

Serendipity in Waterford & Wexford

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Robert Louis Stevenson once said that ‘to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive’. For the essence of a good folly tour is good company, good food, amusing and informative characters, and stunning and eccentric architecture: this optimum combination of elements is not always achieved, but there’s a land not far off Britain’s shores where much joy can be found for the folly lover: Ireland. Arriving at all one’s intended destination is not always necessary as the fun is in the hunt, and the unexpected follies along the way add to the enjoyment.

The good company came in the form of twenty friends of the **Follies Trust**; the good food in the picnics they laid on as well as the fine cuisine of Zak’s Restaurant at the Athenaeum House Hotel overlooking Waterford Harbour where we stayed, The most succulent delicacies being forequarter of lamb followed by whole pear nestling in a crumble. After such refined victuals, the characters and architecture are now described:

The weekend began on Friday 6th June when we met in Waterford. Guided by **John O’Connell** the conservation architect from Dublin, we first visited **Morris House**, now the **Chamber of Commerce House**. This imposing, classical, six-bay, four-storey house was designed by John Roberts, a local architect, around 1785 for a rich merchant, William Morris of Rosduff. It was purchased subsequently for a fraction of its original building cost by the future Waterford Chamber of Commerce who altered and renovated it in 1830 adding the oval dome above the spectacular cantilevered staircase. The plasterwork in the building is very high quality and it is a tribute to the institutions who have used it since that it has been so carefully maintained. The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, the Irish government body responsible for listing buildings writes that *‘Although later embellishments to the façade are not part of Roberts’ original scheme, his grand composition, a four-storey house with a side fan-lit columned entrance doorway, rivals anything to be found in Irish domestic architecture of the time.’*¹

From there we walked to the **Anglican Cathedral** and thence to the former **Bishop’s Palace**, in the Mall. In Ireland in the eighteenth century there were a number of Bishops who undertook grandiose building schemes and this building was one such. Bishop Este who, when appointed to the See of Waterford and Lismore in 1740, commissioned the building had overseen a major remodelling of the Palace in Kilkenny previously. In an issue of the Irish Arts Review **William Laffan** explains that, amongst these schemes, this building is exceptional. *‘Rarely, .. is the wealth and temporal power of the Episcopal bench made so manifest through architectural splendour, as in the enormous palace built in Waterford by [Edward Lovett] Pearce’s pupil Richard Castle which is generally acknowledged as the finest example of the typology in Ireland: even now it dominates the Mall like the residenz of some Rhineland Bishop-Elector.’* Laffan also comments *‘on the orientation of the new palace – the fact that the more ornate of its eight-bay facades faces out towards the Mall rather than in towards the Cathedral which it purports to serve – is symbolic of the outward looking and expansionist city that was Waterford in the mid 18th century.’*²

Bishop Este died prematurely in 1745 and his architect Richard Castle in 1751. His successor, Bishop Chevenix, appointed the local architect, John Roberts, to complete the building. Although it had a 999-year lease, in 1920 the decision was taken by the Church of Ireland for the Bishop *‘to move from this conspicuous site to a more unassuming residence.’*³

The building was subsequently used as part of Bishop Foy's school and later as Council offices. *'Having suffered its fair share from the vicissitudes of time and institutional use, it has recently undergone a triumphant restoration ... as one of the most attractive small museums in the state. Part of a planned trilogy under the banner of the city's Museum of Treasures, the Bishop's Palace focuses on the decorative arts of 18th- and 19th-century Ireland.'*⁴

Eamonn McEneaney, the Director of the **Waterford Museum of Treasures**, met and escorted us around in a double act with John O'Connell who was involved in its restoration. They regaled us with amazing anecdotes and tales of treasures discovered during the demolition of the medieval cathedral in 1774. These were fifteenth century vestments hidden when Oliver Cromwell laid siege to Waterford in 1649 and found 125 years later!

On the second day we got in our cars and travelled around County Waterford, a land of undulating terrain watered by numerous rivers. The drive through the ancient demesne of **Curraghmore** is long and a little rough, making one believe one has entered a forbidden land, but eventually one sees the façade of the house rise up: it has an enormous courtyard bounded by dependencies, and on top of the house, the Stag of St Hubert, to be found in the family crest of the Earls of Waterford, carved by Sir Richard Boehm. What is unusual about this representation of a stag is the crucifix between its antlers: it was this depiction of Christ on the Cross that saved Curraghmore from destruction in 1922 when two members of the IRA arrived at the house intent on blowing it up. When they got out of their car they saw the crucifix, crossed themselves and were overcome by the fear of God if they carried out their plan. So Curraghmore was spared, and it's good job too, for the treasures that lie within are a wonder to behold.

We were fortunate to be guided by Basil Croeser who, despite his South African roots, had immersed himself in the workings and heritage of the house and demesne, and had become very knowledgeable about its history and artefacts. He first showed us the entrance hall with its chaos of walking sticks, riding hats, coats and hunting horns. It had a lived-in air, and a slight whiff of damp as paint was peeling from the twelve feet thick walls. Elephant feet and tusks, stuffed heads of deer, a fox and other game reminded one that hunting was what maintained this estate in former times, with all the socialising of hunt balls and suppers: now only pheasant is shot. Portraits of the family by Sir Thomas Lawrence, as well as more recent paintings such as the current Earl's father, in his red hunting coat and with piercing blue eyes. Dead since 1934, the current, or 8th, Earl was orphaned at a very young age, and has lived without his father for 80 years.

The 8th Earl appeared and greeted us from his wheelchair, such is his advanced age, and we felt privileged to be shown round such a beautiful house and estate with so much history and heritage attached to it. The grounds of Curraghmore are relatively simple and unadorned by flowers or decorative plants, though the trees are large, including the tallest sequoia in Ireland, and the enormous rhododendrons were flowering colourfully. However, the jewel of the demesne, and its only folly, is the **Shell House** which stands in a ferny glade about a hundred metres from the house. Its creator was Catherine de la Poer, Lady Tyrone, a formidable character in many respects: Born in 1700, at the age of 15 she faced off a small army hunting for Roman Catholics which had invaded the demesne and were at the point of firing their cannon. To spare her family and house, she had to choose a man among the soldiers to marry, and as luck would have it she chose one Marcus Beresford, a tolerant

Protestant who wisely kept the crucifix above the statue of the stag on top of the house, little knowing that two hundred years later it would save the house from terrorists.

The Shell House is one of the most remarkable examples of this art form in the world: a riot of decoration, with shells tightly encrusting the entire surface of the walls and ceiling. There is a small entrance lobby from which one enters the main chamber, cruciform in shape, with three large niches and four small ones. There are all types of shells, both small and large, local and from many parts of the world, brought back on ships from British colonies such as the Seychelles and St Helena. Unlike in many shell houses, the shells have remained fixed in situ thanks to a particularly strong adhesive made from ox's blood mixed with pig's and cow's urine.

In the centre of the chamber is **John van Nost's** white marble statue of Catherine de la Poer holding a scroll which states that 'in two hundred & sixty one days these shells were put up by the proper hands of the Rt.Hon.Cath^{ne} Countess of Tyrone 1754'. It is unlikely that she did it alone in such a short time, for she had several children to assist her in this Herculean labour, and there was probably a good deal of scaffolding to erect and then clamber over in order to reach the high ceilings.

We finally left for the Waterford family chapel at **Clonnegam**, unusually located a couple of miles outside the Curraghmore demesne overlooking the house. Here John O'Connell came to the fore with his fulsome explanations of the tombs of the Waterfords, including the sad and poignant reclining sculpture of a family member embracing her son in death, both perishing in the agonising act of childbirth. Due to fallen trees blocking our path, we failed to reach the nearby **Le Poer Tower**, a round tower built with techniques from the early Christian period by George, Earl of Tyrone in 1785. (Note: One can spell the Waterford family's surname alternatively Le Poer or De la Poer).

John O'Connell persuaded us to make an unscheduled stop in the small village of **Fiddown** where there was a small chapel. He knew a man with the key to the chapel which was not normally open to the public, and so we stopped and John knocked on the man's door, who emerged smartly dressed in tweed jacket and flat cap. Inside the externally unprepossessing chapel were the ornate tombs of the Ponsonbys, the Earls of Bessborough, beautifully sculpted, but we were told that that they were a mean lot, turning their tenants off the land when they were unable to pay the rent during the Great Famine.

Then a young man emerged from the nearby Toad Hall, so-named for the wind that blew through the willows and the large colony of frogs which lived in the river that flowed past the house. This was the son of the man with the key, who turned up at the door of the chapel with a big smile on his face saying: 'I've haven't seen so many people in this chapel since the day of my wedding eleven years ago!' He then proceeded to show parts of the chapel which we might otherwise not have seen including the small pagan head set in the back wall. This showed that the site of the chapel had originally been a pagan place of worship. We stood on the roof of the crypt of a much larger church which extended from the road much further into the churchyard, but this had been demolished and the present chapel had been built at which time the young man ensured that the small pagan head was incorporated into the façade by the builders.

We then made a detour to **Lismore** in the far west of County Waterford where the Duke of Devonshire has his weekend retreat from Chatsworth. It's a castle that stands proud over the

Blackwater River once teeming with salmon. In winter the ice would be chipped off the flooded meadows next to the river and stored in the **Icehouse**, another unexpected encounter to be found in a public park in the centre of the town. Lunch was more than an hour late but no one seemed to mind. We just carried on upwards towards the Knockmealdown Mountains, whose name caused some amusement among my parents a long time ago: 'Knock me down?' 'No, 'Meal^down with AL in the name!' But we were going in the wrong direction, and had to turn round and carry on till we found a large open meadow next to a babbling brook. The sun came out and the picnic supplied by Primrose was delicious and heartening.

Up a neighbouring valley was located one of the most extravagant and useless of Ireland's follies, **Ballysaggartmore Folly Bridge**. This crosses no more than a trickle of water, and has two large castellated gatehouses at either end, neither of which has rooms which could have served much purpose, being too small and awkward in shape, and the fireplaces too shallow to draw smoke up their chimneys. It was not intended to serve as a gate lodge either, as a separate **Gate Lodge** was built a few hundred metres away along the drive. Arthur Keily was the landowner who, in 1837, probably wanted to rival his brother's Strancally Castle at Knockamore¹ but ran out of money before he was able to build his own castle, so these two extravagant buildings stand as a testament to his folly. The architect is uncertain, but he was surely at the top of his form as they show some fine detail and the curve of the Folly Bridge, with the lodges at either end, suggests a clever use of perspective which makes the ensemble bigger than it really is.

As with its counterpart in Britain, the **Irish Landmark Trust** has transformed some of the most woe-begone buildings in the Emerald Isle. Tumbledown ruins, wrecks of once glorious buildings, and simple buildings with little more than four walls standing in scrubland, are the raw material from which more than twenty-five holiday homes have risen like phoenixes from the ashes, including a flat in the well-known folly **Helen's Tower** at Clandeboye, and there are more 'in the pipeline'. We were honoured to have in the party **Camilla McAleese**, a Trustee of the Irish Landmark Trust, to explain the work of the trust and how they are winning funds to restore Ireland's architectural heritage. One of the smallest in the portfolio is the **Salterbridge Gate Lodge** at which we stopped near Cappoquin on the road back to Waterford. It was built c.1849 by the Chearnly family, who owned the estate from the mid-18th Century until the 1950s. Like many gate lodges, its function was to indicate to the passer-by the good standing and taste of the owner, and to display some of the features of the work of the architect to be seen in grander scale in the big house. This was captured again in the reconstruction by **Paddy Shaffrey**, an architect friend of the Follies Trust who accompanied us on the tour. Book yourself a stay there or at any of the Trust's other properties at www.irishlandmark.com.

A gatehouse with a public road running through it is a rare and often beautiful thing, even in Britain where the Triumphal Gateway at Fonthill comes to mind. In County Waterford there is also a rare and beautiful gatehouse that is the **Hindu Gothic Gate Lodge at Dromana**, standing at the end of a bridge over the Finnisk River. It's rarity comes from its style, a curious mixture of a copper plated dome and minarets, coupled with ogival arched windows. It is missing the balustrades along the parapets, shown in an old photograph displayed on a board at the site, perhaps due to vandalism, from which the Irish Georgian Society rescued it in the 1960s. There's no glazing in the fancy windows, the frames not looking made to take glass. Nevertheless, legend has it that a family member of the owners of Dromana House

lived in the side rooms of the lodge split in two by the public road, reached the age of 160 years, and only died when a cherry tree fell on top of her! Another local story relates that a temporary timber and canvas structure inspired by the Brighton Pavilion was built to welcome home Henry Villiers-Stuart and his bride who had honeymooned in the Sussex resort in 1826. This flimsy pastiche was such a success that it was decided to build a more permanent stone version² to designs prepared by Martin Day in 1849.

Alas, we had spent such a long day folly-hunting that we did not have time to stop and see the monument to the much-fêted greyhound Master McGrath, erected by his owner James Galwey. Instead we rolled into the Athenaeum House Hotel about two hours later than expected, but not too late for another scrumptious gourmet dinner in Zak's Restaurant. But we deserved it!

The Sunday of the weekend saw us start a little later than on the Saturday, heading north to County Wexford, stopping first at the **Brown-Clayton Monument**. We were met by a local farmer who had the key to this prominent column built on a rocky outcrop near Carrickbyrne and within sight of the sea. It was a blustery morning and due to the narrowness and darkness of the spiral staircase only four of the party made it to the top, but these brave few were rewarded with some fine views of the surrounding countryside once they managed to step on a wooden box, so high was the lip of the parapet. This parapet is in fact the top of a massive Corinthian capital which forms the entire top of the column, of which each leaf of the acanthus weighs some 1.3 tonnes.

After being struck by lightning in 1995, it was restored with £¾ million euros from the World Monument Fund and on the advice of Dublin architect (and author of *The Follies and Garden Buildings of Ireland*) James Howley its height was reduced because the fabric had become unstable. It was originally erected in 1839 by Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Brown-Clayton to commemorate his commander General Abercromby who defeated the French in the Napoleonic Wars in Egypt in 1801. Brown-Clayton modelled it closely on the column that he saw in Alexandria which was built to commemorate the Emperor Diocletian in AD 297³. In Wexford, Brown-Clayton commissioned Thomas Cobden to build the column and he imported thirteen Italian masons to fashion its structure, as well as shire horses from Scotland to draw the granite quarried in County Carlow. The monument is now jointly owned by An Taisce, The National Trust for Ireland, and Wexford County Council.

Our next stop was at **Park House** in Ballyboggan on the outskirts of Wexford City, a nineteenth century house set in fine, manicured grounds. However, there is a touch of the unkempt in one corner where the air raid shelter still stands, derelict and tatty, built far too close to the surface of the land to resist any bombs, which in any case never fell here in the Second World War, or the Emergency as it was known in the Republic. In fine condition, there is the **Round Tower**, a small version (about 20 feet high) of the ancient round towers to be found all over Ireland, built probably as watch towers against the many invaders. Here at Park Place the purpose is commemorative, dedicated to James Pierce who died in 1868, one of a family who made agricultural equipment at the Pierce Ironworks Foundry in Wexford. It is overlooked by a small rusticated chamber, barely a grotto for its lack of decoration, but more a place of rest on the circuit around the garden, or in the case of the present owners, a quiet place with a bench on which their son proposed marriage to his girlfriend. Well, it is quite romantic, with its pond beneath and surrounding verdure.

The romanticism continues with a pair of **Rustic Bridges** which cross a stream. Made of random rubble stone walls with round-headed 'gun loop' apertures in their parapets, they are among several features which were rescued from nearby Castleboro House when it was demolished in the early twentieth century and they found their way to Park House. The folly most curious for its combination of two architectural types is the **Loggia-cum-Tower**, dedicated to Martin Pierce in 1907. At the ground level is a three-arched wooden loggia painted black and white, with an opening at its back which you might expect would lead to a staircase leading up the tower, perhaps twenty feet high. But there is no staircase, so we were left to admire from ground level the muted castellations such as an arrowslit, two-lighted window and crenellations at the top. A little way from this folly stands the **Temple**, with Ionic pillars and a pediment surmounted by curiously curved finials. Dedicated to John Pierce in 1926, it stands on a steep mound picturesquely overlooking a pond.

It was with great pleasure that the party was joined by **Peter Pearson** at Park House. His importance in Irish follydom cannot be underestimated, for it was he that engaged James Howley in the subject of follies, encouraged him to write his masterwork, which is dedicated to Pearson, and he even appears in a few of the book's photographs, usually as a distant figure with the aim of showing the scale of the buildings. This artist, writer and historian led us off the planned itinerary, as John O'Connell did the previous day, in a serendipitous way to the **Gate Lodge at Saunderscourt**. A large crumbling ruin first built in the late eighteenth century, and now overlooking a farmyard, it has no logic to its location as no drive ran through it to the main house, once owned by the Earls of Arran, now demolished. The lodge may be saved though, for as Camilla McAleese related to us, the Irish Landmark Trust has taken out a lease to restore it into two holiday homes, one either side of large arch which dominates the building. At least the cracks in the masonry have been stabilised, but there's a lot of work to do to make it habitable.

Occasionally in one's travels one comes across a place so magical and charming that one falls for it with open arms, and its embrace is so firm that it cannot release those who step into its domain. A benign atmosphere surrounds the place like a warm blanket, and at every turn there is a delight ready to entrance the visitor further as he steps inside and finds it more and more difficult to leave. Such a place is **the Deeps**, Peter Pearson's house set in a hidden valley somewhere north of Wexford City, its precise location only known to the few who have managed to find their way there. The name may come from the depth of the local river, or from Dieppe in France from where settlers came to this verdant land back in the mists of time. Approached along a long, narrow lane without a sign indicating where one is going or where one might arrive, one is surprised to find a 1836 Regency house, not high but wide, based on the design of a house near Ephesus in Turkey.

Inside, the house contains the most wonderful collection of architectural curiosities and antiques. A veritable cornucopia of art and architecture, it is full of fragments of masonry, statuary, busts of Greek gods, oddments, decorative friezes, and prints of old Ireland including follies such as the Casino at Marino. Peter showed us a black bust of a man which he rescued in the nick of time from a house which was being demolished in Dublin. Worth little on the open market, but a gem of an item which goes well in this Aladdin's cave of treasures. A visitor was so impressed that he wrote in the visitor's book 'Soane lives again!' making reference to Sir John's depository of architectural curiosities in London.

And then there is the modern art, made by both Peter and his wife Philomena, or Phil to her friends. Decorating the walls are some striking and vibrant landscapes and seascapes, for example depicting ships in harbours. But what caught my eye was the portrait of *The Woman with Birds in Her Hair*. Bats in the belfry? The portrait of an eccentric folly builder? No, for Philomena said it was partly modelled on her brother, at least the top of half of the face, which smiles enigmatically at the beholder.

The house is surrounded by a garden imbued with nature, full of luxuriant plants, statues and curiosities. The patio garden, sunken and leading off the kitchen, is scattered with plants coming out of the cracks in the paving, as well as various pieces of sculpture and classical columns set at the various levels. However, it is the walled kitchen garden which has the greatest air of magic and enchantment: with statuary scattered around a large square plot which has a dividing wall running most of the way though its middle, there are beds with vegetables, apple trees growing high, and some flowers with large, long fronds which curl their way around the masonry and along the paving while others flowers randomly planted among the ordered chaos seem to have grown without any encouragement from humans..

Our final stop was at **Kyle House**, a fine pile overlooking the River Slaney. Greeted by the owner, retired dairy farmer Patrick Radish, the cattle were still very much in evidence and came very close to us as we attempted to approach the **Obelisk of Kyle**, set high on a white rock. The inscription on the base reads as follows:

Sacred to my Friend
GENERAL GEORGE OGLE
and the
INDEPENDENT VOLUNTEERS
of
IRELAND
Who in the face of immediate danger
By the exercise of every Patriotic Virtue
GAVE PEACE and FREEDOM
to their oppressed country
in Grateful Remembrance of these Blessings
This Pillar was erected by
The Rev. Christopher Harvey DD
Anno 1786

With such noble sentiments expressed, it seems inadequate that it is such a simple shaft of stone and reaches only around fifteen feet, though Patrick Radish remembers it embellished with a ball on the top in his youth.

It is there that the company dispersed. We had run out of time to see the Deeps Bridge at Killurin or The Mound of Light, an austere monument erected to commemorate those who fought in the 1798 Rebellion. But that is the nature of serendipity – you see a few follies you don't expect, and never reach those on the planned schedule. Another time perhaps, you say, for you are enriched by the memories and camaraderie of an exceptional folly tour. I am eternally indebted to Primrose Wilson and the friends of Follies Trust for organising and leading such a fascinating weekend.

¹NIAH Waterford p.33

²Irish Arts Review Vol 28. No.3 *Mitres and Mansions* p106-11

³ibid.

⁴ibid.

⁵Howley, James (1993): *The Follies and Garden Buildings of Ireland*. New Haven and London Yale University Press pp193-194.

⁶ibid p90

⁷ibid p24