

An island rescue

*Fota House, Co Cork
A property of the Irish Heritage Trust*

The Irish Heritage Trust has restored its first house—a splendid Regency survival—in a way that augurs well for the future. Jeremy Musson reports

Photographs by Paul Barker

IN the early 19th century, Fota Island, just outside Cork, was developed into one of the great demesnes of Ireland (**Fig 1**). The island was part of an estate inherited by John Smith-Barry, who, in the 1820s, transformed a 1760s house into a neo-Classical mansion with the father-and-son team of architects, Richard and William Vitruvius Morrison. Smith-Barry also reinvented the topography of his island, constructing new sea defences and sea walls, planting new pleasure grounds and creating new parkland.

This outstanding house has an additional importance today as the first significant property to come into the care of the specially constituted Irish Heritage Trust, a national body intended for the preservation and presentation of major historic houses.

6 In the 1820s, John Smith-Barry transformed a 1760s house into a neo-Classical mansion **9**

The Smith-Barrys of Fota were descendants of the 4th Earl of Barrymore, who died in 1748. His principal Irish seat, the Palladian Castle Lyons, was described by his own agent as 'fit for any duke'. The 4th Earl, unusually, left his younger sons well provided for by apportioning to them estates in Ireland and England. Fota went to a younger son, the Hon Arthur Barry, who is credited with having built a five-bay house at Fota in about 1760. This building forms the centre-piece of the present house.

On his death in 1770, Arthur's estate went to his brother, the Hon John Smith-Barry, who had assumed the name Smith after marriage to an heiress, Dorothy Smith. The 4th Earl had settled part of the Marbury Hall estate in Cheshire on John, who had commissioned James Gibbs to build a house—Belmont Hall—nearby. These combined estates then passed to John's son, James, who was an avid collector and Grand Tourist.

The chevalier de La Tochnaye received a courteous welcome on visiting him in Ireland, in the late 1790s: 'I spent >

Fig 1: Fota from across the park



some time in the island of Foaty with a spoiled child of fortune, Mr. Smith Barry. He has travelled much, is very courteous and reasonable, appears very well educated, is good natured, and would be happy if he had only £500 a year instead of £25,000; but his riches have so surfeited him and disgusted him with the world that he is almost retired from society, and lives a melancholy in his island, which is not the island of Calypso.'

The *chevalier* might have well admired the landscape more had he come in the 1820s. James's son, John (Fig 4), whose parents had not formally married, inherited as a minor in 1801 and began beautifying the island from the time of his marriage in 1814. He also explored different sites for a new house, before embarking on a major remodelling of the existing building.

For the work, he appointed Richard Morrison as his architect, then working with his son, William Vitruvius Morrison, along with Francis Johnston. They reordered the interiors of the old house and added two substantial

wings to create a series of gracious rooms, with a richness and drama that is quite unexpected on first sight of the plain exterior.

Dr Kevin Mulligan has suggested that the dignified exuberance of these interiors, and the general attention to the family's Irish seat in the 1820s, could be seen as part of John's attempts to have the Earldom of Barrymore revived in his favour. The 8th Earl, a distant relation, died in Paris in 1823 and the title died with him. This desire to celebrate the history of his family may also have prompted an alternative but unrealised design by W. V. Morrison for a neo-Elizabethan mansion published in *The Builder* in 1850.

As W. V. Morrison had recently returned from Italy, and a trip to Paestum, he must have designed the baseless Doric blue-limestone portico. In 1830, a fellow architect, Henry Hill, made notes on the house and its plan in his sketchbook, now in Cork Public Museum: 'The Portico is Elegantly executed in cut Lime stone, and in the best taste of Doric Architecture, the Metopes are



Fig 2 left: The top of the staircase, with its plaster dome by Richard and William Vitruvius Morrison. In typical Irish form, the balustrade is of brass

charged with the wreaths and the family crest alternately.'

One side of the ground floor of the old house was punched out and turned into one single, long axial hall-gallery (Fig 5). This connected the new and grander scaled rooms in the wings, the dining room to the north and the drawing room and library to the south. It also provided a suitably grand axial approach to both. The room is divided by three screens of paired Ionic columns in a vivid yellow *scagliola* that strike a warm and lively note and, as a visitor moves through the room, the eye is drawn to the alcove for sculpture at the southern end and the crisply detailed marble chimney-piece to the north.

The fine plasterwork is influenced by contemporary treatises such as Thomas Hope's *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration*, 1807, and C. H. Tatham's *Etchings of Ancient Ornamental Architecture*, 1799—the latter, in particular, was the source for the bucrania frieze in the dining room (Fig 3). In COUNTRY LIFE

in 1986, John Cornforth argued this was the 'one room where one feels the Morrisons were able to pull out most of their stops to produce an impressive late-Regency palace room'. It is a stately interior, with a screen of dark-green *scagliola* Corinthian columns at the eastern end, creating a recess for the buffet, which, in turn, gave the butler and footmen discreet access through a jib door.

Ann Martha Rowan's Irish Architectural Archive monograph on *The Architecture of Richard Morrison and William Vitruvius Morrison*, 1989, also points to the work of Percier and Fontaine being a source of inspiration for the ceiling of the drawing room (the decorative stencilling and paint scheme in this room were carried out in the 1870s by the painter-decorators Sibthorpes of Dublin). The detailing from this room is carried through into the library, suggesting the rooms would have often been used in conjunction with each other.

Documentation for Fota is scarce, but the craftsmen working at Fota

Fig 3 above: A view of the dining room, with its screen of dark-green scagliola Corinthian columns. A jib door to the left of the buffet gave access for the footman and butler. Fig 4 above right: A portrait of John Smith-Barry (1793–1837), who transformed Fota, set above the fireplace of the study. The room also preserves fine 1820s book-cases



Island in the 1820s are likely to be the same as those who worked with the Morrisons at other houses, such as Ballyfin, Carton and Kilruddery. At the latter, for instance, the stucco artist was Henry Popje and the *scagliola* columns were supplied by William Croggan. At Carton, one of the *stuccadores* complained: 'It is impossible to describe the trouble that attended on doing the various stiles upon this ceiling, they run together so curious and intricate.' Wallpapers were supplied in the 1820s from Cowtan & Son in London and others by Irish makers.

The Morrisons were especially skilled at the architectural transformation of existing houses and had already extended Mountbellew in Co Galway with similar ingenuity. At Fota, the wings at either end present a flat front to the approach, but are bowed to the garden front, adding a fine geometric variety to the principal rooms of reception. In the 1830s, Henry Hill was especially taken with the view through the hall from the glazed front door, having 'a very pleasing effect as a view

can be obtained through the house into the flower-garden'.

The staircase hall is domed (Fig 2) and richly decorated and has a cantilevered stone staircase rising to a gallery, which forms part of the long cross-gallery—the Morrisons added a projection to the garden front to increase the spatial drama of the staircase hall.

John died in 1837 and his son James, who was only just 21, spent more time abroad and in England than at Fota. His son, Arthur, married, in 1868, Lady Mary Wyndham-Quin, a daughter of the Earl of Dunraven. In 1872, a new billiard room was added—to designs by Sir John Benson—as well as the Gallery-cum-library with its magnificent baronial oak chimney-piece. After Mary's death, he married a widow, Mrs Post. An active politician, Arthur was raised to the peerage in 1902, as Baron Barrymore.

After Lord Barrymore's death, the estate passed in the male line first to his brother and then to his brother's son. It was sold in 1936 to Lord >



Barrymore's younger daughter, Dorothy, and her husband, Maj William Bell. Dorothy had inherited the Marbury Hall estate in 1925, but was fond of Fota, so she sold Marbury and brought over much of the important art collection made by her ancestor, that 'spoiled child of fortune', from England.

The Bells loved the house and gardens and ran them with a large domestic staff. The major died in 1973 and Mrs Bell in 1975, at which point, Fota was inherited by one of their daughters. She had decided to live in England and sold the estate.

Fota was then acquired by University College Cork, which was interested in the dairy farm. The university leased the house to Richard Wood, a Cork businessman and art collector. He put his important collection of Irish paintings on public display in 'their natural setting, a house rather than a gallery'. His collection was later lent to the University of Limerick.

The house then passed into the hands of an independent trust,

during which time, the Office of Public Works—which still manages the arboretum and gardens at Fota—carried out a restoration of key rooms. Then, in December 2007, Fota was passed to the Irish Heritage Trust (IHT).

Since taking on the house, the IHT has carried out a major programme of works costing some €4.5 million. The near-derelict first-floor rooms have been restored, redecorated (and historic wallpapers conserved) and re-presented to the public. In addition, the Allied Irish Bank and the McCarthy family of Cork have placed an important collection of Irish paintings in the house.

The IHT has also instigated significant works in the garden, including the restoration of the Victorian kitchen garden's working glasshouses. As well as the further furnishing of the state rooms—and negotiations continue to provide more relevant furnishings—interesting work has been done to interpret the social history of the house and service areas. The trust is also

Fig 5: The hall-gallery is punctuated by pairs of yellow scagliola columns. It is formed by one side of the ground floor of the old house having been punched out and directly connects the dining room, drawing room and library

working towards full museum accreditation for the house.

An impressive amount has been achieved and Fota has become a significant local beacon of social and cultural activity, popular with family and school groups. It is run by a small and dedicated team plus a large band of committed volunteers—Kevin Baird, CEO of the IHT, stresses the importance of wide participation in the trust's approach. There remains much still to do, but, despite the difficult economic background, the trust has shown itself a resilient and inventive custodian of this important country house.

The IHT is also in long-term negotiation with other historic houses for which new and imaginative solutions need to be found and for which its achievements at Fota provide an encouraging model. 

Acknowledgements:

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For information about visiting Fota House and Island, visit www.fotahouse.com or telephone 00 353 21 481 5543