Inside the crystal Grotto

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Lady Lucinda Lambton, crusader for England's forgotten architectural heritage officially opened the site this week. The writer, photographer and broadcaster placed the last crystal in the Grotto's outstanding and unrivalled stalactite decoration.

With a grant of £747,400 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and other private trusts, the crystal Grotto is once again a sparkling centrepiece within the magical landscape garden created by the Honourable Charles Hamilton between 1738 and 1773.

Specialist craftsmen from Cliveden Conservation Workshop have spent the past year on the heritage project restoring the folly, which historically has been recognised as the finest stalactite Grotto in Europe. Inspired by the grottoes in Italian Renaissance gardens, in 1760 Charles Hamilton commissioned the celebrated grotto maker, Joseph Lane, to construct this folly for a sum of £8,000 (the equivalent of £600,000 today).

The recreation of this important historic folly has combined extensive research of archive material and archaeological data, with landscaping and expert craftsmanship. 100s of 1000s of crystals – calcite, gypsum, quartz and fluorite – including those recovered from archaeological works, have been skilfully embedded with lime mortar onto a framework of inverted wooden cones, to recreate the dazzling stalactite effect of Lane's original folly.

Lady Lucinda Lambton, said: "This latest phase of HLF-funded restoration works within the 18th century landscape garden in addition to the Grotto includes the reinstatement of the historic Woollett Bridge and improved accessibility to enhance the visitor experience at Painshill. The recreation of the Five Arch Bridge – restoring Charles Hamilton's long lake vista within his historic 18th century landscape – was completed earlier in 2013, with funding from The Monument Trust."

Stuart McLeod, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund South East, said: "We at the Heritage Lottery Fund are delighted that the crystal Grotto, one of only handful left of this type of landscape feature, has been fully restored to its former glory. Now more accessible and visitor friendly than ever, people from near and far will be able to learn from and enjoy this enchanting place for many years to come."

The crystal Grotto - which promises to attract international visitors and garden architecture specialists to Painshill - will be open to visitors (weekends only) and running special Grotto Tours for groups from July 2013. It will also be used as an educational resource for schools and colleges.

Notes to editors

The Painshill Grotto is a rare example of an eighteenth-century grotto in its entirety and original form (as restored); it is a special and exuberant vision of its creator; the crystal decoration is outstanding and unmatched; the stalactites and water effects enhance its unique character; and the exterior gives it a distinctive and otherworldly appearance.

It was described by German landscape designer Friedrich Ludwig von Sckell (1750-1823) as "the finest of its type ever built" and placed first among all the grottoes by the great garden designer and writer JC Loudon (1783- 1843). Leonardo da Vinci declared: "You should feel two emotions when approaching a Grotto: fear and desire. You should fear what

may be inside, but desire to discover.” In his Grotto, Charles Hamilton perfectly captured that mood. The eighteenth-century grotto varied in style and was often the centrepiece of a garden. The Painshill Grotto is an exceptional example of the move towards a more natural folly decorated with shells, minerals, spar and other crystals. This type of grotto, promoted by Joseph Lane and his son Josiah, was comparatively unusual.

The most striking element in the Painshill grotto is the use of stalactites. The stalactite grotto is also rare, with limited application at Fonthill but primarily found at Painshill, Oatlands (which copied Painshill), Ascot Place and St Anne’s Hill, which has been lost.

The Grotto is built across two islands in the lake, giving the external appearance of a rocky outcrop. The mixture of plain rockwork and spongestone cladding produces a strange, rather eerie effect. A carefully placed arbour, an arch and other stone effects, all in oolitic limestone, are positioned around Grotto Island. On a still day, when the light is perfect, ‘nature’s mirror’ can be seen to full effect: the underside of Grotto Bridge is reflected in the still waters of the lake below.

Painshill is one of Europe’s most important 18th century landscape gardens. The 158-acre landscape garden represents the vision of an English gentleman, The Hon. Charles Hamilton. Inspired by Renaissance art and his Grand Tours across Europe, he created a sequence of breathtaking and surprising vistas. The landscapes, originally created between 1738 and 1773, form living works of art into which Hamilton placed follies for dramatic effect. Charles Hamilton’s ambitions, however, exceeded his funding, and he was forced to sell the estate in 1773. Painshill was held by a series of private owners over two centuries and ultimately fell into dereliction through neglect after the Second World War. Painshill Park Trust, a registered charity, was formed in 1981 to restore the landscape garden, now Grade 1 Listed.

Painshill has undergone significant restoration in recent years. The Visitor Centre, which was opened in 2001, currently welcomes over 75,000 visitors every year. Painshill currently has nearly 3,000 members and is supported by over 100 volunteers. Painshill Education Centre provides lifelong learning to over 11,000 school children and adults each year. School activities are tailored to the National Curriculum and the landscape gardens enable the education department to offer unique activities that span a variety of subjects including history, science, geography and ecology.

Further information

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