

Lonely this Christmas? Hire an 18th century hermit

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The hermitage, Spetchley Park, Worcestershire

For those who are wondering what to buy the person who has everything this Christmas, a University of Leicester academic has suggested one of

history's most bizarre garden accessories: an 'ornamental' hermit.

The hermit could even help manage your winter blues as, according to Professor Gordon Campbell of the University's School of English, the wealthy 18th century landowners who indulged in the practice would 'outsource' their melancholy while enjoying life to the full.

The author of "The Hermit in the Garden: From Imperial Rome to Garden Gnome," Professor Campbell has investigated the little-known history of the ornamental hermit, a tradition with its roots in Ancient Rome but still present in the form of the humble garden gnome.

In the 18th century, it was highly fashionable for owners of country estates to commission architectural follies for their landscape gardens, many of which included hermitages comprising of a small cottage, cave or contemplative gazebo.

Often, landowners would inhabit their hermitages with imaginary or, in some cases, real hermits.

Professor Campbell explains: "One needed an estate and a taste for restrained ostentation, and one could certainly show off one's hermit to visitors.



The Hermitage at Oriel Temple

"Hermits were often hired for seven years, required to refrain from cutting their hair or washing and had to live austerely. They could receive up to £600 in return, enough to never work again.

"It meant that the busy CEO could outsource his melancholy, contemplative side, embodying it in a hermit for hire. The ideal of living frugally did not therefore inhibit the good life. It's a bit like bankers carving turkeys for the homeless on Christmas Day."

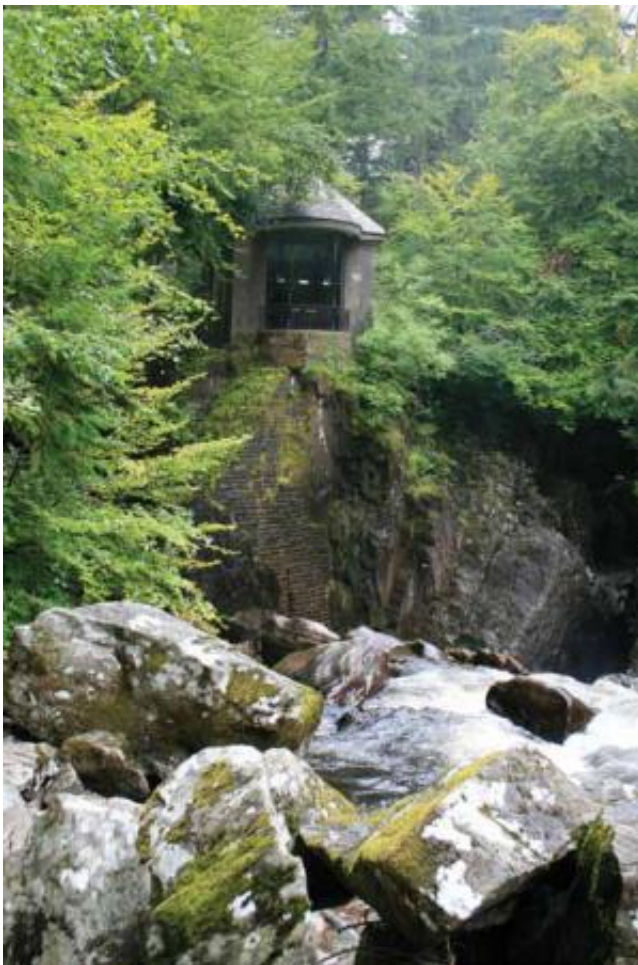
Despite this, Professor Campbell argues that the motivations behind hiring a hermit reflect a lost appreciation of emotional depth, or the 'pleasing melancholy'.

Professor Campbell said: "In the eighteenth century, melancholy became highly desirable but the cult of pleasing melancholy has since disappeared. We now refer to the mental state as depression, and that is a

clinical condition that is anything but pleasing.

"This idea that melancholy could be profound was not new in the eighteenth century. Hamlet's preference for dressing entirely in black is not meant to be a fashion statement, but rather than indication of his melancholy, and the implication of that state of mind was emotional depth.

"The idea of keeping an ornamental hermit in one's garden is an eighteenth-century phenomenon, but I trace the idea from its origins in Hadrian's villa near Tivoli up to the present."



Dunkeld Hermitage

The idea of hiring a hermit may not sit well with modern sensibilities but for those tempted to embrace their own melancholic side, a simple hermitage may suffice.

Professor Campbell adds: "Many hermits were imagined, so the hermitage would be stocked with some eyeglasses and some reading material for the use of a hermit who had perpetually stepped out for a moment.

"In the same spirit, we leave out sherry and biscuits for Santa, and some carrots for his reindeer."

And of course, one could continue the tradition at a much cheaper cost with the purchase of a simple [garden](#) gnome.

"The Hermit in the Garden: From Imperial Rome to Garden Gnome" by Professor Gordon Campbell is published by OUP.

Provided by University of Leicester

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