

# Flights of fancy follies



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Whether follies are great monuments to foolishness or foolish monuments to greatness, many of them are in serious disrepair, but a new group aims to conserve those that remain

ONE OF THE most curious things about follies is that they tend to resist any attempt to define and classify them. According to Belfast architect James Howley, who has written a book about the follies and garden buildings of Ireland, it's that very inconsistency that accounts for their charm.

Follies really do come in all shapes and sizes – from shell-clad grottos, gazebos and hermitages to sham castles, towering obelisks, elaborate Greco-Romanesque temples and exotic-looking mausoleums.

Most are delightfully pointless and that, paradoxically enough, is the point of them: they often have no functional purpose. A certain eccentricity is common too – hence architectural historian Stuart Barton's ambivalent notion of follies as “foolish monuments to greatness and great monuments to foolishness”. But Lydia Wilson's simple description – “follies are joyful little buildings which aim to please” – probably comes closest to capturing the spirit of the things.

Howley says that Irish landowners got into the folly habit under the influence of their 18th-century English counterparts, who were in thrall to the Romantic idea of “artistically moulding” the landscape. But part of the delight of constructing a folly was that you didn't need to be constrained in either form or function, so builders were free to go wild with their imaginations, lifting ideas from Egyptian, Chinese or Greek architecture, and often coming up with decidedly strange-looking results.

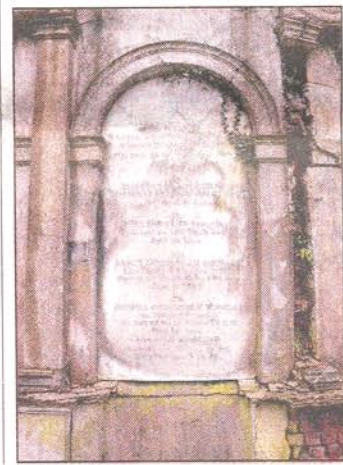
It was once claimed that Ireland has more follies to the acre than anywhere else in the world, but these days many of them are quietly crumbling to pieces in forgotten corners of the country. In response to this situation, the Follies Trust, a charity in Co Armagh, was formed in 2006 by a group of people who share a passion for what they call “this motley collection of unusual buildings”. The plan is to encourage the conservation, preservation, restoration and protection of Ireland's follies before it's too late: as the Trust explains, while follies are part of the intricate structure of our history, “because they serve no useful purpose, they are too often regarded as expendable”.

**THE TRUST'S** first project is to restore three grade B-plus listed mausoleums in Knockbreda churchyard in south Belfast. They come highly recommended – architectural historian James Stevens Curl describes them as “the oddest and finest of buildings in the genre in Ulster . . . sumptuous yet refined, ostentatious yet delicate”. Work on two of the three, the Greg and the Rainey mausoleums, started in September 2008.

Knockbreda churchyard stands on a windy hillside near one of south Belfast's busiest shopping centres. In contrast to the frenetic commercial activity just across the four-lane road, Knockbreda feels like a lonely, largely for-



gotten spot, and the two mausoleums have evidently been rescued just in time. The third – the Waddell Cunningham mausoleum – looks like a wildly over-the-top stone wedding cake, exuberantly decorated with urns and spiky pyramids. But it is hopelessly dilapidated, the weeds growing out of



its roof making a mockery of the exotic design. According to Dr Finbar McCormick, senior lecturer in archaeology at Queen's University Belfast and a director of the Follies Trust, Knockbreda was once considered a most desirable spot to take your final rest.

“This was the place to be after you were dead,” he says. “Lots of people who were buried elsewhere around Belfast were moved up here in the late 18th and early 19th centuries because this is the finest graveyard, with a great panorama over Belfast.”

Evidently, to have a fancy mausoleum here was the height of social one-upmanship. Where did the inspiration for such remarkable-looking monuments come from? According to James Stevens Curl, the structures bear a strong resemblance to tombs in Calcutta in India, where many local merchants and soldiers had served. He believes that the similarities are so great they can't be accidental.

The inhabitants of the mauso-

leums were prominent local captains of industry – Thomas Greg (died 1796), John Rainey (died 1782) and Waddell Cunningham (died 1797), and they were interred beneath the ornate structures along with a number of family members. Although Rainey remains an obscure figure, we know that Greg and Cunningham were business partners; together they created an Irish-American trading company, importing wools and linen.

**BUT SOME** of their dealings were decidedly shady: despite loud declarations of loyalty to king and country, they owned and traded with piratic privateers, and Cunningham dabbled in the slave trade; in fact, some historians claim that he even tried to open a slave-trading company in Belfast.

Raising the necessary cash is always a struggle for restoration projects, and as the Trust's chair, Primrose Wilson, points out, finding funding to restore follies is an even greater challenge since

**The Trust's first project is to restore three grade B-plus listed mausoleums in Knockbreda churchyard, south Belfast.** Photograph: Charles McQuillan/Pacemaker

they tend not to meet modern funding criteria. “It's been something of a nightmare . . . we have applied to huge numbers of trusts and organisations, and there have been a lot of problems,” she says.

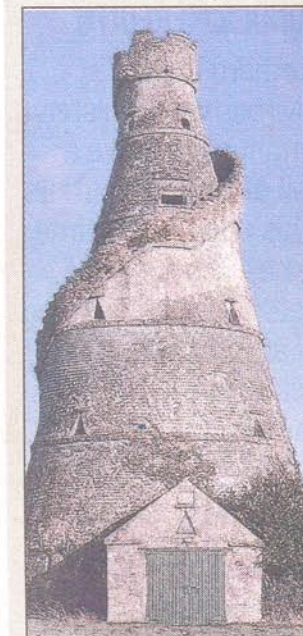
While the Follies Trust has succeeded in securing funding for two of the mausoleums – from bodies including the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Awards for All, as well as donations from descendants of the families interred – money for the third is still being sought. That means lots of fundraising barbecues, says McCormick, as well as a series of guest lectures planned for 2009. The Trust is determined to rescue the Cunningham mausoleum before it finally gives up the ghost.

Once you've been bitten by the folly bug, it's clearly a passion that lasts a lifetime. And these, often overlooked, little architectural gems need all the help they can get.

For more information on the Follies Trust, see [www.follies-trust.org](http://www.follies-trust.org).

## THE WEIRD AND THE WONDERFUL

**The Wonderful Barn (below) near Leixlip, Co Kildare**  
This is arguably the most eccentric looking building in Ireland. Built in 1743 as a famine-relief scheme by Katherine Conolly of Castletown, widow of William ‘Speaker’ Conolly. It was conceived not only as a functional grain store but as an architectural eye-catcher. It rises to a height of 21m (70ft) in a tapering, corkscrew cone, and is encircled by a cantilevered staircase with a crow's nest viewing gallery.



**The mausoleum of Robert Cooke in Reynella churchyard, Co Westmeath**

This mausoleum was built by Adolphus Cooke (1792-1876) of Cookesborough to house the remains of his father, Robert. Adolphus Cooke was a noted and colourful local eccentric and landowner with a strong belief in reincarnation. Reputedly, Adolphus Cooke designed this tomb to look like a beehive, as he believed his father would be reincarnated as a bee. Adolphus himself later had massive fox holes built around his estate in the belief that he himself would be reincarnated as a fox.

**The “Metal Man” beacon in Rosses Point, Co Sligo**

This navigation beacon was built in 1821 in the form of a colourful Royal Navy petty officer guiding ships into Sligo Harbour. Made from painted cast-iron, it's a sturdy construction that is an important part of Sligo maritime history.

Additional sources: [www.igs.ie](http://www.igs.ie) and [www.buildingsofireland.ie](http://www.buildingsofireland.ie)