



The shell grotto,  
Margate

## 1 The Shell Grotto, Margate

Imagine this: it's 1835 and you are Joshua Newlove, a small boy proudly watching your father dig a duck pond in your back garden in Margate. But something's wrong. The spade goes in so deep that it seems to fall into the ground. When your father asks you to go down the hole to investigate what's happened, you don't hesitate. You love adventure, but even you aren't prepared for what you'll find. You come back wide-eyed with stories of magic passages, of mermaid's palaces, of tunnels lined with treasures from the sea. What will, in fact, turn out to be two thousand square feet of shell mosaics.

How the Margate Shell Grotto was discovered by the Newlove family is only part of its legend. Grottos have always been important, and often magical, garden jewels and Margate's mysterious shell grotto is no exception. The fact that the genesis of this grotto still remains a delicious mystery adds to its drama. Over the years since it was discovered, experts and enthusiasts have come up with different theories as to who built it, from the Phoenicians to Victorians to smugglers to opportunistic businessmen to two young brothers playing in the 1800s. The fumes from the gaslights used in Victorian times polluted the shells and mean that carbon dating can't be used.

After its discovery, it became a fashionable place to visit. The Victorian novelist Marie Corelli said, 'If the curious and beautiful subterranean temple existed anywhere but Margate, it would certainly be acknowledged as one of the wonders of the world.' In the 1930s and 40s there were some famous séances held in the grotto, and the marvellously named guide book *Far From the Sodding Crowd*, by Jason Hazeley, Robin Halstead, Alex Morris and Joel Morrison, states: 'In the next six months, unless your soul is utterly dead, you will have a dream set here.'

Dreams aside, to get to the grotto you have to leave the sea-front and walk up the suburban streets until you reach a perfectly unremarkable residential street, apart from one giveaway clue: it's called Grotto Hill. Then you go through the kind of gift shop you might find in any seaside town selling postcards, rocks and children's shell jewellery. Once you've purchased your ticket, you go down - and down - a sandy path to find yourself in this labyrinth of shells, over four million of them. I quickly realised that either I could go mad trying to work out the truth, or I could give myself up to the winding, dancing, swirling, unexpected magic of the place. It felt feminine. It felt as if I was dancing. It felt as if I was entering a conversation. It

felt as if I could shut my eyes and wish for whatever I wanted – there is apparently a wishing shell here: find it and press on it and your dreams will come true.

I didn't find the wishing shell, but Sarah Vickery, the current owner of the grotto, made me wait (rather nervously) in one spot as she went to stand next to the whispering shells. Although she was too far away for me to see her, her whispers echoed loudly round the chamber. The walls of the chambers and passages are decorated by pointed arches of shells, mostly in geometrical designs of stars, diamonds and flower arrangements. The shells are mostly whelk, oysters and dog-winkle, and are smoked a rich brown from the gas lights, which seems to add to the mystery.

I surprised myself by the poem I wrote for the Grotto. It's much more personal than my other garden poems, and yet all the things I was noticing – a conversation, the labyrinthine tunnels, birth, skeletons – are in here. The amazing mystery of creation.



*A detail from a shell panel*

### **Mystery**

I told everyone I didn't care,  
*so long as it's healthy,*  
 but sitting on a bus one day  
 watching mothers and daughters turn  
 in to one another,  
 (how did I even know the relationship?)  
 I had to stroke my stomach,  
 every finger an appeal, and later,

when I held you through that first night,  
 tiny body settled in the crook of my arm,  
 I'd have turned myself inside out  
 to give you my skeleton as protection;  
 we stared at each other, our conversation  
 begun long before either of us was born  
 and though I wanted to tell every happy  
 ending, could only whisper, *you,*

into that shell-like ear, had to trust  
 you to find the tunnel that led past  
 the talking wall to find the one wishing  
 shell, and on to the ray of light  
 falling like a perfect circle in your path,  
 and the fact that you didn't know  
 how you'd got there, or even your purpose,  
 is your mystery to unravel, not mine.