



1 Strokestown Park House, County Roscommon

2 The capacious galleried kitchen of Strokestown House

3 The papers discovered at Strokestown, which contained a letter dated 1846, led to the establishment of the Irish National Famine Museum by Jim Callery

# Living Heritage

Engaging with communities and unlocking the unique story of the properties within its care lies at the heart of the Irish Heritage Trust's ten-year history, writes **Sandra Andrea O'Connell**



Just a few months after the Irish Heritage Trust had been set up in 2006, newly appointed CEO Kevin Baird was shown through a rusty gate into a walled garden that had not been touched in more than 50 years, just behind the formal gardens at Fota House, Cork. 'I did not know what to expect when the key turned in the gate – it was an extraordinary scene, like the forgotten garden in the novel *The Secret Garden*', recalls Baird. Glasshouses had collapsed with trees growing through their skeleton roofs, paths and beds were completely overgrown, and brambles and ivy had taken over.



Ten years on, and Fota's walled garden has not only been rescued but is thriving with activity. Paths have been cleared, beds replanted and the Victorian glasshouses expertly restored with support from Fáilte Ireland and generous donations. A full-time gardener and team of volunteers tend to the garden and dirty tools are hanging from the walls again. The buildings not only harbour seedlings but host regular workshops on topics ranging from sustainable food production to seasonal cooking, led by experts like food historian Regina Sexton. The walled garden is an attraction for visitors and locals alike with large numbers attending the popular plant fairs. For children, there are also dozens of year-round activities. In an enlightened educational programme they are taught how to sow pumpkin seeds in the spring, plant them in the walled garden and then return in the autumn to carve their pumpkins.

This year alone Fota House, Arboretum & Gardens will have received over 70,000 visitors. The Trust's project 'Bringing Fota's Walled Garden back to life' was recognized with the award of the European Union's prestigious Europa Nostra prize for cultural heritage. However, for Kevin Baird the restoration of the walled garden at Fota is more than just a prize-winning project, 'it's the epitome of what the Irish Heritage Trust is about – *bringing heritage to life for everyone to enjoy and to benefit our society*'.



The transformation of the walled garden reflects also the wider restoration work at Fota House, an elegant Regency mansion designed by 19th-century architects Richard and William Morrison. The extensive conservation works by John O'Connell Architects transformed the property and also ensured that the first floor rooms are accessible for visitors again. Art and furniture from the previous owners – the Earls of Barrymore and the Smith Barry family – had been sold off at various auctions since the 1970s but due to the generosity of the McCarthy Family of Cork and many others, precious items including the significant Richard Wood Collection which includes paintings by William Ashford, Robert Carver, Jonathan Fisher and Thomas Roberts have returned to Fota.

The Irish Heritage Trust's vision of 'people, place and participation' has allowed them to transform Fota House and Gardens from receiving €200,000 annual state

funding into a profitable cultural heritage experience that requires no special state support. In addition they have created nine full-time positions and five employment scheme jobs, which in turn generate tax revenue and spending in the local economy. In the 10 years since its foundation, the Trust has become a dynamic force in the Irish heritage sector and is starting to develop their successful model at other projects including Strokestown Park and Johnstown Castle.

The Irish Heritage Trust model represents, in fact, a huge change from how cultural heritage has evolved since the 1990s, when Ireland started to benefit from European Regional Development Funds. Although these welcome EU funds led to the establishment and improvement of many heritage projects across the country, the funding was for capital works only (i.e. building or restoration works) and

built up new audiences through many different events and activities. ‘Every year, we’ve been getting stronger’, says Kevin Baird and explains that the success of the Fota model is now helping projects like Strokestown Park and Johnstown Castle.

At Strokestown Park in County Roscommon, the Irish Heritage Trust (IHT) has embarked on a development programme that will see operational income gradually reduce the current philanthropy required to keep it open. The seat of the Mahon family since 1653, Strokestown Park was bought at auction in 1979 by local entrepreneur Jim Callery and the Westward Group from the last occupant, Olive Pakenham Mahon. Famously, Callery by chance discovered boxes containing the compelling estate archive including an 1846 letter from the tenants on the townland of Cloonahee, pleading with the landlord to provide some form of relief as

Strokestown Park that not only recognizes this international significance but also the importance of engaging the local community. To this end, the Trust is developing links with the diaspora, while at the same time restoring the relationship between the estate and the town, a complex one since Famine times. A first step was the establishment of an international Famine Summer School in 2015, which received US University course accreditation through Quinnipiac University in Connecticut. The inaugural event not only attracted international attention to Strokestown but generated substantial economic benefit for the town, while all accommodation in the area was booked out and local businesses reported a 60% increase in turnover. The Irish Heritage Trust also intends to reinstate the formal avenue that once connected the main street with the Big House. Like in the ‘Secret Garden’ at Fota, this part of the demesne had become completely overgrown, further adding to the separation of estate and town.

The IHT’s success lies arguably in its talent to identify and share the unique story of each project. In their latest venture at Johnstown Castle the Trust is partnering with Castle owners Teagasc (the national agricultural research body) and the Irish Agricultural Museum. Their work will focus on telling Johnstown Castle’s fascinating transformation from the family seat of the Esmond and Grogans to a pioneering agricultural research centre, when it was donated to the state in the 1940s. It was at Johnstown Castle that the fortunes of Irish Farming changed. Agricultural research carried out by Teagasc (formerly An Foras Talúntais) dramatically improved

soil nutrition and production nationally, which in turn led to farming becoming a major contributor to Ireland’s economy. The Trust will not only ‘unlock’ the former research laboratories to tell this compelling story but will also open up what is believed to be Ireland’s largest servants’ tunnel.

As in the case of Fota, the objective is ambitious – to turn the castle from receiving annual state funding to becoming self-supporting within a time span of 10 years.

Developing heritage projects through strategic partnerships, as in the case of Johnstown Castle and Strokestown Park, is a model that the Irish Heritage Trust is currently preparing for its latest venture – ‘Unlocking No 11’. Located on Parnell Square – Dublin’s North-Georgian cultural quarter, which also includes the Gate Theatre, The Hugh Lane, the Irish Writer’s Centre and the proposed new City Library – No 11 is the headquarters of Poetry Ireland and the Irish Heritage Trust.

Together they have embarked on an ambitious programme to own, restore, revive and enhance the 250-year-old building that once was the townhouse of the Ormond family and, in the last century, Dublin and then Fingal County Council Headquarters. The plan is to create a new cultural hub that will house the Seamus Heaney Working Library and engage with a range of educational, arts, culture and heritage organizations. The design is by McCullough Mulvin Architects.

But in a busy heritage sector, which includes organizations like the OPW, historic house owners, the Heritage Council, the Irish Georgian Society, An Taisce and the Irish Landmark Trust, has the IHT managed to carve out its own space and purpose? The answer lies in its

unique proposition to place *people* at the centre of heritage. For Baird the restoration of places is ‘only half the story – the real magic happens afterwards’. He explains that the Trust’s vision is about ‘people, place and participation’, based on the premise that ‘the more people take ownership in a place, the stronger it can be’. Baird says this occurs from Board level, all volunteers led by Chairman James Osborne, to every property where the Trust invests both in its core staff and the enthusiastic team of volunteers through an ongoing Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programme. The Irish Heritage Trust also carries out training through a master-class programme including furniture restoration and other conservation skills. Through these programmes, many talented individuals donate their time, skills and passion to projects.

It is clear that the IHT has been filling a gap in the heritage sector, complementing the work of other important organizations such as the OPW, which cares for major state properties like Dublin Castle, Farmleigh, Castletown House and Kilkenny Castle apart from the National Monuments, and the Irish Landmark Trust, which rescues and restores smaller heritage properties, such as lighthouses and gate lodges. The IHT’s track record in bringing special places to life in addition to reducing cost to the state, as demonstrated at Fota, puts the Trust itself on a sound footing. Only a third of its annual budget now comes from the Department of Arts, Heritage Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (down from 100% in 2006) and the Trust generates the remaining funds from operational activities and fund-raising.

At the end of its first decade, the Irish Heritage Trust is moving ahead with renewed confidence. ■

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many projects did not have a strategy for ongoing public engagement. A 2003 report *A Future for Irish Historic Houses* – written by Terence Dooley and supported by the Irish Georgian Society – expressed grave concerns for the future of the ‘Big House’ and encouraged the government to set up a charitable trust like the National Trust in the UK.

All this research led to the establishment of the Irish Heritage Trust in 2006, supported by the Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government. In recognition of the scale of the endeavour there was a substantial budget earmarked, however, as in the case of so many projects, a large proportion of this was cut when the recession hit a year later. Fota attracted funding in time and, over a period of years, has

their potato crop had failed. Realizing the importance of their discovery, Jim Callery decided to make this unique resource openly accessible by setting up the Irish National Famine Museum in the former stable yard – a project for which architect Orna Hanly received an RIAI Irish Architecture Award. This was followed by the restoration of the extensive estate gardens. Strokestown’s extraordinary cultural heritage is internationally recognized. Professor Christopher Ridgway, Curator at Castle Howard, says Strokestown Park ‘has a range of assets that most properties in Ireland and many in the UK would envy for their potential; it also has a future international platform that few houses anywhere can match’. The IHT has been developing a bespoke solution for

4 The restored Victorian glasshouses at Fota House

5 The drawing room of Fota House with landscapes by William Ashford and Thomas Roberts, among others, on loan from the Richard Wood Collection

6 Fota House is located on Fota Island; it was designed by Richard Morrison and his son William Vitruvius Morrison

7 Jim Callery bought Strokestown in 1979 and cared for it until Irish Heritage Trust became involved in 2015

8 Kevin Baird CEO of Irish Heritage Trust giving a talk at the Strokestown Famine Summer School