IRISH Interiors

STUNNING HOMES DESIGNED TO DAZZLE

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ONE OF THE FINEST REGENCY MANSIONS IN IRELAND HAS BEEN REBORN AND LAVISHLY RESTORED TO CREATE A TRULY OPULENT SETTING WHilst RESPECTING THE ECLECTIC NATURE OF THE IRISH COUNTRY INTERIOR.

WORDS BY CAROLINE ALLEN, PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES FENNELL

Like all the best domestic spaces, the stunning interiors of the painstakingly restored Ballyfin House in Co. Laois, evolved over time. Long admired as one of the most lavish Regency mansions in Ireland, Ballyfin, set on 600 acres, entered a new phase in its history when it opened as a small luxury country house hotel in May 2011. Ballyfin House and Demesne - the former base of the Patrician Brothers who ran a boarding school in the grounds for 74 years - has been reborn thanks to Chicagoan Fred Kreibiel and his wife Kay who were born in North Kerry. His electronics business Molex has a presence in the US, Asia and Europe, including a plant in Shannon.

The Kreibielts already had a house in Kerry and were involved with the Irish Georgian Society. They bought Ballyfin House, which had been once used for the set of The Count of Monte Cristo, in May 2002. A restoration advisory committee led by landscape designer Jim Reynolds, who is now managing director of the hotel, guided their work.

Ballyfin was the ancestral house of the O'Mores, Croisys, the Poles, the Wellesley-Poles - the family of the Duke of Wellington - and the Coote families. In 1821, Sir Charles Coote and his wife Caroline Whately decided to remodel and enlarge the house. They hired the leading father and son architectural partnership of Richard and William Vitruvius Morrison. The result is one of Ireland's great neo-classical houses.

Rising to the modern day challenge at Ballyfin was Scottish interior designer Colin Orchard, now based in London. Having worked with Colefax & Fowler for eight years he set up his own business in Chelsea. He spent six years working on the Ballyfin decor. "My brief was to work on the historic colours, do furniture plans, lighting plans, decorations and furnishings," he explains. Colin worked with a collection of antiques amassed by Fred and Kay on their travels as well as with pieces sourced by English antiques dealer James Hepworth. Other items were bought at auction in Ireland including Adams in Dublin; Sheppard's in Durrrow; and Mealy's of Castlecomer. Reproduction sofas to match the antique seating in the library came from The Sofa Factory.
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Colin’s brief was to create the impression of an Irish country house from which the family had just departed, leaving behind all that previous generations had accumulated, including souvenirs from the grand tour and design inspirations acquired while travelling abroad. Ballyfin should be comfortable, stylish, discreet and Irish, with layers of history to be unravelled and enjoyed. “The aim was to make the house look like it had evolved over many generations of one family, and to look like they had handed it over for its current use as a hotel,” Colin says.

Imogen Taylor, former senior partner at Colefax & Fowler, advised on colour schemes, while Con Farrell from nearby Mountmellick who had worked on Russborough House and Headfort House, was responsible for the paint finish. One notable paint was the colour of the Turner conservatory, which was in such a state of disrepair that the Patrician Brothers had contemplated taking it down for safety reasons. It was decided that the original ‘off-white’ was as somebody put it, like a wedding cake incongruously attached to the Marston’s austerely beautiful building. After its restoration in Shropshire with new curved glass supplied by Emerald Stained Glass, Tulamore, it was repainted in dark green.

Textiles that were typical of the Empire or Regency period were researched and copied. The carpet in the gold drawing room is based on an old Armistice pattern. In the library, an Owen Jones design of wallpaper was chosen and coloured to suit the scheme. Wallpapers in the whispering room and several of the bedrooms are old Mauny designs, recreated using documents.

After building work was completed, the house was furnished with a collection of Irish art, and
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antiques from around the globe. These included chandeliers originally from Westport House, Co Mayo, the Royal Academy in London and the Parisian hôtel particulier of Princess Maria Caroline Murat, sister of Napoleon, and Queen of Naples. They cast light on fine Irish mahogany or French furniture, which, in turn, is reflected in mirrors, including the famous examples commissioned from Thomas Chippendale for Dundas House in London, which now adorn the saloon. “We were fortunate that nobody else at the auction had rooms big enough for them and they didn’t realise the enormous money they should have so we were able to get them at a reasonable price.” says Jim Reynolds.

The richness of Ballylin’s antiques is evident on stepping into the entrance hall where treasures include a Derby porcelain dish decorated with a vista of Ballylin based on Thomas Milton’s published view of 1767. The antlers of an Irish elk—extinct for more than 10,000 years—hang over the doorway, enduring as an upholsterer of the Irish country house welcome. The deeply patterned antique mosaic floor was brought from Italy in 1882. In the Rotunda, the stucco round floor was based on the Lion Court of the Alhambra Palace. The library contains fine 18th century bookbindings and an early 19th century gasolier that formerly hung in the Royal Academy, London.

While the works in the state rooms and the bedrooms give an account of art in the 18th and 19th centuries, the bar and treatment rooms which are decorated in a contemporary style, are filled with modern art ranging from 20th century Irish
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masters such as Louise Brocay to emerging artists. General manager of Ballyfin House, Alice Carew, selected Spode Italian china for breakfast settings for its similarity to the blue porcelain that was used in the house. William Yeoward china and glass was chosen for its 18th and 19th century inspirations and other pieces were commissioned through Thomas Goode of London. The collections are all displayed in a dedicated porcelain room created by Kerry cabinetmaker Philip Turner.

Colin Orchard recalls his “best ever” project with pride. The main challenge, as far as he was concerned, was making sure he didn’t end up with a new looking interior and one that was trash and vulgar. “I love the variation of schemes within the house, but also the fact that there is a continuity. Although it is grand, the house feels welcoming and somewhere to be enjoyed and in which to relax.”

To those inspired to renovate their own homes, Colin’s advice is to do it for yourself, not to show off or impress, and to be confident. “Don’t hesitate to ask for help, and be a bit playful. Mix things up a bit, enjoy colour and texture, and if the budget allows, buy a few good things. Better a few good pieces, than many indifferent ones.”

For Fred Krehbiel, the restoration of Ballyfin and the opening of a small hotel there despite the global economic downturn is the realisation of a dream. It has also provided an opulent backdrop for all the pieces he has picked up over the years on his travels, ranging from the Pimlico and Fulham roads in London to the Left Bank in Paris and Tokyo. “We had a lot in storage but we have used virtually everything. The moral of the story seems to be, if you like something, keep it. You will eventually find a use for it.”

For information on Ballyfin House which is only open to residents, see www.ballyfin.com