built 2 Houses to get rid of it.’ (See Chapter 4 for discussion of Witham.)

It is worth noting that the Adam office produced for the Alderman three finished drawings of designs for bridges at Fonthill. While each of the proposals is different, all feature reclining figures of Bacchus holding a cornucopia. The view through the central arch of one of these designs depicts a series of three grotto-like arched structures on the distant bank, with rising ground behind, planted with trees. Roughly sketched in pencil, and seemingly capricious, they suggest water gently cascading over a raised floor into the lake below. None of the Adam schemes was executed, but the notion of having a statue of a mythical figure in the grounds may have taken hold. A sketchbook by J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851) includes a number of preparatory sketches and finished watercolours of Fonthill made in 1799, including one that has acquired the title Trees by the Lake in Old Fonthill Park, with a River God seated among Rushes. It is difficult to establish the precise location of Turner’s sketch, and nothing else is known of the ‘River God’; there is no

Fig. 14.6 The Hermitage: ogee frame with carved sitting figure.
Photograph © Michael Cousins.
other evidence to support the view that such a figure was installed in the boathouse at Fonthill.\textsuperscript{24}

The Alderman’s planting campaign at Fonthill is less easy to gauge, and it was never going to reach maturity in his lifetime. We know that he was the purchaser of a five guinea Bartram Box of seeds in 1754,\textsuperscript{25} suggesting some botanical interests, and by 1761 some three miles of shrubbery had been planted. In 1760, Mrs Beckford paid a visit to Hester Pitt, the wife of William Pitt, Lord Chatham, at their residence in Kent, Hayes Place, the account of which illustrates that planting at Fonthill had been going on, and at some expense. Escorting her guest around, Hester

walkd in the discretest manner, but at the same time contrived to Shew Her [Mrs Beckford] much the Largest part of Hayes Ground, with which I was not at all tired, and was perfectly Satisfied with her manner of seeing it and the Impression it made. She was extremely sorry for not having seen it Sooner, that the Swells at Fonthill might have Copied Those that enclose Bridge Lane and the Pond, Their Shape having Struck Her mightily as having much more Grace and Beauty with Less expence of Trees than Those she had at Home.\textsuperscript{26}

Whether the Alderman’s earlier visit to Claremont had any influence on the layout of the park at Fonthill is doubtful. Despite having lost many of its straight and formal devices (although it retained Bridgeman’s amphitheatre), the grounds at Claremont must have felt constrained to the Alderman. Vanbrugh’s lofty belvedere there had been in place many years (as had four temples), but it was the later tower at Stourhead that seems to have prompted the Alderman to follow suit at Fonthill, rather than this belvedere. Claremont’s grotto, however, was under construction during the visit in the summer of 1750 and the Alderman may have recalled this when creating his subterraneous feature and Hermitage at Fonthill. The planting at Claremont, and certainly Kent’s clumps, seem to have made little impact on Beckford, and there is no evidence of professional assistance at Fonthill. The late-eighteenth-century exponent of the picturesque, William Gilpin, provided a later account of Fonthill, written around 1778. It bespeaks the Alderman’s hand in the shaping of the grounds (rather than his son’s): ‘The ground, though \textit{artificially formed}, \textit{slopes well} to the river on each side, and beyond the bridge opens into a sweet retiring valley.’\textsuperscript{27}

**The first grottoes**

The precedent for the Alderman’s tunnel at Fonthill is surely that at Alexander Pope’s house at Twickenham, first created in 1720 to 1725 and extended nearly 20 years later. His famous grotto there had its parallel in Fonthill’s Hermitage (Figure 14.7). Grotto and garden style evolved contiguously, with architectural feature giving way to rustic stone work and, initially, shell ornamentation, which
in turn yielded to mineral work, the grotto at Goldney Hall, Bristol, being another early use of that style. More attention was soon placed on the setting and integration of grottoes into the overall layout, with existing structures and their surroundings being adapted to be more aesthetically pleasing, although this was not universal. The task was to artificially reproduce or even outdo what nature could offer; it was a theme that the Alderman’s son held close to his heart, and would later put into practice.

The subterraneous passage or ‘Grot’ at Fonthill allowed direct and concealed communication between the grounds either side of the Tisbury Road. That the Alderman’s Hermitage should be ‘adorn’d with Shells and Spars’ is no surprise. While in Jamaica, he was instrumental in procuring materials for the Earl of Shaftesbury for his grotto at St Giles. These included ‘2 Casks of Tamarinds’ and a further ‘one thousand of Shells’. Julian (or Julines) Beckford, one of the Alderman’s brothers, was also a principal party to their conveyance, and it is worth noting that Julian Beckford is listed in the names of subscribers to the second part of Thomas Wright’s *Universal Architecture*, i.e. ‘Six Original Designs of GROTTOS’, which shows a sustained family interest in the subject.

But who actually created the Hermitage, tunnel (Figure 14.8) and associated rockwork at Fonthill? Considering the fact that a Lane is mentioned in conjunction with the later grottoes at Fonthill, the fame of Joseph and Josiah Lane (father and son) as the pre-eminent grotto builders of the eighteenth century, plus their places of birth at Ashley Wood and Tisbury (east and south of Fonthill respectively) marks them out as obvious candidates, in this instance Joseph specifically.
We know little of Joseph Lane’s upbringing. The son of Thomas Lane of Ashley Wood, he was baptised on 28 August 1717 in Tisbury, and the earliest indication we have of his trade is from his marriage in 1747 when he is recorded as a stonecutter of Tisbury. Without being overly speculative, it is possible that he was in some way involved in the creation of the grotto at Stourhead, for which William Privet submitted a bill in 1748 for £180.17s.6d. While this work included an element of stonework, it is credible that Joseph acquired skills, and even excelled in rockwork of this nature. He may also have had a hand in the grotto at St Giles for Lord Shaftesbury (although there is no evidence to support this), adding further skills and knowledge to his repertoire; but the abundant shellwork there is almost certainly by the specialist John Castles.

On 9 January 1753, Joseph married for the second time, to Deborah Ingram (his first wife, Mary Flippin, seemingly dying in childbirth). Exactly nine months later a son, Josiah, was baptised at Tisbury. By this time Joseph had risen from...
a stonecutter to become a mason. As a local, and a skilled tradesman, a stronger case may be fielded for Joseph being involved in Alderman Beckford’s alterations of the earlier Cottington house and other additions at Fonthill, and more probably the subsequent house after the former was destroyed in 1755. Indeed Joseph had highly desirable skills for the work at hand at Fonthill: both as mason and also because he could apply his expert eye as a stonecutter, for there was a readily available source of materials at a quarry near the house (later to be incorporated into the Alpine Gardens).

We can but surmise how exactly the Alderman came to hear of Joseph’s particular talent, and then directed him to create the Hermitage and tunnel, but engaged in his own right, Joseph’s work tallies with Richard Warner’s later comment about ‘Mr. Lane, who exhibited the earliest specimen of his talents in the construction of a grotto, on a very small scale, at Fonthill’. With Fonthill being the place of Joseph Lane’s emergence into the world of grottoes, his (and his son’s) subsequent employment at Painshill, and not vice versa, is an explicable step. Painshill’s owner, Charles Hamilton, was Beckford’s maternal uncle, certainly Lane senior must have been recognised as a capable grotto builder from 1763 when he was working at Painshill. Just prior to that, he had constructed a cascade and rockwork cave at Loakes manor house (now Wycombe Abbey), Buckinghamshire, for William, Earl of Shelburne.

This was not a one-way interplay of ideas. Alderman Beckford’s visit in 1750 to Claremont, which may have inspired Fonthill’s early rockwork features, has already been noted. Stourhead was almost certainly another influential park, and several visits of exchange are recorded, and in 1768, at a time when the Alderman’s works were maturing, he made a visit to Lord Lyttelton at Hagley, which Lyttelton reciprocated the following year. Laurent Châtel has commented on the ‘paucity of material relating to Fonthill’ in the principal Beckford archives, and this is especially so following the death of the Alderman and the period before his son’s majority. Hence the accounts provided by visitors provide a particularly crucial and rich source of information. 1769 proved a very fruitful year, and two descriptions, by Sophia, Lady Shelburne of Bowood (1745–71), and the Irish politician John Parnell (1745–1801), who visited two months apart, are worth quoting at length as much for their contrasting views as well as detail. Lady Shelburne wrote,

The House is a Large & Handsome Stone Building with two wings but is Situated much too near the Road & confin’d on one side by a Common ... after dinner they shew’d us the Stables & the Lodging for the Stable people which makes a very fine House at some distance from the other & in a better Situation we took a short walk in the Shrubbery & drank tea in the Banqueting House The Shrubbery is at a distance from the House the Walk to it rough & the whole place, tho’ very large, I think inferior to the Inside in Beauty […] the Evening being very fine Mrs Beckford carried me a short drive about a shrubbery I had not seen.
Parnell, on the other hand, and on the whole, did not take to Fonthill:

...a Knoll coverd with well grown old trees on one side and a Peice of water on the other Leaves scarce Place for so Great a Pile as the House and offices to stand in and the Paltry little Evergreen clumps Particularly scots firr crowding on the Brow of the Knoll & under the old Sycamores Oak &c on it add to the smallness of the Lawn & makes the House Preposterous, How can planters obtrude a few little Round Petty Paties of Evergreens in a spot coverd with scattered old trees of full growth is it a Pleasure to see the young firr stunted scalded and killd by the Dripping Branches of the Old forest trees or are we to cutt down the great trees spotting a Lawn in hopes the young ones will soon grow up to supply their Place Either Surely is a Detestable species of Improvement there is a fine square of Stabling Building at Beckfords and behind them a Range of farm offices the whole about 200 yards from the House well conceald [...] the Bridge over the artificial Peice of water at Aldemn Beckfords is an hideous Piece of architecture Scarcely fitt for the most Private Part of a trading City only tolerable as being strong Enough to Bear Perpetual Waggon I never saw such a thing in my life in the Regions of taste Built as an ornament.

### After the Alderman

Alderman Beckford died on 21 June 1770, and his son, who was just nine, inherited estates at home and abroad, and considerable wealth. A notable incident sheds light on the size and make-up of Fonthill at this time. In the ‘Bill of Complaint of William Beckford’ in which, until William came of age, Maria, the Alderman’s widow, stated the case for her continued repair and maintenance of Fonthill, it was noted that

...the said House and ffurniture with the Kitchen Garden and Pleasure Ground near the Water Grist Mill and the Park with some Land enclosed with the said Park and lying contiguous and near to the House containing in the whole about two hundred and twenty six acres part of which Park and Land containing about one hundred acres is ornamented with Timber Trees and plantations of other Trees and Shrubs...

Reverend Mr John Lettice, Beckford’s long-standing tutor, frequently mentioned with respect to Beckford’s tours, receives scant recognition with regard to Fonthill itself, but according to Beckford’s earliest biographer he played a role in the subsequent layout of the park.

By 1776 the Alderman’s planting was maturing: ‘a fine Grove of Oaks with clumps of evergreens on ye left of the House is very picturesque and there is a fine peice of water’, remarked Mrs Lybbe Powys, concluding: ‘otherwise the situation is disagreeable’. The Andrews and Dury map of 1773 (see Chapter 3 Figure 3.22) still...
shows the principal public road as being to the east of the water and crossing via
the stone bridge, although there appears to have been a return of a road running
south from the grand arch to join this public road, where it was probably gated.
This accords with William Gilpin’s brief description written about eight years after
the Alderman’s death, in which he records the bridge as still being present, but
with his typical sting: ‘It [Fonthill] takes its name from a woody hill and fountain
hard by it, from which rises a stream that assists in forming an artificial river, deco-
rated by a very sumptuous bridge. If the bridge had been more simple, the scene
about it would have been more pleasing.’

In part, the Alderman’s shrubbery lined the Tisbury road, but the greater
part – some three miles – continued round the park in a regular zig-zag, and the
grounds, ‘though not variegated; were considered pretty’. The situation of the
house, however, came in for criticism, being low down and subject to mists, and
also censured for ‘the prospect from the house in front, which is so very dreary,
that, in winter it must be absolutely dreadful’. Helpful advice followed: ‘Probably,
with some pains, Mr. Beckford might obtain permission to plant a wood along
the skirts of the hill, (the lands not being his own) which might, in some degree,
screen the object I complain of. The improvement would certainly be a great one.’
Ultimately, once Fonthill Abbey was complete, William Beckford opted for a more
permanent solution and had most of his father’s Splendens pulled down.

**Coming of age**

William Beckford, it appears, held true to maternal and guardians’ guidance during
his minority, at least with regard to Fonthill, and any works executed there – limited
though they may have been – seem to have been undertaken with Maria Beckford’s
blessing. The period following his father’s death comes across as that of a young
man formulating ideas and visionary, romantic dreams, typically by putting pen to
paper, but also with more practical schemes for Fonthill’s landscape. Upon attain-
ing his majority in 1781, these began to take physical shape. He engaged James
Wyatt (1746–1813) to draw up a proposal for enlarging the stretch of water north
of Splendens by taking in Marsh Common, adding a number of islands and creating
a cascade, and for the making of a new road to the east, crossing to the west bank
via an iron bridge of about a 100-foot span. Clearly the road running from the
arch past the house had by then become a public one again, but with a plan – prob-
ably Beckford’s – to revert to private. Wyatt’s design was never implemented – he
would come back for grander affairs later – but it showed an intent to develop away
from the house. Indeed, aside from the house, Beckford effectively abandoned the
west side of the Old Park in favour of opportunities to the east:

The stone of the present Fonthill House, built by the late Mr. Beckford, was
taken from a quarry on the Eastern shore of the Lake, at an inconsiderable
distance from the site of the mansion itself. Several acres of rocky ground, which formed this quarry, continued after the completion of the building still open; and exhibiting nothing but large naked masses of white stone and ugly excavations, and those almost fronting the house, it was resolved to cover every part of this quarry, some picturesque features of rock excepted, with soil brought from a distance by dint of labour, and then to plant the ground with oak, beech, elm, larch, fir, &c. leaving green walks, bordered with shrubs and flowers, and such other spaces open, as good taste suggested, according to the nature of the ground.  

This work was reportedly carried out by the Alderman; James Morrison would also develop this area in 1838. Nonetheless, the rugged terrain, quarries and outcroppings would have had a natural appeal to William Beckford, certainly following his early tours, evoking memories of travels and the scenery that so captivated him. A Swiss visitor, Henry Meister, would later note the similarity to the Alpine scenery Beckford admired on his travels (see Chapter 10).

This maze of hill and wood; one while descending with us into a deep valley; another time, mounting us up high hills from whose tops we descried immense prospects, extending over several counties, and bounded either by the sea or sky. These views were continually changing to a new country, and I thought myself by turns in Switzerland, in France, in England, and in America.

New water, new grottoes

From 1781 to 1784, William Beckford extended his quarry planting ‘along the adjoining hills which hang over the Lake’. But what Beckford then achieved with the water was significantly more dramatic than Wyatt’s plan. Beckford did away with his father’s confined river and its neighbouring sinuous channel; in their stead he created a dam and waterfall at the southern end, and effected ‘an enlargement of the bed of the river, and the removal of a stone bridge of several arches, by which the water could no longer be crossed’. From a practical standpoint, the removal of the bridge would probably have preceded the flooding; Britton, writing in 1801, ‘was informed it had been removed twenty years ago’. The Reverend John Swete (1752–1821) of Oxton in Devon, a prolific traveller of the late eighteenth century, left the following account of his visit, made in the autumn of 1783, indicating that the water had been drained in order to undertake the works.

... all at once burst on my right, the house, and grounds of Fonthill and leaving the road, I ascended the summit of a hill on my left, where is a circular plantation of firs – from whence I had a fine View of the whole Scenery beneath which was in itself very attractive – descending to the road it pas’t
through a small ragged Village, and entering a fine rustic arch with a lodge on each side, I reach’d the lawn before the house, which is in front a handsome Structure of white stone, with two wings projecting, and join’d to the house by a Colonnade – the mount on the right is most delightfully wooded, though its effect is partly lost by being so near to the house – the back grounds are charming but the stream that runs through is so small, that at this time, what little water was in the bed, appear’d in a state of Stagnation.

After several years of assimilation, the ‘different form of the shores and extension now given to the breadth of the water have entirely changed its former aspect and character, and rendered it worthy of its present appellation of a Lake’. In reality it had been transformed into flowing water. This was just part of Beckford’s evolving scheme for Fonthill: Redding wrote that ‘the east bank was ornamented with rocks, caverns, baths, and grottoes in the taste of the earlier part of the century…’ Typically, however, this style of ornamentation did not prevail until the second half of the eighteenth century, and towards the end, particularly, the less decorated form started to dominate.

Beckford was 23 when these works were underway, as revealed in a series of letters to Dr Samuel Henley (1740–1815). In the first, Beckford asked ‘If you are to visit D[evonshire] this summer I trust you will not pass by Fonthill without casting an eye upon my rocks and water, which is wonderfully expanded.’ In the next letter, written a couple of months later, it seems that Henley had yet to visit Beckford, who encouraged him by saying ‘we should enjoy my new creation of wood & water’. This time there is no doubt as to the builder of at least one grotto and its location, which figures in the third plea for a visit: ‘Mr Lane is rockifying, not in high places, but in a snug copse by the river side, where I spend many an hour in dreaming abt my unfortunate princes [Vathek’s companions], & contriving reasonable ways & means of sending them to the Devil.’

By the early 1780s, Joseph and Josiah Lane had become the foremost grotto-builders and ornamenters in England: their works by that time included grottoes at Painshill, Oatlands (a reworking of Stephen Wright’s more formal affair), Wimbledon House, and probably the decoration of that at Ascot Place; all extensive and lengthy commissions featuring their distinctive, almost trademark, spar decoration with banded stalactites. At Fonthill, however, this ‘rockifying’ was solely Josiah’s, his father having died in the summer of 1784. One of the best descriptions of Beckford’s early achievements comes in 1791 from a Dutch visitor, Baron Johan Frederik Willem van Spaen van Biljoen:

The parkland matches the house both in beauty and elegance – nowhere have we seen finer lawns so well maintained and of such large expanse stretching over the hillsides, with the valley occupied by a large river which flows over a fine waterfall of some 25 to 30 ft; there are several grottoes cut in the living rock; to achieve this effect, very tasteful use has been made of the quarries...
which furnished the building materials for the house; the entrance to these grottoes is masked with creepers. There are also some artificial grottoes, a particularly fine one with a cold bath [Figure 14.9] and another where the water seeping from the top was forming stalactites. Men were occupied in levelling the irregularities of a hill so that the slope was swarming with a

Fig. 14.9 The grotto and cold bath.
Photograph © Elizabeth Waters.
quantity of workmen, who, taken together with a flock of some 200 or 300 sheep, greatly animated a landscape already very picturesque in itself.\footnote{58}

Van Spaen clearly distinguishes between the quarry grottoes and the creations of Lane – other contemporary accounts also confirm these two artificial grottoes in this area. The principal grotto lay by the water’s edge but was approached from above, as described by Meister:

Following a path covered with moss, and bordered with beds of flowers intermixed with clumps of the most delightful shrubs, and of the wild laurel, the verdure of which is so pleasant to the sight, we arrived at a small dome, which served as an entrance to a spacious grotto that had its principal front towards the river. At the end of this grotto which has none of the trifling ornaments of shell-work, but seems constructed by large masses of rock piled together in a picturesque confusion, a fountain throws out its chrystal streams, which, falling with a gentle murmur into a rustic bason, is conveyed under the rock and mingles with the waters of the river. As air is continually passing through the two domes that serve as entrances, the grotto is as dry as the best ventilated room.\footnote{59}

John Britton’s description of 1801 confirms the grotto to be by ‘the well known Lane’, whom he also acclaimed as ‘a man who transfixed some of the romantic scenes of Salvator into English ground’.\footnote{60} Britton adds even more colour and detail of the grotto’s decoration and surrounding planting:

It is externally formed of large masses of rock, and ornamented within by grotesque petrifications, stalactites, madrepores [corals of the common reef-building type], &c. aquatic plants and flowers shooting from the crevices. Its large interior space resounds with perennial springs trickling from various parts, and through channels here visible, and there unseen, hurrying along till lost in the waters of the lake. Issuing from the inclosure of the grotto by a winding path of shrubs, we come across a broad strait terrace of considerable length, bordered on the left by a lofty plantation, and on the right enlightened by the water. At the farther end of this walk we bid adieu to the Alpine Gardens.\footnote{61}

In 1822, just before the impending sale of Fonthill Abbey, The Times reported:

the range of cave below is divided into three arched chambers; and, from the centre vaults of these there is an opening to the lake, which flows up a miniature creek, half way into the apartment. There is something, in fine weather, very delightful about the place. The vaulted roof of this last centre cavern we mentioned runs low towards the front that opens upon the water, so that the stranger’s prospect (standing erect) scarcely reaches across the lake.\footnote{62}
Here, continued *The Times*, ‘there is no shell work, no fossil, no baby-house trumpery...’ Recent examination of the structure reveals that in places it had been constructed by cut and finished stone, suggesting re-use of materials from Splendens or the former house. Slightly higher up from this grotto was the more cave-like structure (van Spaen’s ‘particularly fine’ grotto):

At a small distance from this grotto is a large cave, in which nature or art, for it is not easy to discover which, has formed several deep fissures, some having the appearance of cells, and others answering the purpose of baths. The middle of this cavern is entirely open on the top, except that a sort of covering is formed by the shrubs which have planted themselves in the crevices of the rock, and a fine tree that seems to be planted by the hand of a magician in the centre of this retreat, springing out of a bed of violets bordered with green turf.  

This ‘rude basin of rock, surrounded by crags, and overhung with lofty trees’, as it was later depicted, received the ‘drizzlings of a tiny stream, called the “Petrifying Spring”’.  

Less clear is whether Josiah Lane was responsible for what has been taken for a third grotto, basically a vertical outcropping of rocks just behind the spring. This may date to James Morrison’s time, when he sought to improve the water flow to the cold bath (‘the Rock’) and from that to the lower grotto:

Hayter has been in the Quarry since poor Humphrey’s death, he has been working at the Grotto about the Water works [...] We have made the two small ponds to hold water above the Rock where the Bath is, made it fall out of one with the other, and Carried it from thence into the Bath in the Rock which we have re clay’d_and made to hold and is now full of Water, and from thence Carried it thro’ to the Grotto, this makes the Rock & Grotto quite lively to what it has been for many years past — The water is beautiful and Clear, there is but one fault, namely we have not enough of it, but we Cannot get more without taking it from the Spring at the Factory and this would be an expensive affair.

A number of writers have commented on the similarities between the Alpine Gardens and the description of the grounds of the fictional ‘Beachly’ in Elizabeth Hervey’s novel, *Melissa and Marcia or the Two Sisters* (a narrative that Beckford later borrowed from his half-sister almost word for word in his *Modern Novel Writing*). There are certainly features that surface in Hervey’s writing, such as the temples and grottoes, which suggest that she was using Fonthill as the model, but there are also subtle differences such as her ‘brilliant spars and curious shells’ which were never present in these grottoes. Hervey paints a romanticised scene,
with her idealised trimmings, and it would be wrong to take all of her description as fact. 69

What is telling at Fonthill from all of these narratives is a clear transition in style from the Lanes’ previous grottoes: gone are the unnatural spar decorations and abundance of artificial stalactites (or roof pendants), replaced by a form much more rustic and massive in character. Whether this was at Beckford’s behest or a suggestion on the part of Josiah Lane is unknown, although the former is more likely.

The commencement and extent of Beckford’s planting activities is more difficult to pin down with precision; the works previously discussed would indicate that possession of the estate refers to his coming of age in 1781, and this is the likely context that, in 1797, the European Magazine reported on his contribution:

Although parts of the original estate at Fonthill are covered with fine oak timber, yet some thousand acres of the ground purchased by Mr. Beckford’s father, as well as by himself, the leases of which have been continually falling in, were unplanted. Not to mention the great plantation begun by the late Mr. Beckford, the present gentleman has been, every year since his possession, continuing them upon a grander scale. Several hundred thousand trees, and, some years, not less than a million, and those of all the different sorts of forest wood, and of various tribes of exotic plants and shrubs, often constitute the work but of a single season. 70

William Beckford’s creation of the Alpine Gardens ranks as a singular early accomplishment; yet Cyrus Redding’s account of when this came about is questionable. It was a time when the Alderman’s plantation on the east bank had ‘grown to large-sized trees, and become a flourishing wood’; Lettice was ‘instructing the Misses Beckford’, 71 and their father had just returned from Aranjuez – this would suggest the late spring of 1796. In the aforementioned area, Lettice ‘suggested that walks should be made of nearly a mile in extent, in order to render that wild spot pleasanter for the ladies, who seemed to have a partiality for it’. Beckford clearly agreed, and had workmen set about the task, ‘in what afterwards had the name of the “Alpine Garden”’. 72 Visitors’ accounts (such as those by van Spaen, Meister and Drysdale), however, show that even before this time this was a well-frequented area, replete with carriage roads and many paths, with the quarries having been developed into scenic features. 73

Contemporary accounts indicate that visitors were kept to the east of the water, probably at Beckford’s direction. About this immediate region were several other features. Meister noted three ‘greatly neglected’ temples:

That which is dedicated to Hercules, is built on a small eminence almost disjoined from the other hills. The temple of the Naiad, the guardian of this...
beautiful valley, is in a secret cavern, ornamented in the Etruscan taste, on the banks of the river with whose stream she waters it. The temple of Jesus Christ [the parish church] is at a distance from the boundary of these vast domains.  

The neglect suggests that these structures were the work of the Alderman and subsequently abandoned to nature by his son. Towards the highest region of the Alpine Gardens was to be found ‘a root-house with a bowling-green in front, encircled with lofty firs, intermingled with lilac, woodbine, and laurel’. Further winding walks led through open groves and ‘almost impenetrable wood’, and on the highest ground of the quarries Beckford erected ‘a rustic rotunda, called the Paliaro. It is thatched with straw, like the huts of the Calabrian shepherds; and supported by six rude unbarked firs as columns.’ Later, at the turn of the century, on ‘a smooth level of green turf on top of a rock’, Beckford planned to place ‘an urn or sarcophagus […] dedicated to the memory of Alexander Cozens, an artist of much original genius, and who was particularly partial to this spot’.  

Meister alludes to the remains of a very ancient tower and ‘two caves of the most romantic appearance’, one of them covered with vine and ivy, seemingly dedicated to the worship of Bacchus (Figure 14.10). Mowl incorrectly transports readers to the wrong side of the Old Park, and infers that the so-called ‘cromlech’ was, in fact, this ancient tower. Meister is clearly still in the area of the Alpine Gardens, and the ‘two caves’ and their drapery conform to those at the quarry lawn.  

Writing in 1823, Rutter refers to how Beckford, before the building of the Abbey, was focused on ‘the erection of a tower on the summit of the highest hill upon

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**Fig. 14.10** Engraving of the quarry grottoes in the Alpine Garden.

*John Rutter, Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey, 1823.*
the estate, the foundations of which had been already laid by the late Alderman, after a design similar to the celebrated tower of Alfred at Stourhead...’. However, it could hardly be deemed ancient – just never completed – and was on an entirely different part of the estate to the west, as Elizabeth Hervey noted in 1797, when she observed ‘the ruins on Stope’s beacon’.78

Josiah Lane’s return to Fonthill in 1794 is more circumspect – ‘a carved roundel’ saying ‘J. L. 1794’ is all that we have to go on,79 and even the deciphering of the inscription itself has been doubted, besides the possibility that the initials also happen to be those of John Lettice. Of more reliable substance, following an improvement in income from Beckford’s plantations, is a letter to his agent James Wildman in August 1790: ‘… My works at Fonthill, buildings, planting etc. are going on very briskly. I have been raising towers and digging Grottoes.’80 What this tower was at this time is uncertain, unless he had already started to resurrect his father’s work on Stop’s Beacon.81 As to the grottoes, the work could refer to those in the Alpine Gardens (that with the cold bath above the lakeside grotto) or the so-called ‘cromlech’ built just south of the copse of the Hermitage wood (Figure 14.11). This structure, which certainly carries a more primitive air about it, is formed of two levels; too diminutive for occupancy in the lower one (although ideal for Beckford’s dwarf)82 with small steps leading up to a small viewing platform above. Possibly it was built on, or near to, the site of his father’s ‘Umbrella Seat’?

By the end of 1796, Beckford and Wyatt had started work on their grander scheme beyond the confines of the Old Park. An extract from a letter of 1799 suggests abandonment of the former gardens – although Fonthill House was evidently still well-maintained – in favour of extensive planting about the Abbey grounds.

![The ‘cromlech’.](Photo.png)
… We now got to Deptford Inn took fresh Horses and about eight mile from that Place is Fonthill, nothing can exceed the splendour, and magnificence of the House and every thing belonging to it the only Fault is that your eye is fatigued with the quantity of Gold that is about the House, There are some fine Pictures two beautiful Landscapes by Claud he has fitted furnished one Room in the Turkish style, but it is impossible to describe the extravagance of all we saw, his whole time and thoughts are taken up about the Abbey which is not to be a Church but in Rooms as any other House, but to exceed any thing in the Country, The Gardens are very bad, the Grounds are very extensive but hardly to be called beautifull there is a fine Peice of artificial water & some Good Trees, he is continually planting and improving…

Parallels with Fonthill in other grottoes

Lane’s lakeside grotto at Fonthill was deliberately hidden – with the intent of solitude – and incorporated an opening onto calming waters (Figure 14.12). In this respect, there are clear echoes of the grotto at Stourhead, and that at Painshill, Charles Hamilton’s superlative creation in Surrey, both of which had apertures to view their respective lakes. But it was this more rugged and natural form of grotto-work that Josiah Lane introduced at Fonthill which would lend itself to further commissions at other Wiltshire estates: the cascade with its intertwining tunnels – ‘formed of tumblers found near the spot’ – and separate hermitage at Bowood, built

Fig. 14.12 The Lakeside grotto, opening onto the water.
Photograph © Michael Cousins.
from 1785 to 1788 for the Marquess of Lansdowne, and a grotto at Old Wardour for the 8th Lord Arundell a few years later. The elevated position of the latter provided a prospect beyond the old castle towards the lake; a parallel may be drawn with the siting of Fonthill’s ‘cromlech’, which would have provided a similar view across Beckford’s new lake. The ‘cromlech’, even if not related to the aforementioned grottoes being dug in 1790, was probably constructed around the same time as Wardour’s, an account of which illustrates an historical context that Beckford would have appreciated:

One of the fields [at Place Farm] is called Lost Stone, and in the centre of it was formerly a circular work, with a vallum set round with stones. About the year 1792, Lord Arundell employing the celebrated constructor of rock work, Josiah Lane, to form a grotto at Wardour, these stones were removed. In the centre of the original work, as far as I can now gather from the report of those who remember it, stood three upright unhewn stones of large dimensions, placed so as to form three sides of a square, and in the space beneath some human bones were found. These three stones were placed near the old castle at Wardour, and the bones deposited underneath.

While the builder of the grotto at Belcombe Court near Bradford-on-Avon (Figure 14.13) has not been identified it can be dated to post-1770, and shares enough similarities with the ‘cromlech’ at Fonthill, the grotto at Wardour, and elements of the rockwork at Bowood, to suggest Lane as the principal contender. The grotto

Fig. 14.13 Belcombe Court grotto, Bradford-on-Avon.
Photograph © Michael Cousins.
at Bowden Park (Figure 14.14), probably for Barnard Dickenson (1746–1814),\textsuperscript{87} likewise lacks builder and date of construction, and the dearth of archival information meant restoration after significant storm damage in the 1980s of the interior – with its prominent needle-like stalactites – was achieved from limited photographic evidence and from memory. If this was by Josiah Lane, then it marks a return to the styles of Painshill, Oatlands and Ascot Place rather than that at Fonthill. The decoration of Ascot Place is typical Lane, even if the rockwork construction was ‘by one Turnbull, a Scotch mason’\textsuperscript{88} Certainly Lane’s final work for C. N. Pallmer (ca. 1819) at Norbiton Place, Surrey, according to a lone description, sounds remarkably like that at Oatlands, and its positioning over water follows this predecessor. If so, this would support Lane reverting to his earlier style on projects carried out post-Fonthill, and would also strengthen the case for Lane at Bowden Park. Such reversion to an earlier style also suggests a significant level of involvement from Beckford in the design of the Fonthill grottoes.

It was John Claudius Loudon, the gardening authority of the time, who conveys the sad end of Josiah Lane:

His name was Josiah Lane, and he was a native of the adjoining parish of Tisbury, in the workhouse of which he died last year, at a great age! He was perfectly ignorant, but certainly had a genius for this kind of construction. He used to do all the work with his own hands, and be paid at the rate of about two guineas a week; but, like other money-getting men with ill-regulated minds, he never thought of making provision for age.\textsuperscript{89}
Josiah was buried on 28 January 1833, aged 79. His father Joseph, who probably created the first of the Fonthill grottoes, by all accounts, appears to have had considerably more business sense. 

A new owner

William Beckford left Fonthill in 1822 having sold the estate to John Farquhar, whose nephew, George Mortimer, acquired the remains of Splendens and 1,200 acres of surrounding ground upon Farquhar’s apoplectic demise in 1826. Three years later the majority of the Old Park and the Pavilion (the converted kitchen wing of the old mansion) were sold to James Morrison. In describing Fonthill in 1833, Loudon echoed previous comments that the ‘house is badly placed, and it does not appear to us to be much improved by some immense clumps which Mr. Farquhar’s nephew has planted near it’. Loudon continued:

The same individual had the beautiful mosaic flooring of the cave taken up, and, in relaying it, placed a large mariner’s compass of black and white marble in the centre. The orifice in the roof of this cave, by which it is lighted, is unprotected by any fence or grating, and may be considered as a trap for the destruction of men or other animals. We very nearly fell into it, and in consequence wrote to Mr. Morrison, who has since informed us that he immediately afterwards surrounded the opening by a fence.

Which cave is being referred to is not clear, but previous commentaries and this description would suggest it was that part of the cold bath, of which the ‘middle of this cavern is entirely open on the top, except that a sort of covering is formed by the shrubs’.

Besides transforming the Pavilion, Morrison’s initial works focused on returning the estate to order and implementing numerous additions and changes for which he used the services of the architect John Buonarotti Papworth (1775–1847). The creation of various islands was planned (first on the side of the lake opposite the house, then by the pond head); other employments included the planting of trees, shrubberies and ‘Flower beds upon the Lawn’. The quarry came in for particular attention, for example: ‘Humphries has planted a good deal about the Quarry Shrubs, Fern, Tuscan, Adders Tongue &C, and likewise planted out a good many of the Trees which were in the Garden’: American trees and shrubs were especially favoured, the latter especially at the Rookery. Papworth was also requested to make ‘a few sketches of seats for the grounds’, made from ‘woods of different kinds’, and during the winter of 1836–7 the Hermitage was brought back to prominence, with the area grubbed-up and walled or fenced from the nearby road. In 1837, James Combes (Morrison’s steward) wrote: ‘I wish you were here to enjoy the shady walks and the singing of the Birds last evening as the Sun was
setting I walked round the Quarry it was really delightful If M. r Morrison will allow me £50. next Winter I will engage to make the Quarry the prettiest place in the whole world. Indeed the quarry would become a small menagerie of sorts over the next few years, with rabbits, pheasants, pea hen, guinea pigs and curious ducks in a paddock there, as well as ‘large White South American Geese’ (Morrison was also offered a tame deer). The lake was equally resplendent with different breeds of duck, widgeons and swans. That year’s end and the following represented the period of peak activity in the park:

The Mud is out and a precious quantity there is _ _ we are making the Island above the bridge and making the Dam to rise the water at the upper end of the lake _

The Gardener & Gilbert are planting out Evergreens, Hayter & Tine are filling up the Clumps in the Park with live Trees __

Are the Standard Cherry & Damson Trees designed for the Garden, it will be useless to plant such kind of fruit any where besides on account of the Birds __

The mud from the lake was used to cover ‘over about 75 or 80 Acres of land’, including ‘a large piece of the enclosure which you [Morrison] designed for a Deer Park’. Elsewhere, an orchard was established in the quarry, a new waterfall created north of the Pavilion (with ‘new Islands at Fonthill Bishop’), and the old road through the park, which Morrison had earmarked for removal two years earlier, was now ‘totally destroyed’.

Throughout Papworth’s engagement, he habitually eyed sale-houses for suitable items for his client. At the auction of Coade in 1843, Papworth picked out several items that he felt suitable for Morrison, of which Papworth suggested ‘The Giant [Polyphemus] would certainly perform well over the Coverd way at the Landing Fonthill & the Acis & Galatea in the Cavern of the Rookery.’ (See Chapter 6 Figure 6.6.) The lot was duly purchased for 16 guineas, together with ‘40 Gothic Heads’ that were evidently used to decorate the tunnel and grottoes at Fonthill. Regrettably there was a falling out between Papworth and Morrison in 1845, and the architect died two years later.

**Conclusion**

Alderman Beckford’s contribution to Fonthill can now be established on firmer foundations, and works often attributed to his son returned to him with certitude. His Hermitage and subterranean tunnel probably represent Joseph Lane’s first commission, one that would evolve into the creation – with his son, Josiah – of the highly elaborate and wondrous grottoes that still delight us today. Yet the Alderman’s making of the ‘serpentine river’, his extensive planting, and
the addition of various ornamental features also defined the eighteenth-century Fonthill Park. The Alderman died before his tower on Stop’s Beacon could outdo that being erected at Stourhead (Alfred’s Tower); his son would inherit those genes and ultimately build the most monumental of dwellings. But William Beckford also had other visions, and transformed the park further, bringing it closer to nature, making it his own, and casting off much of what his father had done. It is at Fonthill that we first see the change in Josiah Lane’s style of grottoes – it would seem at his patron’s behest – to rockwork-fashioned chambers, sparing in decoration; he would later apply this form to grottoes and other features at several other Wiltshire estates.

Beckford eventually removed himself from the trappings of his father’s Splendens to the seclusion of Fonthill Abbey. For almost 30 years the Abbey outshone everything. But following its dramatic collapse in 1825, the accolade of magnificence was handed back to Stourhead. It was only under James Morrison’s ownership that Fonthill, specifically the Old Park, was finally judged to have eclipsed its neighbour: ‘some Gentlemen were here from London last week, and went from here to Stourhead, when they returned they told me that Stourhead was not worthy to be Compared to Fonthill’.¹⁰¹