

# WIDOW SPINKS AND HER GROTTO

Dianne Barre

This rare, perhaps unique, example of an early nineteenth-century garden grotto became an attraction to entice customers to a business showroom in Derby.

**W**illiam Spinks was a manufacturer of fluorspar (alabaster) ornaments in Derby. Following his death in 1811, his widow Frances (1761–c.1820) continued to run the business in King Street. She was an enterprising businesswoman and advertising in the *Derby Mercury*, she drew attention to an attraction – the ‘elegant grotto’ behind the manufactory showrooms:

## ‘An Elegant Grotto’

*The Building is of an octagonal form, with a pyramidal Roof, terminating in a glazed Dome; from whence the light is transmitted internally through polished circular Specimens of choice transparent Fluors, the various and beautiful hues of which are by this means shewn to great advantage. It receives light also from four Gothic Windows of transparent Paintings on Glass, representing the Four Seasons. The internal decorations of the Walls consist of fine Specimens of the Crystallizations of Minerals, Stalactites, etc. collected at a very considerable expence from various parts of the Kingdom, but particularly Derbyshire. Also a great diversity of Corals, Shells, and other marine Productions, from many different parts of the World. And opposite the Entrance, is a curious Chimney-piece supported by Columns of Alabaster cut in diamonds*

This gem was available to view at 1s (5p) and 6d (2.5p) for children. With its ‘combination of natural and artificial Beauties’ this grotto/summer-house appeared to have been a success, as soon afterwards Mrs Spinks announced proudly that it ‘has lately been enriched with several additional Curiosities’ at no extra cost to view.

However, three years later the grotto was for sale.

## ‘An Entire New Grotto’

Some suitable aspirant to gentility must have acquired this masterpiece, to be admired by friends and visitors, for the following year (1819) Mrs Spinks announced that ‘she has just completed the erection of an Entire New Grotto which is now ready for exhibition in her Flower Garden’. It seems to have been a close copy of the original, but now its display was foremost:



Shells were a popular decoration for grottoes such as Mrs Spinks’, and were highly decorative, as can be seen in this photograph of the shell-encrusted surround to a window in the Shell Gallery at A La Ronde, Devon.

*The Grotto is of an octagonal form, approached by a group of romantic rock work, and is enriched and ornamented by a choice and valuable collection of British and Exotic Minerals, including a complete variety of the produce of Derbyshire, comprising Fluors, Spars, Stalactites, Fossils etc. besides a curious collection of rare Shells, Corals, Sea Weeds, and other Marine productions.*

Admission price was held at 1s per adult and 6d per child.

There were no more advertisements after this and the grotto was for sale in 1822. Frances Spinks and her remarkable grotto deserve further investigation. ●

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## Further Reading

All the information is drawn from a contemporary newspaper, *Derby Mercury*: issues 14 March and 29 May 1811; 25 July 1811; 21 April 1814; 13 and 25 July 1815; 13 August 1818; 24 June 1819; 3 July 1822 accessed online via British Newspapers Archive