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Ireland's Follies

Touring the whimsical, intentionally pointless structures known as follies that dot the Irish landscape. **BY Sally Shivan**

I'm staring in awe—and not a little bewilderment—at an artfully stacked arrangement of immense stone arches. The arches are adorned by stone pineapples and eagles, and out of the top rises a single, tall stone spire. The whole creation is massive, 140 feet high and 100 feet wide. This is Conolly's Folly, built in 1740 at Castletown, in County Kildare. It is a striking structure, not quite art, not quite architecture. And it has no purpose whatsoever.

My driver for the day, Frank, is a trim, middle-aged man in a nice gray suit, with shiny black shoes—while I'm in my casual American tourist getup of jeans and hiking shoes. Frank has never seen anything like it. "What is it built for?"

"Nothing," I reply.

"Built for no purpose!" he exclaims. He gets it. I had explained to him earlier what we were after: odd, sort of pointless structures built for fun, often as famine-relief projects in the 18th and 19th centuries. Follies, as they are known, come in many shapes and sizes—towers, temples, sham castles, obelisks, forts, even fake caves. Now that he's seen one, Frank is enchanted. He's hooked.

We are folly hunters. We take off in hot pursuit, Frank refusing to use the GPS, determined to sniff them out without any help. As we drive, I explain how the follies were all the rage among the Irish grand-country-house-set 100 years ago and more, and how I am interested in the gentry who commissioned these structures and in the laborers who built them. I say to Frank, think how they must have felt, building these crazy structures for their wealthy landlords while trying to ignore the hollow gnawing in their stomachs. They would have been grateful for the work, I suppose, but at the same time...

Frank is an investment broker, who, since Ireland's economy tanked, mostly supports himself by driving foreign businessmen to and from the Dublin airport in his small black Mercedes sedan. Helping me with my research adventure is a departure from his routine. We chat about sports, the economy,

our families. Frank's eldest child, just out of college, is about to emigrate in search of work. Today's hard times are hungry times, in their way. We float along in the car, through the green interior of Ireland, past pastures and golf courses, cottages, villages. I notice the cream-colored leather upholstery of the armrest below my window is scuffed, grubby.

The grassy hilltop above the village of Killiney, half an hour south of Dublin, is dotted all over with follies: There's a blocky little building with a pointy white cement cone sticking up from it, a smaller cone-topped structure called the Witch's Hat, and a pyramid about 15 feet tall that kids can clamber up. Weirdest of all are a couple of spooky stone-slab structures that look like ancient sarcophagi.

I should have known better but couldn't help myself, I had to ask what they were for. A pair of austere, somber, fake, stone tombs sitting in the middle of the grass all by themselves? I stopped a guy who looked like he'd know; he was riding

around in a golfcart spearing rubbish on a stick. A cigarette dangled from his lip, and he looked gruff and Irish.

"They're follies," he said, as if no further explanation were necessary.

As I said, I should have known better. "Yes, but what were these for?"

"Place to 'ave their tea on!" he called out, spearing a Fanta bottle. "They're all follies!" And he hopped in his buggy and putt-putted away.

Grand country homes like the one at Killiney, and at Castletown, are among a number of national historic sites anyone can visit, many just an hour or two from Dublin. These well-preserved

sites are greatly outnumbered, though, by the ones in ruins—roofless shells overrun with ivy, gardens gone to grass and thistle. Their owners went bankrupt, or simply fled, many impoverished along with their tenants in the Great Famine of the 1840s. Famine meant the collapse of the rural economy, on which the landlords depended; they lost the rents from their tenants, the basis of their wealth. In some cases, the farmers



The Witch's Hat sits atop Killiney Hill, which commands a view of the Irish Sea.



Conolly's Folly, a massive arrangement of arches and soaring 140-foot obelisk, was built in 1740 on the grounds of Castletown House near Dublin.

were content to stand back and watch the huge, empty houses rot, while in other cases, they burned the places down.

That defiance offers a glimpse of the historic conflict between the Irish Protestant ruling class and the Catholic majority. To call it Protestant versus Catholic oversimplifies it, though, because some Catholic landowners acquired Protestant holdings over time, and some “dissenter” Protestants were discriminated against just as Catholics were, and there were Protestant aristocrats who were as passionate about the cause of Irish independence as any Catholic.

Under the circumstances, the whimsical nature of follies seems a little bizarre. Why did the landlords build follies instead of schools or housing for their tenants? Their world was so different from ours it's hard for us to understand. They would have insisted they were providing work instead of charity. And follies were fashionable, and grand, and building them was an affirmation of fashion and grandeur, at a time when the social order was under threat. Call it denial, a stubborn insistence that nothing would change.

These estates were like little countries unto themselves. The household at Castletown fed over 80 people a night, between servants and family. The house and its outbuildings had more than 90 hearths which burned 300 tons of coal per year; lighting Castletown required 2,400 pounds of candles each year. The estate's chickens produced 10,000 eggs, although this wasn't enough and they had to buy 6,000 more. The staff at such places included a steward, butler, housekeeper, valets, footmen, pantry boys, the gentleman of the horse, an army of maids, a full-time wet nurse. Plus the servants who worked outside—laborers, lodgekeepers, the brewer, the miller, stablehands, smiths, etc. The numbers employed would swell during periods of hardship—time, then, for a new folly or two.

The largest folly in Ireland is the Jealous Wall, and the story behind it is as marvelous and creepy as its name. It starts in 1740 with Robert Rochfort building a big house on a lake. He suspects his wife of cheating on him with his brother, so he confines her to his other house where she has no contact with the outside world for 31 years. She has to walk around



The Jealous Wall is the largest folly in Ireland and is perhaps best known for its role in a story of bitter sibling rivalry.

with a servant ringing a bell when her husband visits so he can avoid running into her. But these visits are rare, as he spends most of his time at his estate on the lake, where another of his brothers—by all accounts an instigator of the adultery rumors and by this time not someone Robert is fond of—starts building an even bigger house of his own just half a mile from Robert's property line. It's situated to block Robert's best view, and, as a final snub, it is turned away from Robert's house, its rear end, so to speak, in Robert's face.

So Robert builds a wall. A freestanding, three-story, 180-foot-long, pseudo-crumbling, Gothic wall-to-nowhere incorporating curves, corners, a half-turret at one end, and numerous arched, rounded, and square window openings and doorways. Now when he looks out from his house, he sees this wall, rather than his brother's place.

Whether she had the affair she was accused of has been debated and will never be known. When Robert died, they came to let her go. The first words of the poor, half-mad woman were, “Is the tyrant dead?”

At Ballyfin, the mansion is up to its Georgian cornices in first-class follies—an outstanding tower, an outrageous grotto, a small Greek temple made of blond marble. The house was falling apart when its new owner bought it in 2002 to turn it into a small hotel. He spent nine years restoring it, from the impossibly delicate flowers and tendrils of the plasterwork across its ceilings, to the 2,000-year-old Roman mosaic floor that fills its entry hall, to the soaring wrought-iron-and-glass conservatory that was dismantled, sent to England for restoration, returned two years later, reassembled.

The follies, too, were restored. The folly tower has a moat, a twisting staircase that stops at four different landings each with its own little fireplace, and at the top, a glass-enclosed observation deck with sweeping views of the house, the gardens, the distant hills. The grotto was made safe for frolickers, who can duck in and out through its rustic portico—think of an impressive porch with columns, if Fred Flintstone were the architect—or they can slip down the back tunnel to the secret rear entrance.

At a dinner at Ballyfin, organized by the Irish tourism folks, I sat next to the lovely Eileen Power, who hails from County Waterford and possesses that classic Irish complexion, pale skin with the faintest bloom to it. The conversation was all about Ballyfin, the extraordinary quality of the restoration—Isn't it astonishing? Isn't it beautiful? Then Eileen spoke in a voice that was amazed but sober, her words careful but full of surprise: “Yes, isn't it wonderful that we're at a point, now, that we can enjoy this place as art?”

Wow. I suddenly felt that I was just another silly American in Ireland. I'd been enthralled by the beauty of the house, but I'd missed the point. In the abstract, people like me may get it—the history, the legacy—but the raw wounds that still persist among the Irish people, that's not a matter of knowledge or understanding but of feeling.



A grand Irish country estate, Ballyfin was built in the 1820s and is famed for its natural and man-made beauties, including the tower built as a folly (top right) in the 1860s.

There are many varieties of forgetting. The human urge to forget is as natural as the need to remember. There is the sort of letting go that Eileen embraces. There is the forgetting of Ireland's immigrants to the U.S.—the collective cultural amnesia of becoming an American after fleeing the devastation of one's home country. And there is forgetting as practiced by the Irish aristocrats of old. They were determined to forget—negate—the actual state of things around them. They did this by building fanciful, escapist follies all around the countryside, many now crumbling—fake ruins falling to actual ruin—so that the Irish today are stuck figuring out what to do with them. They are working to preserve the follies, because they're a part of their heritage, their story. There is an art to letting go, and holding on, at the same time.

Follies are disturbing. Sometimes I feel all the fun has been sucked out of them. But isn't there something to celebrate there—their glorious uselessness? They make a statement: The act of creation doesn't have to be about utility, or even art—sometimes it can just let you scratch the itch of silliness. Follies are fun, damn it. I've seen it with my own eyes—Frank's face lighting up, his first time, when he got it.

That day I spent with Frank, riding around in the car, I remember getting a bit delirious. Late afternoon, sun going down—by then we're kind of giddy with folly-hunting but we've got to find one more, just one more—we're looking for an estate called St. Enda's. Finally Frank breaks down and turns

on the GPS. It sends us left, right, through congested suburban streets, around roundabouts and curves. We see, suddenly, this must be it—on our left is the stone wall of St. Enda's, all we need is to find a turn in. The GPS is saying "Turrrn right," but we want to go left. "Turrrn right," it insists. Frank shuts it off—"Turrrn ri—" and spins the wheel, swings the Mercedes left and tucks it deftly through an open gate in the wall, and we're in.

A hermit's cave, a lookout tower, a tiny fort, a Druid's Glen, this place, they say, has it all. Frank parks the car. We scramble out. And the folly hunt is on. **A**

FOLLY-FINDER

The Follies Trust works to preserve Irish folly buildings—visit follies-trust.org for projects, publications, and links.

A great guide is *The Follies and Garden Buildings of Ireland* by James Howley, and *Abandoned Mansions of Ireland* by Tarquin Blake is a fascinating picture book of Irish ruins. Follies are found all over, but a leisurely country drive one or two hours from Dublin offers an abundance.

 To read more about Ireland's follies, visit saturdayeveningpost.com/follies.

Sally Shivan, a professor at the University of Maryland, has written for *The Washington Post*, *Miami Herald*, and the *Hemispheres* among other publications. She won the 2011 Travel Classics International writing contest for her story on Ireland's follies.