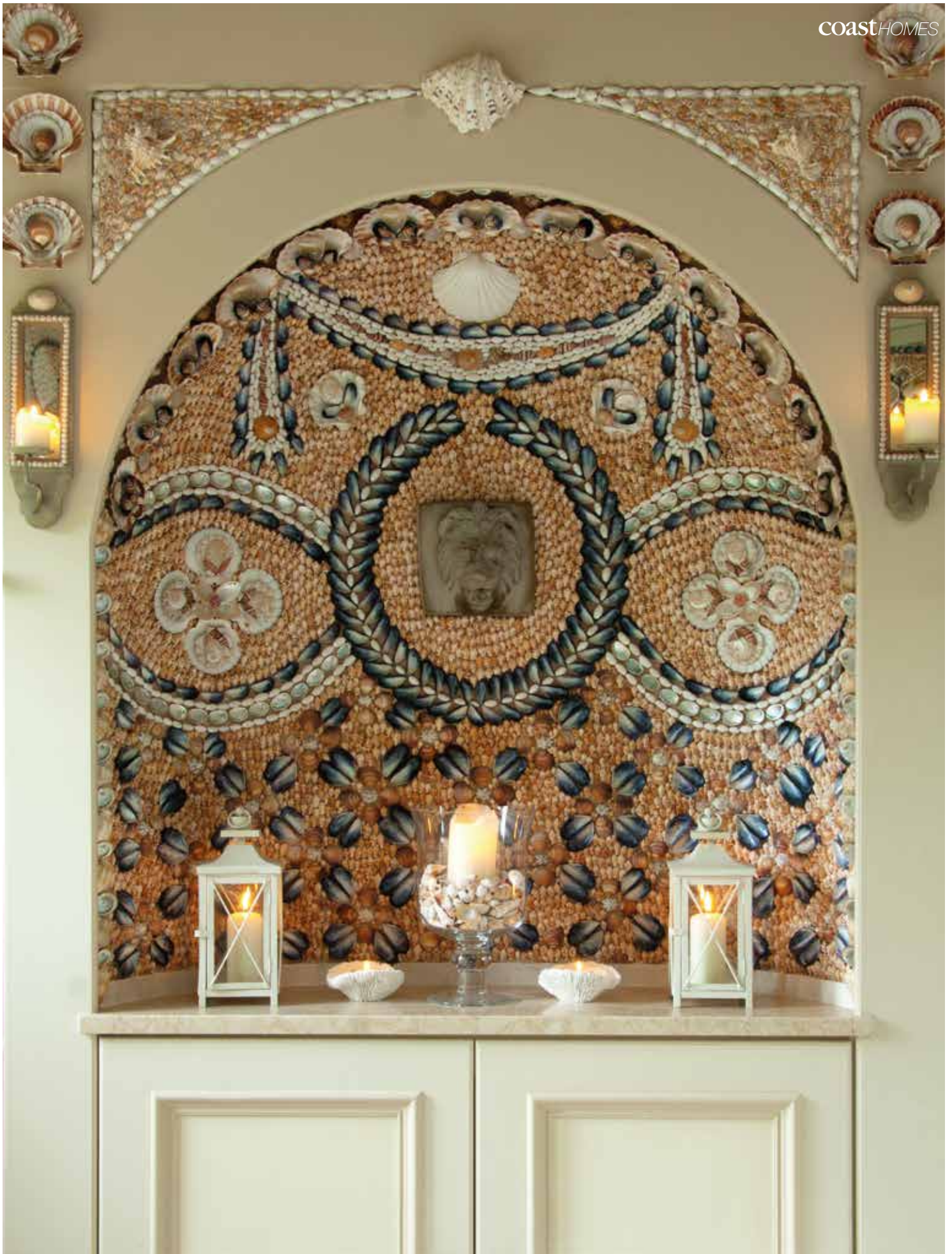
A woman with long brown hair, wearing a blue cardigan over a striped top, is lighting a candle in a white, shell-shaped holder. She is standing in front of a wall covered in various shells, including scallops, limpets, and mussels. The scene is lit with warm, ambient light, creating a cozy atmosphere. The woman is wearing several bracelets and a watch. In the background, a glass vase with water and shells is visible on a surface.

## SHELL'S ANGEL

Scallop, limpet and mussel shells have a long decorative tradition in follies and grottoes. Now artist LINDA FENWICK has used them to great effect in her own shell house, which becomes a *magical space* in the evenings

WORDS *Jacky Hobbs* PHOTOGRAPHS *Michelle Garrett*



ABOVE The shell alcove had to be pieced together in situ. A stone lion's head encircled with a mussel shell garland forms the centre piece OPPOSITE Linda prepares the Shell House for her evening guests. The 'coral' tealight holder is in fact fake, but works well here – accessories throughout are seashore themed



ABOVE The richly embellished Shell House has cathedral-like qualities – the main alcove works as an altar focal point. The shell panels are framed with painted woodwork (Farrow & Ball Matchstick and Joa's White), which highlights the intricate shellwork; iridescent abalone shells are juxtaposed with matt limpets



ENTER *and you are* DAZZLED by THOUSANDS of OPALESCENT SHELLS ARRANGED *in* INTRICATE PATTERNS

The plain, gingerbread-house exterior of Linda Fenwick's shell house belies the wonder within. Enter and you are immediately dazzled by walls, floors and ceilings decorated with thousands of opalescent shells arranged in intricate patterns. There are swags of cowrie shells, lacework panels of criss-crossed razor clams, galaxies of starry limpets, circles of indigo mussel shells and iridescent abalones, and layered fans of scallop shells, all painstakingly positioned by hand.

Linda's custom-built shell house at the bottom of her garden in North Yorkshire is part of the revival in the ancient tradition of decorating with shells, which dates back to Ancient Rome, continued through Renaissance Italy and reached a zenith in the follies of British landowners in the 18th and 19th centuries. Today, there are some 250 surviving historic shell houses, many of which have fallen into disrepair, but new shell artists such as Linda and Blott Kerr-Wilson are spearheading their restoration and creating new works of their own. Blott Kerr-Wilson, for example, has restored the shell house at Cilwendeg Mansion in Wales (see overleaf for more), and created the Shell House at Ballymaloe Cookery School in Ireland fashioned entirely from spent shells from the classes.

HEAVEN AND SHELLS

American-born Linda started collecting shells on Shell Beach, Sanibel Island, in Florida, as a child. When her sister moved to Hawaii, Linda's frequent visits there grew her collection further. Marriage and a move to England meant more beautiful shells to gather, this time from British beaches. This lifetime collection



TOP RIGHT The grand stone pillars and veranda outside The Shell House were added to complement the interior



THE IRIDESCENT SHELLS SPARKLE *and* SHIMMER FROM CANDLELIGHT THROWN *from* SHELL-FILLED HURRICANE LANTERNS *and* SHELLS HOLDING TEALIGHTS

has been put to good use in Linda's house of shells that she created with the help of builder Colin Thomas of CWT Joinery. After Linda had sketched out her design, Colin drew it to scale on the designated panel so she could fix the shells with a mixture of tile adhesive and PVA glue. Her choice for each panel was dictated by the effect she wanted to achieve: smaller, neutral-toned shells were used to create subtle, textural designs; more prominent shells such as cowries, razor shells and abalones were used for bolder patterns, and scallops with their rich coral colour, and indigo mussels were added as colourful accents. The shape and form of the shells determined patterns: mussels suited circlets and garlands, while cowries made good swags and smaller scallops the prettiest rosettes.

Five panels sit above each of the five windows and one member of her family (four children and husband James) has personalised each one. Son Edward, for example, has fashioned his panel from tiny star-like limpets, with a circlet of pearlescent abalone shells, and James's panel is made of a combination of mussels and abalones with a mussel and scallop centrepiece and his initials etched in plaster. Even Crumble the dog has managed an enthusiastic plaster paw print.

The panels were screwed into position, with the occasional shell removed and replaced to hide screw heads that hold giant clam shells and other large specimens in place. The more complex concave alcove was pieced together in situ. The salvaged fireplace was not only embellished but also encrusted with tiny fossilised shells and vents disguised

with clam shells. Clean areas of stone and woodwork counterbalance the intricate and detailed shellwork, and the marble floor is discreetly inlaid with mother-of-pearl squares.

A TWINKLY ENTERTAINMENT SPACE

The house sits in the garden, close to the main house, making for easy access and transfer of food from the kitchen when it is transformed into a magical entertainment space in the evenings. The iridescent shells sparkle and shimmer from candlelight thrown from hurricane lanterns and shells holding tealights, and the encrusted ceiling panel is studded with brilliant LED lights, which sparkle like stars. Foldaway tables are draped in surf-fresh aqua plaid linens laid with coral-patterned plates and silvered-shell salt and pepper cellars with matching spoons. Inevitably, seafood is served – Whitby crab and lobsters are favourites, completing the shellfish theme.

With this project behind her, Linda has now started her own business creating bespoke houses for other people. Whatever she designs next, you can be sure that the tradition of shell houses is in safe hands.

*The Shell House is open as part of the NGS open day on 6 May and 17 June this year (ngs.org.uk). For more on Linda Fenwick Shell Design, see lindafenwickshelldesign.com. For more on Blott Kerr-Wilson, see blottshellhouses.com.*

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FROM TOP LEFT The ceiling has a raised atrium, which allows daylight to flood into the Shell House – LED star lights twinkle at night; candlelight in storm and hurricane lanterns gives a warm glow to the alcove; Linda hosts regular supper parties here; extra shells adorn accessories

## 4 SHELL GROTTOES TO VISIT

### 1 The Shell House Hermitage, Cilwendeg Mansion, Pembrokeshire.

Built in the 1820s as a reading room, it has been restored to its original splendour, decorated with designs made from native shells, minerals and glass shards ([thetempletrust.org](http://thetempletrust.org)).

### 2 The Shell Grotto, Margate, Kent.

A subterranean series of passageways clad with more than four million cockles, whelks, mussels and oyster shells. Twenty metres of tunnels lead to an 'altar room', which was discovered in 1835, but its origin remains a mystery ([shellgrotto.co.uk](http://shellgrotto.co.uk)).

### 3 The Shell Grotto, Pontypool, Torfaen.

A restored 19th-century summerhouse, visited by the Prince of Wales in 1882 and later by King George VII. Its fan vault is coated with thousands of shells and stalactites from local caves ([torfaen.gov.uk](http://torfaen.gov.uk)).

### 4 The Shell Garden, St Aubin, Jersey.

Awash with dolphins, mermaids and seahorses created from locally collected shells, which cover miniature churches and windmills built over a series of terraces by Colin Soudain in 1957 ([jersey.co.uk](http://jersey.co.uk)).



ABOVE The Shell House makes a sumptuous dining room, complete with a real fire for cosy evenings. The atrium brings height and drama to the shell-encrusted building – diners are never sure whether to eat or admire their surroundings. Linda had the wall sconces made to her own design