

SHERBORNE SHELL HOUSE

English Heritage Register Grade 1 (Building)

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The Shell House is generally thought to date from c.1750 but it is still not known who commissioned the work. The earliest written reference is in an advertisement of 1801: *'To be Let - A very roomy Dwelling-House situated in the most pleasant part of Cheap Street, late the residence of Thomas Gollop Esq and before him of Mr. Samuel Foot, with the large walled-in garden, hot-house and shell-house adjoining...'*

Samuel Foot (1704-92) was a prominent and respected lawyer who eventually retired to his nearby estate in Berwick St. John, Wiltshire. His long legal career covered the period when both Alexander Pope and 'Capability' Brown visited Sherborne Castle. Little is known about his private life except that he married three times and died without issue leaving extensive property.

Thomas Gollop of Sherborne and Strode (whose ancestors had once owned the manors of Parnham and Chantmarle) died only a year after Foot in 1793, aged 47. It is believed that he set off for the Grand Tour before he was 15 and returned some 6 years later. It is possible that the Italian marble plaque above the entrance to the Shell House could be a souvenir from his travels. He married at 45 and the marriage settlement included his mansion house and garden at Lillington, adjacent to Leweston. One of his ancestors is buried in Leweston Church.

We are uncertain as to which Cheap Street 'dwelling-house' the walled garden and Shell House belonged. No maps of Sherborne were produced between 1735 and 1834 and no documents have come to light. The garden (49a on the 1834 map*) was to change hands several times and has belonged to houses in three different streets.

Benjamin Vowell, Wine merchant of Cheap Street, is known to have bought Thomas Gollop's house and garden from his son in 1812. In 1780 the wine business had been established in Cheap Street (17 on the 1834 map) and the garden of that property (also 17 on the 1834 map) abutted the western wall of the Shell House garden.

After Vowell died in 1829, the garden was inherited by the wealthy Pretor and Whitty banking families who lived in adjoining houses in Long Street (nos 617b and 618). They had already created a pleasure garden with a grand joint entrance (49b) opposite their houses. An opening was subsequently formed so that a straight path led up through both gardens directly to the pièce de resistance, the Shell House.

A similar 'double' garden, belonging to a house on Hound Street called 'The Retreat', was, before 1852, created on its eastern side. The 1887 OS map shows its lower section to have had a serpentine path meandering through shrubberies to a formal entrance on Long Street. 'The Retreat' became a boarding house for Sherborne School in 1873 and shortly afterwards the Shell House garden was bought and turned into a kitchen garden, providing produce for the boys and accessed via two new openings in its east wall. In 1910 'The Retreat' was renamed Harper House in memory of a former Headmaster.

**The Shell House is the round building north of 49a. (1834 map)*

SOME NOTES FOR VISITORS TO THE SHELL HOUSE

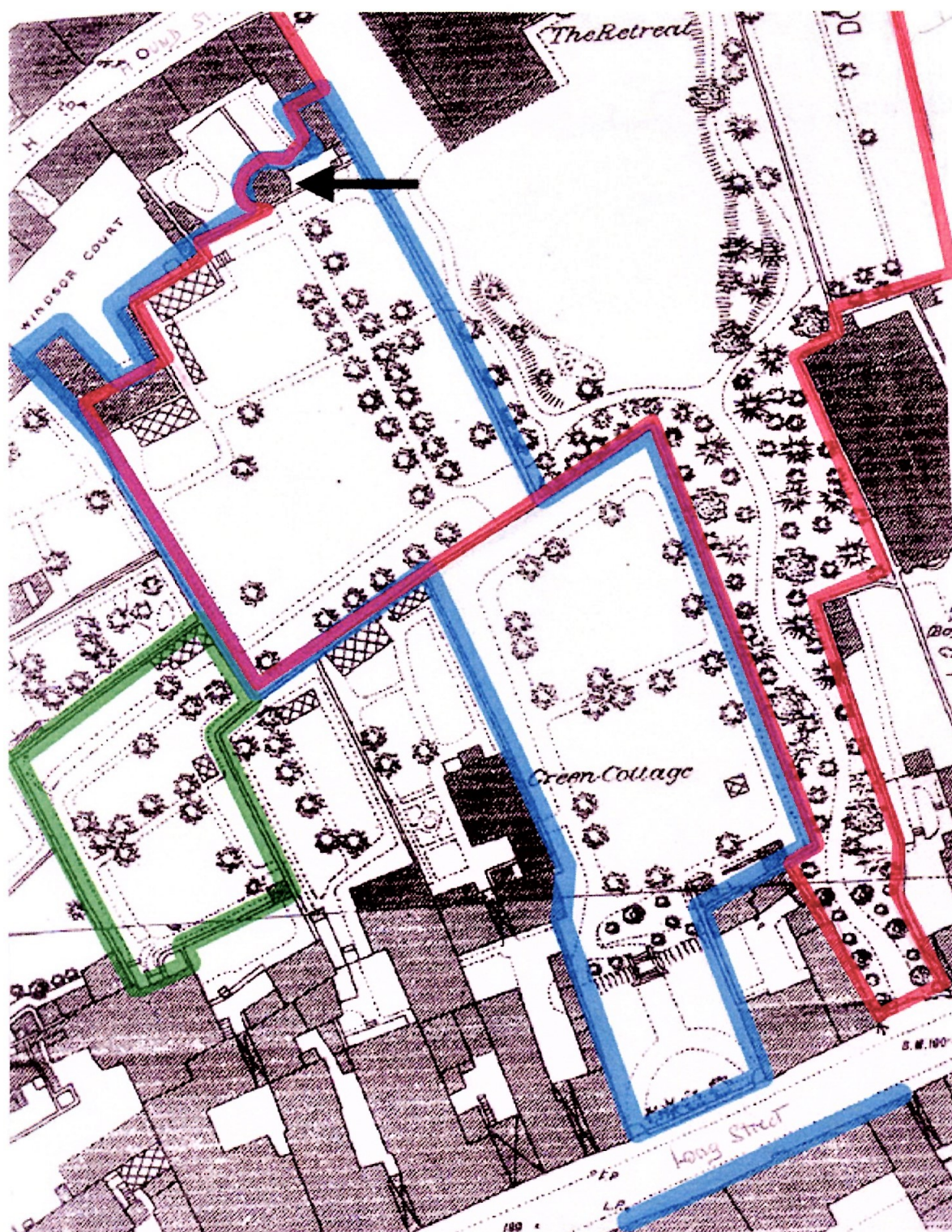
- It is believed that the octagonal room with its seven alcoves was created within an earlier circular structure - most probably a dovecote. The domed, thatched roof was originally stone-tiled and culminated in an octagonal lantern. At first the entrance level was much lower (as evidenced by the gardens behind) but the land to the south has been banked up almost to the level of the present doorway. Creating the floor at this height allowed the bottom section of the building to become a storage cellar.
- The doors, with their hinged glazed panels, are copied from the remains of the previous pair which could have been of 18th century design.
- The present floor is a traditional design but traces of the original lime-ash plaster floor were uncovered during restoration: a decorative pattern of grey, buff and pink plaster with a two-tone guilloche pattern around the edge (see salvaged fragments, including a recessed leaf-shape, in the display area in the adjoining outbuilding).
- The flat wall surfaces are coated with a mixture of tiny shells, crushed mother-of-pearl and glass, which would have shimmered in the light from the lantern above. The Georgian Group have very generously agreed to fund the reinstatement of this lantern.
- Almost all of the shells used in the extraordinarily intricate decoration are from the British Isles and most can still be found on the Dorset coast. The swags above the alcoves incorporate fine painted lead made to resemble ribbon and leaves. Each flower has an individual design made up from innumerable little shells applied to cork discs with warmed beeswax or a shellac resin. The discs are fixed to copper wire bound with green cotton thread and assembled into garlands or arranged in groups around the ceiling panels and the tops of the alcoves. In some places the larger shell flowers have painted detailing.
- A considerable section of the plaster cornice had to be recast using a mould from the original. Above the band of blue-grey and green acanthus leaves is a border of stylised butterflies interspersed with shell, flower, oak-leaf and fleur-de-lis shapes.
- The ceiling panels have alternate grounds of golden-coloured quartz (with light-catching shards of glass embedded amongst it) and white shells in scale formation. They are separated by skilfully tapered ribs, alternately gold and blue, formed into twists with ribbon-like bands of shells.
- Alcove 2: the area that had suffered the most damage. The loss of the shell flowers, however, reveals the template of the pattern pricked out in the plaster. Either side of this alcove are the remaining forms of birds on typical rococo-style scroll supports. What appears to be an owl, once covered in shell feathers, sits on the roundel above the alcove. The ceiling panel of this section fell during emergency re-thatching work in 2001. It has been restored using the salvaged material but the thickness (and weight) of the original plaster and quartz work has been reduced.
- Alcove 4: distinguished by its trellis arrangement of razor shells. The edges of the border separating the alcove from its hood are encrusted with coral effect shapes. An elaborate flower basket sits above this border. The bracket below the roundel could have been used to support an ornament or a lantern. Fragments of costly red glass can be seen in the centre of the large flower above the roundel.



Shell House Dome



1834 T.Percy map 49a depicts the shell house garden with circular building along northern boundary wall identifying the shell house



- Garden of Wine Merchant (see ref 17 on 1834 map)
- The Shell House Garden and Long Street entrance, early cXIX
- The Shell House Garden became part of The Retreat (now Harper House) in the late cXIX

1887 o/s map which identifies both the early cXIX and late cXIX entrances from Long Street