

FOLLIES: FRIVOLOUS OR FUNCTIONAL? **IONA ERSKINE ANDREWS**

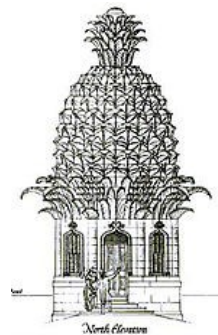
“Follies are joyful buildings which aim to please.” The Follies Trust

Generally defined as ornamental buildings with no practical purpose, follies conjure up images of romance and eccentricity and are thought of as peculiarly British/Irish. In Northern Ireland they range from The Temple of the Winds at Mount Stewart to Lord Limerick’s decorative gate pillars near Bryansford, Co. Down with mausolea, obelisks, garden buildings and all manner of delightful structures in between.

FUNCTIONAL FOLLIES

The popular image only tells part of the story. Delving into the detail we find that each and every folly actually has a purpose, even if it is merely to mark a view or to commemorate a loved one. Conversely, many functional buildings also contain wonderful and elaborate detailing, an element of “follie.” There is thus a spectrum from functional to frivolous along which most building structures lie. Follies may be at the frivolous end of the spectrum but there is no black and white, merely shades of grey or shades of frivolous ornamentation.

One of the best known follies in the British Isles is the Dunmore Pineapple in West Lothian. According to Jack Stevenson it is said to “rank as the most bizarre building in Scotland.” It was built in 1761 by John Murray, 4th Earl of Dunmore, as a hot-house for growing pineapples. Murray left Scotland after the initial structure had been built, and went on to become Colonial Governor of Virginia in America. The upper-floor pavilion or summerhouse with its pineapple-shaped cupola and the Palladian lower-floor portico were added after Murray’s return from Virginia. The design is attributed to Sir William Chambers who designed similar fanciful structures at Kew Gardens and the Casino at Marino, Dublin. Nowadays the building can be rented as holiday accommodation from the Landmark Trust.



The Monument in the City of London commemorates the Great fire of London in 1666 and celebrates the City which rose from the ashes. Designed by Sir Christopher Wren and Dr Robert Hooke, it was completed in 1677. It is 202 ft (67m) tall and is located 202 ft from the king’s baker in pudding lane where the fire started. As leading lights of the

Royal Society, Christopher Wren and Robert Hooke designed The Monument to carry out scientific experiments. The Doric column of Portland stone with internal staircase is also a giant telescope with a laboratory in the cellar. The staircase steps, measuring exactly six inches high, were designed to be used for experiments on pressure while the hollow shaft was destined for experiments with pendulums. Referred to by Hooke as “The Fish Street Pillar,” it was restored by the City of London Corporation in 2009 at a cost of £4.5m. More than 150,000 visitors per year climb up to the observation gallery. Many claim that its views are better than those of St Paul’s Cathedral for they include views of St Paul’s itself.



PICTURESQUE FOLLIES

Many follies were constructed as garden features as part of the 18th century picturesque movement in landscape architecture. Also popular at the time was the Palladian style of architecture and the fashion for going on a Grand Tour. This resulted in elegant follies harking back to classical times.

Mussenden Temple, Co. Londonderry is thought to have been inspired by the temples of Vesta at Tivoli and Rome. It is dramatically perched high on the cliffs above Magilligan Strand with views across the sea to Scotland, Donegal and the Antrim coast. It was built as a library in the grounds of Downhill Demesne by the 4th Earl of Bristol and the Bishop of Derry, “the Earl Bishop” in 1785. He dedicated it to his cousin’s daughter, Mrs Mussenden, to whom it was rumored, not helped by the fact that he had packed his wife off to Suffolk, he was unsuitably close.

The Temple of the Winds at Mount Stewart, Co. Down stands on top of a wooded hill looking out over Strangford Lough. It was built in the 1780s by Robert Stewart who had returned from a grand tour in 1762 and later became the first Marquis of Londonderry. The designer was James “Athenian” Stuart whose favorite Greek building was a clock tower, The Tower of the Winds, Athens. It was octagonal with two porches as is the folly at Mount Stewart. However, the Temple of the Winds, used for dining, has large sash windows a sumptuous interior.



Friends of the Follies Trust at Temple of the Winds

With the introduction of Gothick revival by Horace Walpole at Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, arguably a giant folly in itself, the Gothick style (spelt thus to differentiate it from the original Medieval gothic) became popular in landscape architecture. Tollymore Park, under the magnificent Mountains of Mourne, with the Shimna River tumbling over rocks through its grounds, provided an ideal romantic setting for a picturesque eighteenth century landscape. Thomas Wright, garden designer, mathematician and astronomer, known affectionately as the “wizard of Durham” and Lord Limerick designed decorative entrance gates, bridges, a barn that looks like a church, a hermitage and follies sited to take advantage of the natural landscape in the Gothick style. Tollymore Park – A Guide to the Follies and Garden Buildings is available on the Follies Trust website www.follies-trust.org. Tollymore opened as the first forest park in Northern Ireland in 1955.



The Hermitage at Tollymore Park

FAMINE RELIEF FOLLIES

In Ireland famine relief projects resulted in the construction of estate walls and follies. Scrabo Tower, Co. Down was built in memory of Charles William Vane, 3rd Marquis of Londonderry, one of the Duke of Wellington’s generals in the Napoleonic Wars. Its construction completed in 1857, on top of a volcanic plug at the head of Strangford Lough, provided employment for the tenant farmers of Mount Stewart. It was designed

by W H Lynn, then working for Lanyon, in the Scottish Baronial style. Now a well loved local landmark it is in the ownership of NIEA.



Scrabo Tower from Temple of the Winds

Nearby Helen's Tower on Clondeboye Estate, was part of an ambitious landscape project by Lord Dufferin. It was designed by William Burn in 1848 and construction also provided work for tenants suffering from the Irish Famines. Dedicated to the memory of Lord Dufferin's mother, Helen, a grand daughter of Sheridan, poems have been written about it by Tennyson, Kipling and Argyll. Before WWI, land below it was used as a training camp for the 36th (Ulster) Division. Following tragic loss of lives in the Battle of the Somme, a replica, the Ulster Tower, was constructed at Theipval in 1921 in commemoration. Helen's Tower has been restored by the Irish Landmark Trust and can be rented as holiday accommodation.



Helen's Tower, Clondeboye Estate, Co. Down

FOREIGN FOLLIES

The construction of follies is not entirely restricted to the British Isles. The Hameau de la Reine at Versailles was built as a retreat for Marie Antoinette in 1783. It includes a model farm with a dairy, dovecot, boudoir, mill and a tower in the form of a lighthouse. The Queen sought refuge from the formalities of the Court by dressing as a peasant and milking the cows, kept meticulously clean by farm workers. It fell into disrepair after the French Revolution but was restored in the 1990s.

The Taj Mahal in Agra, India has been referred to as “poetry in marble” and “the most extravagant monument ever built for love.” It was built in 1631 by Emperor Shah Jahan as a mausoleum to his second wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who died in childbirth (of their 14th child) in 1631. The death of Mumtaz left the emperor so bereft that his hair is said to have turned grey overnight. Some 20,000 people from India and Central Asia worked on the building, some later had their hands or thumbs amputated to ensure that the perfection of the Taj could never be repeated. The main architect is believed to have been Isa Khan from Iran but other specialists were brought in from as far a field as Europe to produce the exquisite marble, screens and pietra dura (marble with inlay work) made with thousands of semiprecious stones.

RECORDING OF FOLLIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

In Northern Ireland, follies are well documented. Many are listed buildings and recorded on the Historic Buildings Database. Others fall within the boundaries of properties on the Register of Parks, Gardens and Demesnes of Special Historic Interest. James Howley’s book, *Follies and Garden Buildings of Ireland* is the definitive guide, beautifully illustrated, including measured survey drawings and listing over 500 structures. Many follies are recorded in the informative and scholarly books published by the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society. *Buildings of County Antrim*, *Buildings of County Armagh* and *Buildings of North County Down* by CEB Brett and *Tollymore: The Story of an Irish Demesne* by The Earl of Roden particularly spring to mind. In 2004-5 Judy Hewitt conducted a valuable survey as part of a dissertation on follies for a QUB Architectural Conservation Course. Under the categories of tombs/mausolea, garden features and temples/summerhouses/ hermitage/ shams she visited and recorded features like the Temple of the Winds at Mount Stewart as well as the Long Pond and Round Pond at Antrim Castle.

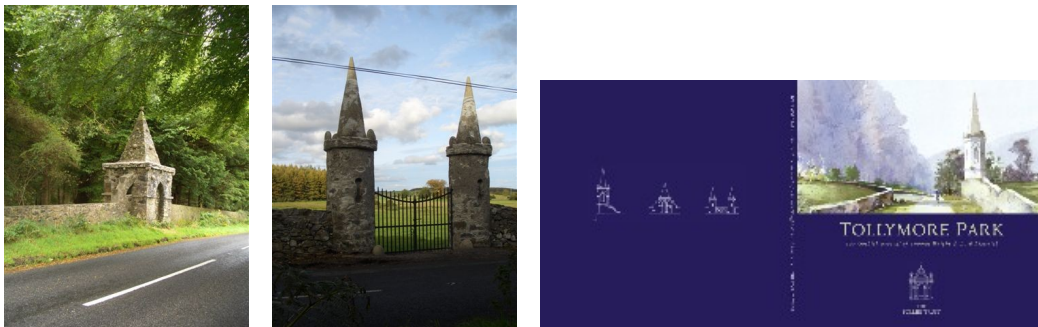
Sadly, many follies are in poor condition and are on the Built Heritage at Risk Register. Many are in private ownership forming part of an historic landscape. Their maintenance is often far down on the list of priorities of maintaining a house and estate buildings. Mausolea located in churchyards are the responsibility not of the churches but of individual families. However the descendants of the ancestor in whose memory the mausolea were erected are now often widely dispersed. Many follies are in Government hands, whether it be the Forest Service, Water Service or local councils whose purpose and focus is elsewhere. Those fortunate enough to be owned by conservation bodies such as The National Trust and The Irish Landmark Trust fare better.

THE FOLLIES TRUST

The Follies Trust was formed in 2006 to encourage the appreciation and conservation of Irish follies. Since its inception it has successfully completed the restoration and conservation of a whole host of delightful structures, held informative lectures and published three books. It has battled funding constraints, sourced grants and worked with local community groups and owners. Much of the energy behind the group is its chairman, Primrose Wilson CBE, also a former Chairman of the Historic Buildings

Council (1992-95.) She is ably supported by trustees who include the current Chairman of Council, Frank Robinson. One of the founding trustees was Richard (Dick) Oram who served on the HBC from 2004 until his death in 2008. Such was the love and esteem with which he was held that The Follies Trust dedicated their conservation of Lord Limerick's follies on the edge of Tollymore Forest Park to his memory.

The three delightful structures, constructed in the 1780s, lie on the Bryansford-Hilltown Road. They are in the Gothick style, attributed to Thomas Wright, as mentioned above and are decorated with bap-stones, smooth round local stones, so called because they look like baps. One was built as a pedestrian gateway, now blind. Another comprises a pair of cylindrical gate piers. The third, the largest and most prominent, is thought to have served as a boundary marker. It sits on the edge of Tollymore demesne and would have been the first feature visible to Lord Limerick as he travelled from his main home in Dundalk to his summer residence at Tollymore.



Lord Limerick's Follies on the edge of Tollymore Park

The Follies Trust carries out conservation and restoration work to the highest conservation standards using a Conservation Surveyor, Chris McCollum, and appropriate materials such as lime mortar. Their first project the mausolea in Knockbreda Churchyard has received commendations from The Georgian Group, RICS NI and Europa Nostra.



The Greg and Rainey mausolea, conserved in 2009 and the Waddell-Cunningham mausoleum conserved in 2010, miniature Classical temples, lie within the graveyard of Knockbreda Parish Church. Professor James Stevens Curl describes them as “an astonishing array of funerary monuments...these Knockbreda mausolea are sumptuous yet refined; ostentatious yet delicate.” The church, constructed in 1737, was designed by the Dublin based architect, Richard Castle, famous for Powerscourt, Russborough House

and the Rotunda Hospital, Dublin. The graveyard became fashionable as a burial ground for the prosperous families of Belfast.

In 2011, the conservation of a charming drinking fountain in Kilkenny and of a cast iron mausoleum in Galway were completed along with another book.



Stroan Fountain, Kilkenny



The Dennis Mausoleum, Clonbern, Co. Galway and



Future projects include two linen green watch towers, an obelisk, funereal monuments and a sham fort at Tyrella House, Co. Down. This was purportedly constructed to house three cannons removed from SS Great Britain which ran aground on Tyrella Beach in 1846, having mistaken the newly constructed St John's Point Lighthouse for the lighthouse on the Isle of Man.



Sham Fort, Tyrella House, Co. Down

CONTEMPORARY FOLLIES

The construction of follies is not an activity totally consigned to the past. The tree house at Alnwick Castle, Northumberland, opened in 2005, cost £3.3 million to build and is amongst the largest, most expensive and lavishly equipped tree house ever built. It occupies a copse of mature lime trees and includes an 80 seat restaurant, a shop and acres of timber decked hanging walkways.



In Northern Ireland, Sir William Hastings of Hastings Hotels has built a mausoleum in the grounds of Downpatrick Cathedral for his future use.



I leave the last word in praise of follies to Alan Terrill of The Folly Foundation. “I think people love the thought that someone somewhere had the imagination, money and lack of planning authorities watching over them to build something fantastic, weird, huge, beautiful or totally useless just because they could. It certainly cheers me up and makes me envious.”

Photograph Credits

Dunmore Pineapple: The Landmark Trust

Helen's Tower: The Irish Landmark Trust

Knockbreda, Lord Limerick's Follies at Tollymore, Stroan Fountain and the Dennis

Mausoleum, Clonbern and associated books: The Follies Trust

Tyrella Fort: David Corbett

Remaining: the author