

Beggar's Knoll: China in Wiltshire

Jonathan Holt



I have a life-long interest in architectural follies, those curious buildings which are notoriously difficult to define partly because there are so many types, for example towers, grottoes, shell houses, banqueting houses, fishing pavilions ... the list goes on! Gwyn Headley and Wim Meulenkamp, authors of a gazetteer on the subject, said it is easier to say what they are NOT rather than try to define what they ARE. Sometimes it comes down to the eye of the beholder, so there is an element of subjectivity.

The earliest follies were pleasure houses built from the sixteenth century, with a boom in the eighteenth. They can be found mainly in Europe, parts of North America and the former European, particularly British, colonies. Wiltshire is particularly rich in all types from mock medieval to ultra-modern, made of concrete, glass and steel, partly because there were some very wealthy landowners who benefited from colonisation and trade. Exotic styles which bear no relation to the local vernacular are prime examples of follies, and by coincidence there are several examples of such exoticism in the form of Chinese-style buildings in the county: in Swindon where, believe it or not, there is a pagoda on an island in a lake, at Seend Manor near Melksham, and at Westbury, just a few stones-throw to the west of Bratton, perhaps unknown to members of the BHA.

Beggar's Knoll



To find Beggar's Knoll, go beyond the White Horse as you approach Westbury and just before you reach the Newtown area of the Westbury, turn to the left and you enter a different world. What makes Beggar's Knoll stand out is the complete nature of the design: not just buildings, but statuary, paving, ceramics and plants native to the East Asian country, all well laid out and proportioned.

The garden hangs on an escarpment on the western edge of Salisbury Plain with fine views into Somerset where, since 2000, the owners Colin Little and Penny Stirling have infused the place with their Sinophile tastes, having visited China numerous times in order to soak up the atmosphere of the country's green spaces. They also visited Vancouver in Penny's native Canada in 1999 when they were inspired by the Dr Sun Yat Sen Garden. They draw on Chinese philosophy and thinking, saying that the main purposes of a Chinese garden are relaxation, enjoying plants, taking in the scenery and admiring the architecture.



The first step into this exotic world is the Garden of 10,000 Shadows entered through a Gateway [left] where one sees a Buddha well ensconced among the planting and two Tang dynasty poems carved in stone. A sign in Chinese says 'Friendship with Foreign Devils' as if to suggest that the spirits of the garden can make peace with the natives who come into this very special place.

One can sit in the Harvesting the Moon Pavilion [below right] which is a play on words in the Wiltshire legend of the Moonrakers who harnessed the moon in their smuggling



endeavours. When the Revenue men were after them, they 'raked' the moon off a pond in which they had thrown their pursuers. Like many Chinese houses, the corners of the pavilion are turned up to keep the demons away, making it harder for them to enter, and the adjacent zigzags in the paths prevent the demons from catching you because they can only run in straight lines.



One enters the Three Friends of Winter Garden through a brightly coloured gateway with a carved dragon on its façade, symbol of the Emperor, and a phoenix, symbol of the Empress, both carved by Penny [left]. One leaves by the white moon gate wall which was built by Mick Oram and Dave Dredge, under Penny's design and guidance.

Many Chinese gardens were made by 'scholars' or others who had retired from official jobs, and in the Scholar's Garden there is an attractive seat and ceremonial gate [right], as well as a sculpture of a fat man who represents prosperity.



Set high above the drive stands the Wildly Cheering Pavilion [left] which celebrates the local council's abandonment of a bypass proposed for Westbury which would have cut in front of Beggar's Knoll. The translation of the Chinese proverb says 'Everything grows well in the garden'.

Further up at the top of this blessed plot is the Bamboo Garden with appropriate planting and the Bamboo Pavilion [right] which has a carving of five bats on the ceiling [below]. The word for bat in mandarin is 'foo' and it is also the word for 'good luck', but said with a different tone, so this building plays on this linguistic feature. The Chinese characters on the outside mean 'Raising the Bamboo Pavilion', the word for pavilion being 'ting', a word to be found in the names of other Chinese buildings in British gardens.



All three pavilions were built by Colin, with the foundations laid by two local builders from Westbury, Mick Oram and Dave Dredge. The Harvesting the Moon (2002) and Wildly Cheering (2004) Pavilions were built in the northern Chinese style, with relatively low-pitched roofs and none of the extreme curlicues seen in the south of the country. However, the Bamboo Pavilion (2006), which does not have extreme curlicues, was modelled on a pavilion in Suzhou in the south.

The parts of pavilions made in the traditional style in China are normally joined by means of cunning joints. In contrast, at Beggar's Knoll there are lots of screws in the pavilions for Penny and Colin did not have the skills or the time to assemble them without these modern fixing devices.

Relatively new, there is an Islamic style tiled garden influenced by North-West China.



OS REF: ST 885508 Postcode BA13 3ED

To arrange a visit e-mail the owners Penny Stirling and Colin Little at silkendalliance@talktalk.net or telephone 01373 823383.

Other nearby follies

St Peter's Pump near Stourhead OS Ref: ST 761354

Take the B3092 south of Maiden Bradley, then after about 2 miles take the road towards Alfred's Tower. After about 1½ miles stop and cross the sloping field to the south where it is about 300 yards away.

Bishopstrow House, Warminster OS Ref ST 896441 Postcode BA12 9HH
Rotunda in the grounds of a hotel, easily accessible.

Pumpkin Tower, Trowbridge OS Ref ST 853578 Postcode BA14 8HR
Can be seen at the north end of Bythesea Road. No internal access.

Francis Dineley's Follies OS Ref ST 933243 Postcode SP0 OEX
The Banqueting Temple and Gatehouse Belvedere can be reached by heading north off a lane leading to Woodlands, Dineley's house to the east of Berwick St John.

Wardour Old Castle OS Ref SU 939263 Postcode SP3 6RR
The grounds of the castle contain a grotto built in 1792 by Josiah Lane, the prolific grotto builder of Tisbury. Also an elegant banqueting house, possibly by Capability Brown. English Heritage opens the site at typical times.

Fonthill Several follies around OS Ref: ST 918310
This is a very large estate whose ownership is split, with several points of access:

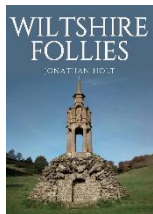
- **Triumphal Gateway.** Close to Fonthill Bishop. Can be driven through on a public road. One wing can be rented for holidays. Go to www.beckfordarms.com where it is called The Arch. The Boathouse on Fonthill Lake can be approached down a slope from the Gateway.
- The main part of the estate is now called Old Fonthill Abbey which contains the remains of the Abbey, just the Lancaster Tower, as well as extensive walks around Bitham Lake. It can be visited on two open days in May this year. Access from west side of estate north of Newtown. The openings are in aid of Cure Parkinson's <https://cureparkinsons.org.uk/events/> and local charities.

- The area around the south part of Fonthill Lake with the Cromlech and grottoes can also be visited by parking in a layby used by a fishing club on the road between Fonthill Bishop and Fonthill Gifford.
- Fonthill House: No follies but this eastern part is worth visiting. Owned by Lord Margadale, it surrounds a relatively new house with fine gardens remodelled by Tania Compton, featured in the Art of the Garden on Sky Arts . Open this year on Sunday 26th April under the National Gardens Scheme and Saturday 4th July for a Rare Plant Fair.

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This article is based on a talk given by Jonathan Holt to the Bratton History Association on 18 January 2026.

Jonathan Holt is a member the BHA and Editor of *Follies*, the organ of the Folly Fellowship, a charity dedicated to their preservation and enjoyment (www.follies.org.uk).



In 2019 Jonathan published *Wiltshire Follies* with Amberley Publishing, the result of numerous explorations and substantial research. He is also the author of books on Dorset, Somerset, Gloucestershire and Bristol, a tour guide and continuing the folly theme, he has built a shell house in his garden in Bath. *Wiltshire Follies* is available directly from Jonathan for £17 including postage & packing. E-mail him at jonathanholt3@gmail.com for details of how to pay.