

A la Ronde – a brief history



A la Ronde is an 18th-century, 16-sided house near Lypstone in the ownership of the National Trust. The house was built in 1795/6 for two spinster cousins, Jane and Mary Parminter. It is a Grade I listed building, as are the adjacent Point-In-View chapel, school and almshouses, together with a manse, which were also built by the cousins. The gardens are Grade II listed in the National Register of Historic Parks and Gardens.

The Parminter family, which can be traced back in North Devon as far back as 1600, had acquired considerable wealth as merchants. Jane was the daughter of Barnstaple wine merchant, John Parminter, who had a business in Lisbon, where she was born in 1750. Jane grew up in London and became guardian to her cousin Mary who was born in 1767 but orphaned at a young age. After her father's death, Jane decided to embark on the Grand Tour in 1874 accompanied by her invalid sister Elizabeth, her younger cousin Mary, and a female friend, Miss Colville. Over several years these intrepid women explored France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland and possibly Spain and Portugal, before returning to England. Sadly, Elizabeth died soon afterwards.

The two cousins became greatly attached to each other and in 1795, inspired by their travels, and in particular by the sixth-century Byzantine Basilica of San Vitale at Ravenna, Jane and Mary made plans to build themselves a rural retreat, which would remind them of their tour and provide a home for their many souvenirs. They negotiated the purchase of 28 acres of land near Exmouth with magnificent views over the Exe estuary. They had decided to create a 'ferme ornée', or 'ornamental farm', on the site and to live out the remainder of their lives together in a thatched and whitewashed sixteen-sided villa that was designed to exactly reflect their ideas and experiences.

The house, completed in about 1796, consists of 20 rooms, the ground floor ones radiating out from a 10.7 metres (35 ft) high hallway, named "The Octagon". The lower ground floor housed a wine cellar, strong room and kitchen and an octagonal room on

the upper floor housed an intricate hand-crafted Shell Gallery. Between the main rooms were triangular-shaped closets with diamond-shaped windows. Much of the internal decoration was produced by the two cousins, whose handicraft skills were excellent. The house also contained many objects brought back by the cousins from their Grand Tour.

In their years spent together at A la Ronde, Jane and Mary lived secluded and somewhat eccentric lives, indulging their passion for design, creating the shell gallery and an ornate feather frieze, along with mosaic work, papercuts and other crafted items.

The cousins did not stop at building a house, however, and began to build a combined chapel, school, and dwelling houses nearby. This ambitious project, dubbed 'Point in View', was still unfinished by the time Jane died in 1811, aged 61 years. She was buried at the chapel. The school opened in 1826 and Mary continued to live at A la Ronde until her death in 1849, aged 82, when she was also buried in the chapel that she had built with Jane. The school continued until 1901 when new government legislation made uncertified schools like Point in View untenable.

Mary left a will of extraordinary length and detail, but with two principal aims: to preserve A la Ronde and its contents intact, and to allow only “unmarried kinswomen” to inherit it. This condition held firm through the ownership by Sophia and Jane Hurlock, until 1886 when the house was transferred from Stella Tudor (nee Reichel) to her brother the Reverend Oswald Reichel. The sole male owner in over two hundred years was responsible for substantial (but carefully thought out) structural changes. These included the construction of a water tower and laundry room, the installation of a bathroom and central heating, the construction of upstairs bedrooms with dormer windows, the fitting of first-floor windows, a heavy pulley dumb-waiter and speaking tubes, the replacement of the original thatch with roof tiles and the addition of an external catwalk.

The last private owner of the property, Ursula Tudor-Perkins, removed all but one of the very large central heating radiators installed by Reichel, and with the purchase of the property by the National Trust in 1991 came the restoration of the wall-coverings to the more authentic colours of the time, as well as creating a virtual tour of the delicate Shell Gallery on the uppermost storey of the house to allow observation without risk of damage.

A family tree, showing how the ownership has been passed down through the generations, is shown on the following page.

Owners of A La Ronde
(shown in capitals in the diagram below)

