The re-creation of Ballyfin

The restoration of Ballyfin represents a unique achievement, where sensitivity to character and place triumph, writes Kevin Mulligan.
The palening of Ballyfin is an extraordinary triumph. After three decades of slow decline that had placed it foremost amongst Ireland's endangered buildings, the monumental task of restoring this great house and its landscape is now complete. When the Patrician Brothers announced their intention to close Ballyfin College in 2001 after a stewardship of seventy-four years, just four brothers remained to share the overwhelming responsibility for the vast house and 600 acres of demesne. Decay was becoming evident everywhere as nature eagerly extended its tenacious hand.

Today, all this has been reversed as a great house and its landscape have been renewed in an unparalleled achievement. Since the sale of the property in 2002, the primary aim behind the ambitious restoration of Ballyfin has been to revive the hospitable intention of the Irish country house in a small hotel, its creation defined by the character and constraints of the historic building and its landscape, rather than by the usual narrow-focus exploitation. Nothing of this kind had ever before been envisioned in Ireland: even if country house transformations have become common in the last two decades, many of our best houses have been unfairly exploited to give status to overweening developments, becoming meaninglessly stranded after half-hearted restorations to lie in diminished landscapes as a kind of apologia for the heartless, greedy excesses of a remarkable era. It is notable, however, that some great houses of County Laois seem to have been more fortunate than others. Emo Court, so influential in Ballyfin's design, was an early recipient of unselshless private restoration, though its demesne still remains fragmented and seriously endangered; and though the house has gone, the gardens and demesne of Heywood are recognized for their importance and, like Emo, are now in state care; and Abbeyleix, fully restored, continues as a private residence.

Part of what makes the restoration of Ballyfin exceptional is that the process has been informed by a close analysis of the building and landscape, supported by thorough historical research, so that many specialist teams could be directed to work in a measured and rigorous way to faithfully revive the fabric and atmosphere of what is the greatest of Sir Richard and William Morrison's classical houses. Towards achieving this, an equal focus has been placed on a restotution of the idea of the country house as a repository for the fine arts and consequently an exceptional collection of works have been assembled in the restored rooms, most of these of Irish interest and many related to Ballyfin and its history: over the chimneypiece in the Entrance Hall, overlooking the restored antique Roman pavement, hangs a 17th century portrait of Colonel Sir Audley Mervyn, whose marriage connections related him to all of the families who ever owned Ballyfin; in the library, one of William Ashford's long lost views of Ballyfin has returned, and to make this idea of palening even more complete the Cooe family portraits now line the Stair Hall (Fig 6) after an absence of almost a hundred years.

The combination of furnishings and redecoration in the interiors now recaptures the grand effect in the stately sequence of ground floor rooms devised by the Morrisons. Few alterations were necessary to the existing plan, and the country house arrangement of bedrooms and dressing rooms allowed bathrooms to be effortlessly conceived without compromising any of the architectural integrity. Overall, decoration has largely been subordinated to the richness of the architectural detail, and many of the colour traditions of the early 19th century have again been revived in the paint, wallpaper and fabrics which have been brought together under the expert eye of Colin Orchard. Along the imposing central enfilade of the Saloon, Rotunda and

1. The inlaid floor of the Rotunda is a wholly imaginative work based on the Lion Court of the Alhambra Palace, Granada
2. View of Ballyfin's principal front
3. Hidden behind a bookcase in a corner of the Library is a mirrored doorway that leads into the conservatory
Library, a great deal of the architectural contrast and variety is reclaimed by the impressive array of scagliola columns (Fig 5). These are amongst the richest examples to be found in any house of the period, the Morrisons being by far the most important exponents of the material, where its evocation of antique splendour was perfectly suited to their taste for architectural richness.

Adding further extravagance, inlaid woods inspired with patterns from James Cavanagh Murphy’s Rambles Antiquities of Spain of 1815 were used to remarkable effect in the marquetry floors of the Saloon and Rotunda (Fig 1). Such richly-patterned works are rare, with marquetry of this kind almost exclusively the work of the cabinetmaker. At Ballyfin, the timbers ranged from standard exotics like mahogany to satinwood and purple heart, all chosen for their contrasting colour and durability. Given the rarity of these floors, their repair by the local conservator, John Hart (Fig 7), stands out as one of the most exceptional achievements in the house, one that became as much a work of revelation as of restoration, as years of floor polish gave way to laborious cleaning to reveal the true richness of the design and artistry in the original work.

Beyond the main house, the old kitchen wing and the 1928 dormitory and classroom block have been transformed. The kitchen wing, having housed the school offices, now provides an additional bedroom suite that glories in the great Diocletian window on the cantilever façade, while the Wellesley-pole wing utterly belies its origin in the unwieldy 1928 dormitory block. Having lost its upper floor and gauche pilastered façade, it has been remodelled to become more handsomely classical under a bold eaves cornice and blocking course. Here all of the more modern hotel facilities have been accommodated with a quiet elegance, impressing upon one the universal appeal and superior versatility of classical architecture above the often attention-seeking priorities of modernist designs.

Restoration of the house was finally completed in June 2010 when the conservatory redeemed its brilliant jewel-like quality. Having fallen into such a state that it risked collapse, the ironwork of Richard Turner’s delicate curvilinear design was entirely dismantled, repaired and strengthened in a skillful restoration that allows its fragile shell to shimmer once again, though it has now exchanged its brilliant Victorian white for a more muted, viridescent colour that defers to the architecture of the house (Fig 3).

Any faithful, meaningful restoration of a great house like Ballyfin could only have been achieved by respecting its
relationship to the landscape. In recognizing that a perfect unity between art and nature characterizes landscape design, restoration has inevitably encompassed everything within the demesne walls, including the walls themselves, the historic buildings and gardens, the lake, the parkland, and its avenues and vistas. Developed over a long time and by different owners, the demesne at Ballyfin is a richly layered landscape which grew from obscure beginnings, to become celebrated as one of the finest landscapes of the mid 18th century following the achievements of William and Lady Sarah Pole. Their successors continued the tradition of improvement. Even before rebuilding the house, Sir Charles Coote had employed John Sutherland (see Irish Arts Review Winter 2010, p 117), the most important landscape designer in Regency Ireland who continued the Brownian tradition of using trees to reinforce the idea of landscape art as a scene-making business. The agricultural prosperity that followed the Great Famine allowed Sir Charles Coote to carry out a further phase of improvements, with much of the work in the period, including a wonderful menagerie in one of the old livestock barns, carried out by Murdock Campbell, the long-serving steward at Ballyfin. By far the greatest undertaking was the erection of an enormous stone tower, completed before 1861. A large gravel pit garden have likewise been repaired, old paths are restored and new ones formed. Most tellingly, commercial forestry has been harvested and replaced by new deciduous plantations, planted at the very outset so as to be given a reasonable headstart and not in tracts but in picturesque clumps to restore and augment the parkland characteristics of the landscape. Having opened up vistas once more, the svelte spire of the demesne church again fulfills its picturesque intent. More materially, the original alignment of the principal avenue has been reinstated, restoring its former scenic intention to build anticipation and hold suspense until the full dramatic power of the house is sensational revealed on the final bend of the drive. The practical potential of the kitchen garden has again been realised, replanted and brought back to life under the head gardener Robert Pyewell and his team, so that once again its produce will feed the house and decorate the rooms.

Closer to the house, the fountain has been centred and replumbed so that its jet d'eau plays again. More dramatically, the relationship between the house and the Pleasure Grounds has been given a new emphasis in the formation of a water cascade conceived by Jim Reynolds, its orderly torrents descending from a serene classical temple designed by John O’Connell, invoking something of the formal landscape tradition where the creation of this exceptional place began several centuries ago. These days, ‘painstaking’ and ‘meticulous’ may have become the cliches of building ‘restoration’, but to demonstrate that proper conservation and careful restoration are processes that cannot be hurried, it has taken nine years to complete the works at Ballyfin, longer than it took to build the house in the first instance. The results are truly exemplary and if the pace of works has been necessarily slow, it has surely also been completely worthwhile.

Photography by James Fennell with the exception of Figs 7 & 8 by Woody Clark.

Kevin Mulligan is an architectural historian with considerable experience of building conservation.