



BALLYFIN

The Return by John Quinn

The gates were locked. How often during our boarding school days, fifty-plus years ago, would we have wished to be confronted with this sight. With, hopefully, a notice affixed – PLAGUE, KEEP OUT or SCHOOL CLOSED DUE TO FIRE.

Patrician College, Ballyfin, Co Laois, had been our “home” for five years in the fifties. Originally the home of the Coote family, the 600-acre estate and mansion had been bought for £10,000 in 1929 by the Patrician Brothers, who ran it as a boarding school for the next seven decades. In 2002 American business magnate Fred Krehbiel bought the entire estate and set about restoring it to its 19th Century splendour. In 2009 the school closed, to be merged into a new community school in Mountrath.

Five years ago, as the restoration began, fellow-past pupil Colman Morrissey and I made a vow that whenever Ballyfin re-opened as a luxury hotel (as was Krehbiel’s plan) we would come back as guests, no matter what the cost...I had made an award-winning radio documentary on my Ballyfin years two decades previously, so this would be an especially emotional “homecoming”. And now the gates were locked.

The delay was minimal. As soon as we announced ourselves on the intercom, the gates swung open and we drove up the long winding avenue through the bluebell woods until the imposing Palladian mansion was revealed in the May sunshine.

He was fearful. He had left the familiarity and security of home in a small village in Co. Meath, sixty miles away. The Ford Prefect rattled over the cattle grid. Goodbye, it seemed to say. Goodbye to his friends, his parents. Goodbye to the world. Four great columns guarded the entrance doors where the President, Br. Silverius, stood greeting the parents...

The entire management team came out to welcome us. We were, after all, the first paying guests on this historic opening day of Ballyfin Hotel. A valet took our cars away. We move through the entrance hall with its intricately-patterned mosaic floor – brought from Italy in 1822 – and into the sumptuous saloon, dominated by four dark-green *scagliola* columns. This great room, with its rich plasterwork and coved ceiling, was designed to receive distinguished company and exudes warmth and hospitality. We, returned 21st century exiles, are indeed made to feel distinguished as we sip a welcoming coffee and absorb the grandeur around us. It is a truly emotional experience.





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The accommodation manager shows us around the rooms that are available. Fifty years ago these would have been the brothers' rooms, sparsely furnished with a bed, chair and wardrobe and little else. Now they are restored to 19th century splendour. Nothing has been spared in terms of furnishings, paintings and décor. It is all captured in Kevin Mulligan's lavish coffee-table book- *Ballyfin: The Restoration of an Irish House and Demesne* – published by the owner as a testament to the work done on this great house – and a thing of great beauty itself.

There is good news. Because the hotel isn't fully booked, we can have a room each rather than share. Colman will enjoy the Mountrath Room and, to his great envy, I acquire the Wellesley-Pole Suite, named after William Wellesley, older brother of the Duke of Wellington, who inherited Ballyfin in 1781. I defend my right of acquisition through my Meath connection to Wellington. A whole suite to myself – luxurious sittingroom, elegant bedroom and imposing bathroom. I could get used to this.

He awoke to a new and strange world. Bro Angelus marched through the dormitory, ringing a handbell. It was so unusual to find himself sharing a room with fifty other boys. The hubbub and clamour grew as the washroom filled up and boys queued for handbasins. He washed quickly. The towel smelled of home...

A further delight awaits when I consider the view from my suite. A magnificent cascade tumbles musically down the sloping grounds from beneath a Claudian temple. This concept, the creation of Jim Reynolds, Director of the Restoration Project, is at once breath-taking and soothing to ear and eye, adding a wondrous centrepiece to what the Cootes would have known as the Pleasure Grounds. They had been our restricted "pleasure grounds" too...

If you didn't play games, you went for walks in the grounds, remembering always to stay within bounds – Ne ambulaveritis in horto, pueri (Do not walk in the garden, boys). The gardens with their orchard were out of bounds, as were the lake and the tower. Some boys were very daring and would go out over the demesne wall to Delaney's shop, or worse still to Phelan's pub...

Settled into our rooms, we begin to familiarise ourselves with the house. Down the beautiful cantilevered Portland stone stairway and through the Stair hall, now hung with Cote family portraits which have been diligently traced and restored to the house after a century's absence – a measure of the meticulous work that has gone into its restoration. Across the Saloon and through the Rotunda – for me, one of the gems of Ballyfin, with its eight Sienna marble columns, its intricate plasterwork dome and its stunning inlaid floor – which Kevin Mulligan informs us "became the extraordinary setting for a magic railway, as the Cote children used to set up their model trains after tea on wet afternoons". The Rotunda is a link room to the Library.

This magnificent room with its many mahogany-fronted bookcases and deep bowed-window is typical of a great eighteenth-century house, originally a male preserve but latterly more of a family livingroom. With matching Morrison chimney-pieces at either end, it exudes warmth and restfulness in the company of books. Books are generously displayed for the entertainment of the modern traveller in the restored Ballyfin – with a warning on each bookplate – "Consider it the vilest sin to steal a book from Ballyfin"!

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Mr O' Reilly asked himself and Tim Dunne to help with the cataloguing of books in the library. It was a pleasant change to be released from the study hall to work in the beautiful library. It was good to handle books, to feel their bindings, to turn their often delicate leaves and to wonder at the strangeness of their titles – Masterpieces of Eloquence, Outlines of Dogmatic Theory, The Catechism of Perseverance Vols. 1-4...

One bookcase in the library is a disguised door which leads into the conservatory. This Richard Turner –designed masterpiece had fallen into decay despite the best efforts of Bro Joseph and a FAS team in the 1990s. It is important to record that in their seventy-year tenure of Ballyfin, the Patrician Brothers did their utmost to preserve the house but, with meagre resources, it was always an uphill task. Lunch will be served in the conservatory today. Excellent idea! With the assistance of the two Freds – Executive Chef Fred Cordonnier (ex-Patrick Guilbaud) and Food and Beverage Manager Frederic Poivre – we make our choices. We both opt for Warm Asparagus Salad, Guinea Fowl Egg and Pata Negra Ham to start. My main course is pan-fried Fillet of Sea Bass, Pickled Spring Carrots, and Coriander Yoghurt. Colman prefers pan-fried Rib-Eye of beef, Green Beans, Potato Lyonnaise and Béarnaise Sauce. Ah this is the life, Colman. Do you remember the old days?

The food was sparse. Tea, bread and butter in the evening with a spoonful of jam on Fridays and Sundays. Someone at the table might have a tin of beans or sardines and if he was lucky, they might share... On Sunday morning there was a sausage for breakfast – which was fine if he hadn't actually lost it (or even a whole term's sausage) at cards or push-ha'penny...

Suitable replenished, we decide to remove ourselves to the pleasure grounds to take some fresh air. We make a detour through the splendid Gold Room, originally the ladies "drawing room". They laughed at us fifty years ago when we came home on holiday and told of a room adorned with gilt mirrors, gilded plasterwork and silk-covered walls, but it was true. We had been there and seen it, admittedly only during the Retreat when Fr Sebastian heard our confessions there...

Fr Sebastian gave talks on Bad Actions, Bad Thoughts, Bad Language... There were sniggers from the seniors at the back of the oratory. If you were really worried about something, you could drop a question into the Question Box. Larry O' Gorman didn't need a Question Box. He stood up bravely and asked – "Is it a sin to call a brother a fool?"

A long ramble would do us both good but we take the lazy 21st century option and employ a golf-buggy to get us around. Well there is so much to SEE...the restored walled garden, the tower (which we can enter and enjoy the spectacular views of the midlands), the fernery (I never knew we had a fernery) and the lake. All out of bounds territory in days of old. The football pitches are just grassland now. And there where the goal-mouth was, scene of many a melee, is a giant H – the helicopter pad. The semi-demolished handball alleys are under repair. It transpires the alleys were built on the original wall of the grapery, and now will become a rose garden as it was in Edwardian times.

Reputations and fortunes – of sausages and even cigarettes – were won and lost in the alleys. Pudsy Ryan was the King of the Alleys. Nobody stood a chance with Pudsey. He could "butt" a ball with deadly accuracy.

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On the way to the lake we notice that a landmark is missing. The brothers' cemetery, set in a grove. Gone without trace. The brothers' remains were exhumed and re-interred in the village cemetery. New saplings are planted. The trip around the lake affords us the opportunity to see Ballyfin in true perspective – a majestic thirteen-bay mansion bathed in May sunshine.

A swim would be nice before dinner – not in the lake, but in the state of the art swimming-pool. In 1930 the Brothers built a four-storey block which was essentially the school. The basement was our refectory. Now it is a swimming-pool. I relax there in peaceful solitude.

The boys lined up before charging downstairs to the refectory. Each table had a prefect and two sub-prefects in charge of giving out the food. The "ref" was noisy and boisterous.

Wait a minute! There's something different about this school-block, It's only three storeys high! As part of the restoration, the top floor (our dormitory) was shaved off to align it with the height of the mansion...Most of our life as students was confined to that "modern" block. Our main contact with the mansion was through our twice-daily visits to the oratory.

Each pew had a series of white enamel numbers affixed to it. Later, he would learn how to unscrew the number with a nail-file, insert a message behind the number and screw it back on. In this way he would be remembered in fifty years time, maybe forever...

The oratory was originally the State Diningroom and now it has been tastefully restored to that original function (I wonder where my pew is now). We repair there for dinner after a most convivial reception in the Library – champagne with lobster and *foie gras* canapés. (Well, It's a change from the usual Sunday evening spoon of jam...)Once again, the two Freds do us proud. My *entrée* is a terrine of quail, organic chicken, *foie gras* mousse, cherry fig, melba toast and port syrup. The *plat de resistance* is pan-roasted fillet of Hereford beef, oxtail and *foie gras* celeriac puree, red onion and creamed potato. With two most palatable wines, I can just about entertain the "Ballyfin Mess" for dessert.

We repair to the Ballyfin Bar for cognacs. The Ballyfin school experience is recording at quite a pace. On the way to the bar, I must answer a call of nature. The location of the toilets is strangely familiar, It can't be. It is. The former President's office where many a trembling misbehaving student had to report. "Justice!" Colman and I cry in unison.

The Bar is in the basement, the former servants' quarters. I had enquired earlier if it stocked cigars – the occasion seemed to demand a half-corona to be savoured in the courtyard. A packet of cigars was duly proffered. The staff later admitted that one of them had driven the six miles to Portlaoise to acquire them!

And so to bed in the Wellesley-Pole Suite, to sleep to the music of the cascade outside, perchance to dream of Bro Angelus marching in with bell clanging at 7.30a.m. No!



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A leisurely breakfast at 10a.m. begins the new day. Schooldays put me off porridge for life. I sample it this morning – a lot more palatable fifty years later, but I am still not convinced...Papers and morning coffee in the Library, as a gentleman does. One more engagement before I leave. I have booked in for a full body massage in the treatment room beside the pool. A full hour of total restoration in what I am told was originally the vegetable store. I am ready for the world.

Leaving Ballyfin was difficult. (Did I ever think I would write that sentence?). This had been an emotional return – a jumble of memories and pleasurable experiences. Five years then. One day now. So much to assimilate and sift. I thought a lot of my parents who had made extraordinary sacrifices to send me and my three siblings to boarding school. I thought of the Patrician Brothers.

The brothers were no fools, whatever Larry O' Gorman thought. They were honest, hardworking countrymen – men with ruddy weather-beaten faces, who might well be his uncles or neighbouring farmers. Men who could turn from teaching Honours Maths to fixing the plumbing. Teachers, bakers, farmers...

On my way home I would call to pay them my respect in the village cemetery, for they had made sacrifices too – for me and thousands of others.

As for Ballyfin, The vision of restoring a country house has been realised in stunning fashion and is to be commended. It may seem quite expensive to stay there but for myself and Colman, returning after over half a century to a very different Ballyfin, the experience was totally worthwhile. Well might we echo the words of Lady Kildare in 1759 –

“Yesterday I saw a most delightful place indeed, much beyond any place I have seen in Ireland – Ballyfin.”

All excerpts in italics from the original script of the 1992 radio documentary – *Ballyfin, A boarding School Memory*, by John Quinn.

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