



Pope's Grotto

PRESERVATION TRUST

Patrons: Monty Don OBE, Sir Donald Insall CBE, Kim Wilkie

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Project News

Although the conservation project has been unexpectedly paused, we have not been idle, as Angela Kidner, our Heritage Consultant reports

This year Alexander Pope's Grotto has once again lain empty and unvisited through Pope's birthday and death-day in glorious May. The pandemic struck just as the National Lottery Heritage Fund was about to sign the agreement to give us permission to start on the project of conservation and activities. Then suddenly schools had much more urgent pressures to deal with, and the Lottery Fund scrambled to provide emergency funding and advice to struggling charities.

Now, as a cautious relaxation of lockdown begins, we have been hard at work contacting all the organisations we are working with and re-planning

our programme of activities. It is wonderful to be linking up again with Marble Hill House's Rachel Morrison, back from furlough, and planning joint activities. We hope to start the main project in September and look forward to re-opening the Grotto with the necessary protocols in place very soon.



A wonderful lift to our morale came this month in the form of a grant from the Idlewild Trust towards the conservation of the minerals inside the grotto. We are very grateful to the Trust for their support at this testing time, and to all our other funders who are retaining their support of the project. We look forward to seeing you in the grotto before long!

Open Days

When Alexander Pope was showing the newly-completed Grotto to his visitors, he could scarcely have imagined that people would still want to visit it 300 years later. He certainly would not have anticipated that the steady stream of modern visitors who have experienced the Grotto over the last few years would be temporarily suspended by a global pandemic.

We're planning to open the Grotto for the first time this year on Saturday 19th September during Open House London. Unfortunately, Pope did not allow

for the current social-distancing rules: its narrow chambers and single entrance make it difficult to admit more than a few concurrent visitors so the number of visitors will be limited to 5 every half-hour. Visitors will be required to wear face coverings and to observe social-distancing rules.



Open House events are free but booking will be mandatory and will begin on the 26th of August - please visit [Open House London](https://www.openhouselondon.co.uk) for details.

If this first attempt to open the Grotto during the pandemic is successful, we may organise further openings later this year.

Twickenham Luminaries: a virtual lecture series

Our National Lottery Heritage Fund grant application included a proposal for a series of summer events with our partners at English Heritage, Marble Hill. In February we started planning but the pandemic struck and we were disappointed to have to cancel them. Instead we have jointly organised a five day virtual lecture series titled "Twickenham Luminaries".

Each lecture will shine a light on an individual associated with a heritage building in Twickenham. There will be five 20 minute lectures on successive evenings in the week beginning 14th September. There will be time for questions and answers.

The subjects and speakers will be:

- *Monday 14th Sept:* Nellie Ionides and Orleans House, Minna Andersen
- *Tuesday 15th Sept:* Henrietta Howard and Marble Hill House, Dr Megan Leyland
- *Wednesday 16th Sept:* Horace Walpole and Strawberry Hill, Michael Snodin
- *Thursday 17th Sept:* Alexander Pope and His Villa, Professor Judith Hawley
- *Friday 18th Sept:* Sir John Soane and Turner's House, Ricky Pound

There are 500 free tickets for each lecture but we ask for a £5 donation from those who can afford it. You can find more information about the lectures, the speakers and booking, at:

<http://popesgrotto.org.uk/lectures/>

Demand is likely to be high so you are advised to book as early as possible.

Memories of St Catherine's School

Schoolgirls used the Grotto to avoid the busy road above for 77 years. Some of them have told us about their times at the school

If you've visited the grotto, you'll know that it lies under Radnor House School. In fact, it has been under a school since 1919, when St Catherine's Convent and School bought the site together with The Lawn, a substantial house across the road to Hampton with a large garden (part of Pope's original garden, actually). From that time until 1996, when the School sold Pope's Villa and retreated to the other side of the road, girls used the central tunnel of the grotto to safely get to and from their classes on each side of the road. It was also used as a bomb shelter in the Second World War.

One of our volunteers recently came across this memoir from a St Catherine's old girl, Irene Potter, on the BBC's WW2 People's Archive:

"When I was about eleven years old I was at St. Catherine's Convent in Twickenham, Middlesex. One day I remember hearing lots of noise outside the window facing the River Thames, on looking out I saw boat after boat of many different sizes going past and men waving to us. What I did not know then was that these boats were going to rescue the men from Dunkirk.

"Later, as the War progressed I remember spending many an hour in the air raid shelter trying to do my school work. This shelter was in fact at one time the 'Grotto' which was made under the road for the poet Alexander Pope to use, when he lived in the house, to get to his garden on the other side of the road without being seen. It was very damp and cold and had lots of spiders and other creepy crawlies. Fortunately the school was never bombed, but we lost a lot of our learning time going to and fro."

This reminded us that we have, over the years, collected the memories of a few St Catherine's alumnae. Here are some of them:

Pamela Hide:

"I was a pupil at St Catherine's during the war and have memories of being sent to the grotto to shelter during air raids - lessons continued as we sat on camp stools until the 'all clear' sirens were heard."

Stella Lodge:

"As a former pupil of St Catherine's School when it was on the riverside with the playing field on the other side of the road, I was pleased that a trust has been setup for the preservation of the Grotto.

"I have vivid memories of scarpering through there, a gloomy place, damp with, it seemed to us, an army of stag beetles.

Janet Head:

"I have a particular interest in the Grotto: I was a pupil at St Catherine's Convent all my school life from the age of 5 in 1941 until I left in 1954. I remember the Grotto very well and can recall the feeling walking through it to reach playing fields across the road – rather dark and damp and quite awe-inspiring for a small child!"

Maureen Cooke and friend:

"As past pupils of St Catherine's in the 1960s we were well acquainted with the Grotto as we passed through it many times each day during our school years. Happy memories!"

Finally, certainly not an alumna, but

Howard Weinbrot, Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin:

"On my first visit to the UK as an undergraduate, I did my due-diligence at Twickenham. The Mother Superior then in charge told me that the house included bunks for American GIs during the war. Some of them alas were not kind to their hosts and pinched the glowing rocks in the grotto's walls and ceiling.

"I think of those specters because this weekend in America is Memorial Day weekend. When we are not out shopping the sales, we are reminded of the men and women who served America and between 1941-45 served the world, so that civilized posterity could preserve its past for the future, as in a grotto for an English poet who died in 1744 but is loved throughout the anglophone sphere. *Esto perpetua.*"

Volunteers and Trustees

Become a volunteer!

Our volunteers welcome guests at public open days, explain the history and contents of the Grotto, assist visitors to complete feedback forms and sell tickets and books at the front desk. Volunteers also assist at other events which the Trust organises.

Harriet McKinley-Smith was a volunteer before being awarded a scholarship at Jesus College, Oxford:

"I was first introduced to the Grotto by Professor Judith Hawley on a university trip for a module I was studying on the 18th Century. I didn't really know too much about Pope as I had only read a few poems at the time. When I visited I didn't really know what to expect. I thought that we were visiting a hole in the ground and I wasn't really sure why it was of interest to a group of university students. I was soon proven wrong.



Harriet McKinley-Smith

"We were given a tour by Judith where she explained what the Grotto used to be like. I was captivated by the history behind it, from the alabaster lamps to the piece of the Giants Causeway. Soon afterwards, Judith sent us an email explaining that the Grotto needed volunteer tour guides and I jumped at the chance to share everything I knew about Pope and his Grotto with others. The team of trustees and volunteers could not have been more welcoming.

"There is a real sense of teamwork as everybody wants to help with the restoration work and also sharing what we know with the visitors".

Trustees

Trustees are responsible for fundraising, the management of the grotto and its conservation. The Trust meets six times a year and trustees work on projects and administration between meetings. If you have legal, fundraising or marketing skills you will be especially welcome as a trustee.

If you're interested in becoming either a volunteer or a trustee, please email us at

jobs@popesgrotto.org.uk