Cost what it may

Ballyfin, Co Laois

One of Ireland's greatest Classical country houses has recently been restored as a hotel. Christopher Ridgway looks at the remarkable story of the magnificent house and its repair.

Photographs by Paul Barker
A DWELLING has stood on the site of Ballyfin, in the lee of the Slieve Bloom mountains, since at least the 16th century. During the Cromwellian turmoil of the 1640s, the land around it was confiscated from the Crosby family, and, after the Restoration, it was awarded to the Poles. In the 1720s, William Pole replaced the old Tudor residence with a new house; 30 years later, his nephew William with his wife, Lady Sarah, began to refashion the gardens and demesne extensively, and in the 1770s, they started to enlarge the house in a neo-Classical manner. These developments were just the opening stages in the history of the present building.

After Pole’s death in 1781, a distant cousin, William Wellesley of Dangan, Co Meath, inherited Ballyfin and adopted the suffix Pole to his name. Born in 1763, Wellesley came from a distinguished family—his older brother Richard was a politician and future governor general of Bengal, and his younger sibling Arthur was to become the Duke of Wellington. Wellesley continued to improve Ballyfin according to William Pole’s wishes, but, in 1812, as his political career imploded, he sold the estate to Sir Charles Coote, 9th Baronet. This was no chance purchase—the Coote family had been connected with the area since the 17th century and it held estates at Mountrath, a few miles away.

‘Each of the three rooms in the central enfilade of Ballyfin is ingeniously toplit’

The arrival of Sir Charles and his wife, Caroline, marked a watershed in the architectural history of the house. Having briefly continued the improvements begun by the Poles in the 1770s and erected a library range with a distinguished bow elevation, Coote dismissed his architect, Dominick Madden. In 1822, he now turned to the leading architect of country houses in Ireland, the Cork-born Richard Morrison. Together with his son, William Vitruvius, Morrison turned Ballyfin into one of the grandest early-19th-century houses in the country.

The Morrissos began by demolishing Madden’s work and shifting the entire house some 200 ft further west, away from the stable yards. The new house reproduced some of Madden’s features, but established a plain 13-bay front distinguished by a portico with a giant Ionic order (Fig 1). The exterior of the building has a particularly smooth finish that markedly offsets the crisp and restrained architectural detail.

Indoors, Morrison created a set of spacious rooms in the core of the building: these were linked laterally from the library (Fig 2), through the rotunda (Fig 7) and central saloon (Fig 8) to the staircase hall (Fig 9) beyond. This spine employed one of Morrison’s favourite devices of intersecting internal vistas, and the lateral axis, visible from the entrance hall, is sandwiched between two sets of reception rooms on the east and west sides of the building.

Ballyfin is thus three layers deep, and each of the three rooms in the central enfilade is ingeniously toplit. In the saloon, the tall rectangular skylight rests on a monopodium of 16 painted wooden gryphons and...
the glass above is decorated with heraldic coots. Two pairs of scagliola columns with flanking pilasters, at either end of the saloon, divide the area into three sections; Morrison was to repeat this tripartite formula in the library, as well as in numerous other houses, as, for example, with the Morrison Room at Carton, Co Kildare, fashioned a few years earlier in 1815.

Linking the saloon with the library is the rotunda, another element lifted from Madden. One need only look 14 miles away to Emo Court, begun in about 1790 by James Gandon, to detect the origin of these two spaces at Ballyfin. At Emo, there is a similar elevation to the library on the east of the house and, in the centre, there is a large circular saloon.

In keeping with the family motto ‘Coute que coute’ (‘Cost what it may’), the Cootes spared little expense with the decoration of the interiors. The deeply incised stuccowork for the ceilings and cornices is among the finest in Ireland, incorporating arabesques, putti with musical instruments, swags, and panthers. The parquetry flooring incorporates Moorish designs, revealing the eclectic influences Morrison drew from when furnishing the interior. In the hall, the marble floor has a mosaic centrepiece (Fig 8), which was sent from Rome in 1822, by the Italian painter and designer Gaspare Gabrielli, with whom Morrison had worked at Lyons, Co Kildare two decades earlier.
When work finished in 1826, Coote had spent £20,000 on rebuilding Ballyfin: the result was a house of immense grandeur, opulence and sophistication, but practical spatial organisation. Little was to change indoors until the 1840s, when Gillow of London was commissioned to redecorate the drawing room in an Empire style, lining the walls with a combination of silk hangings and gilded boiseries, and enriching the plasterwork.

Sir Charles hired the gardener John Sutherland to expand on the pioneering landscaping of William Pole from the previous century. A pleasure garden was fashioned featuring a maze house and a grapery, a rockwork labyrinth was laid out and there was a pheasantry with ornamental ponds. The climax to this phase of improvement came in 1855, when Coote commissioned the Dublin-born ironmaster Richard Turner to design a large double-apsed conservatory on the west of the house, reached by a short glazed link leading from the library.

As with so many families in Ireland, the Coote's tenure of Ballyfin came to an end in the early 20th century, after Irish Independence. In 1923, much of the contents was sold and the house was put on the market. Five years later, Ballyfin was bought by the Patrician Brothers, who converted it into a school. Thus, in the space of three centuries, the house had been built, remodelled, left unfinished, torn down, reconstructed, and turned into a school under the aegis of at least five different owners.

The Brothers adapted the building to its new purpose and erected a new and undistinguished north block. Nevertheless, their tenure was to prove crucial to its long-term survival. In addition, the Brothers never threw anything away: all fixtures and fittings that were replaced, dismantled or damaged were boxed up and stored away.

By the end of the 20th century, Ballyfin had that ugly-dolling appearance characteristic of so many institutionalised buildings, and when the house was featured in Country Life (September 13 and 20, 1973), author Edward McParland concluded that only lavish expenditure could hope to 'ensure the safety of Ireland's grandest neo-Classical house'. Little could anyone have known how such a wish would be answered 30 years later, when Chicago businessman Fred Krebbiel and his Irish wife, Kay, bought Ballyfin in 2002 after the Patrician Brothers had announced their wish to relocate the school.

The couple had long wished to acquire a noble building in Ireland and convert it into a very special kind of hotel, and crucial in the decision to acquire Ballyfin was the fact that the 614-acre demesne, enclosed by ¾ miles of perimeter walls, was intact. This was an exceptional survival, the house and the landscape still belonged together and, with careful planning, could be properly reintegrated. Under the leadership of landscape designer Jim Reynolds, a restoration team was assembled to tackle the enormous challenge of recovering the grandeur of Ballyfin. The advisory committee included family descendant Sir Christopher Coote, Brother Maurice Murphy, who had known the building during its long life as a school, the Knight of Glin and Robert Guinness.

Restoration began in 2003 with the appointment of Purcell Miller Tritton architects, John O'Connell architect, and Cornerstone Construction. The entire cornice and blocking course of the house had to be lifted and repaired; the closest match for stone had to be sourced from Derbyshire. Elements such as the Ionic capitals and coat of arms
on the entrance portico were restored or replaced where necessary by Cliveden Conservation. The Victorian conservatory was in a parlous condition. It was dismantled and sent to England for repair by Oeura Conservation before being reassembled on site with new glass, and painted a pleasing dark green as opposed to a more conventional white finish.

Elsewhere, as the institutional layers were removed, the splendid parquetry floors were revealed in the saloon, rotunda, and library. To the joy of the restorer John Hart, the Patrician Brothers produced the missing fragments of mahogany, satinwood and purple-heart that had been stored away, and once the inlay was complete, the floors were cleaned and polished, allowing a rich range of brown and golden hues to delineate the geometrical patterning.

"As the institutional layers were removed, the splendid parquetry floors were revealed"

Although the process of restoration was, at all times, informed by thorough research, this was not an archaeological exercise, looking to turn the clock back. So, for example, the accommodation block erected in 1928 was not demolished. Jane Kennedy lowered it in height and cleverly modified it to harmonise with the main building.

Once the structural elements had been secured, the redecoration and furnishing of the house began, driven at all times by Mr Krehbiel’s vision to turn this grand building into a welcoming residence. The aim has been to create the atmosphere of an occupied house with a family in residence rather than that of a hotel. Where possible, objects that were sold in the two auctions of 1923 have been reacquired, but no attempt has been made to re-create interiors of a particular period. Most pleasing of all is how 17 Coote family portraits have returned to the house, and these now hang around the cantilevered stone staircase. Also acquired for the library were two 18th-century capriccios by Domenico Fossatti, and in the dining rooms, a series of Van der Hagen grisaille paintings, previously at Mount Congreve, Co Waterford, sit beside three over-door roundels with landscape views commissioned from Lucinda Oaks.

This process of recovery has been matched outdoors by the restoration of the entrance lodges, the replacing of conifer plantations with native hardwoods and the reinstatement of paths and rides as recorded in the OS map of 1839. Visitors to Ballyfin may spy a handful of golf buggies in front of the hotel, but these are for facilitating exploration of the demesne. One thing guests will not find at Ballyfin is a golf course, although there is fishing for sporting enthusiasts. Intrepid guests can enjoy the picturesque lake (Fig 6), William Pole’s famous 18th-century grotto (Fig 5), Sir Charles Coote’s 18th-century stone tower with mock fortifications and the new temple and cascade.

Although this story has a familiar Irish ring to it, from the boom years of the Celtic Tiger when many houses were rescued from decay through the timely intervention by wealthy individuals, there are significant differences in the case of Ballyfin. Certainly, the global recession challenged the project just as it was coming to fruition, but the vision has not been compromised. Everything has been done to the highest quality, allowing the architectural grandeur of Morrison’s house to combine with the comfort and hospitality that characterises a top-class hotel, which also manages to feel like an intimate household. The layers of the past visible both indoors and outdoors are, in Mr Krehbiel’s words, the ‘equivalent of time-lapse photography’. And just as time-lapse photography records a succession of moments, so Ballyfin today records an intriguing process of change and recovery in this latest incarnation of Ireland’s finest neo-Classical house.

For more information, telephone 00 353 5787 55866 or visit www.ballyfin.com.

© Fig 7 above: The rotunda at Ballyfin is encircled by eight Siena scagliola columns and the coffered dome is ornamented with hexagonal panels containing decorative stars set in an emphatic geometrical lattice. The oculus above is ringed with more stars—these are gilded and gesture to the heavens above the stained glass skylight. © Fig 8 facing page: The mosaic centrepiece on the floor of the hall came from Rome in 1822.