

PRESERVING OUR HERITAGE

UCD's Programme for the Preservation of Period Houses has seen many of the important buildings on campus, and off, restored to their former glory.

Ann O'Dea reports



Merville House today: its original owner lends his name to Foster Avenue

THE GRAND plans for the development of Belfield campus are well documented with results of the Gateway architectural competition due this summer, but this is only part of the bigger picture. Under the watchful eyes of Sean Brennan and Aidan Grannell in the Buildings & Services Department, many of the architecturally important houses at Belfield, Carysfort and in the city centre have been sensitively restored and allocated more appropriate uses over recent years.

Indeed, it is in the cleverly restored courtyard buildings of Belfield House, now the offices of Buildings & Services, that I sit down with Sean and Aidan to chat about the projects to date. Sporting alumni will remember that these buildings housed much of the sporting equipment, rugby changing rooms and baths until recent years – we in the Canoe Club used it to store our canoes. Today they are almost unrecognisable — the old stone walls remain but pretty replacement sash windows sparkle, and comfortable modern offices occupy the interiors of what were basically old outhouses.

Financing the restoration

Having made a submission of interest in 2001, UCD was delighted to be selected to house the prestigious Clinton Institute, and the resulting funding paid for the restoration of Belfield House, whose parquet floors still bore the marks of rugby studs. It all fitted well with the strategy to obtain outside funding for the preservation programme, according to UCD's Bursar Eamonn Ceannt.

"After carrying out the restorations at Newman House on Stephen's Green some 10 years ago, we decided to put the programme in place to restore all the houses, which are an important part of Irish heritage," says Ceannt. "The Newman House restoration was funded through sponsorship from the Gallagher Group, and the aim was to gradually raise funding and restore the other important buildings as we could."

And there were many. The Belfield campus alone is made up from the land of 11 different suburban estates: Ardmore, Belfield, Belgrove, Merville, Roebuck Castle, Roebuck Grove, Roebuck House, Richview, Rosemont, Thornfield and Woodview. Sadly not all of the houses remain, but seven are still intact.

Belfield House

Belfield House, a fine, compact and elegant country house, is very much linked to the sporting history of UCD, purchased by the university in the 1930s, along with its lands, for the purpose of sporting endeavour, at a time when the scholarly pursuits were still based in the city. Today it stands pristine, its distinctive yellow lime render restored, after extensive renovations. Its fine reception rooms have been returned to their original purpose, in a renovation project handled sensitively by architects Fitzgerald Kavanagh.

Originally built in 1801 by Ambrose Moore of the La Touche family, its large bow window overlooks Dublin Bay, while its entrance hall and Oval Room boast fine neo-classical plasterwork in the Adams style — common to many of the fine Dublin houses of the



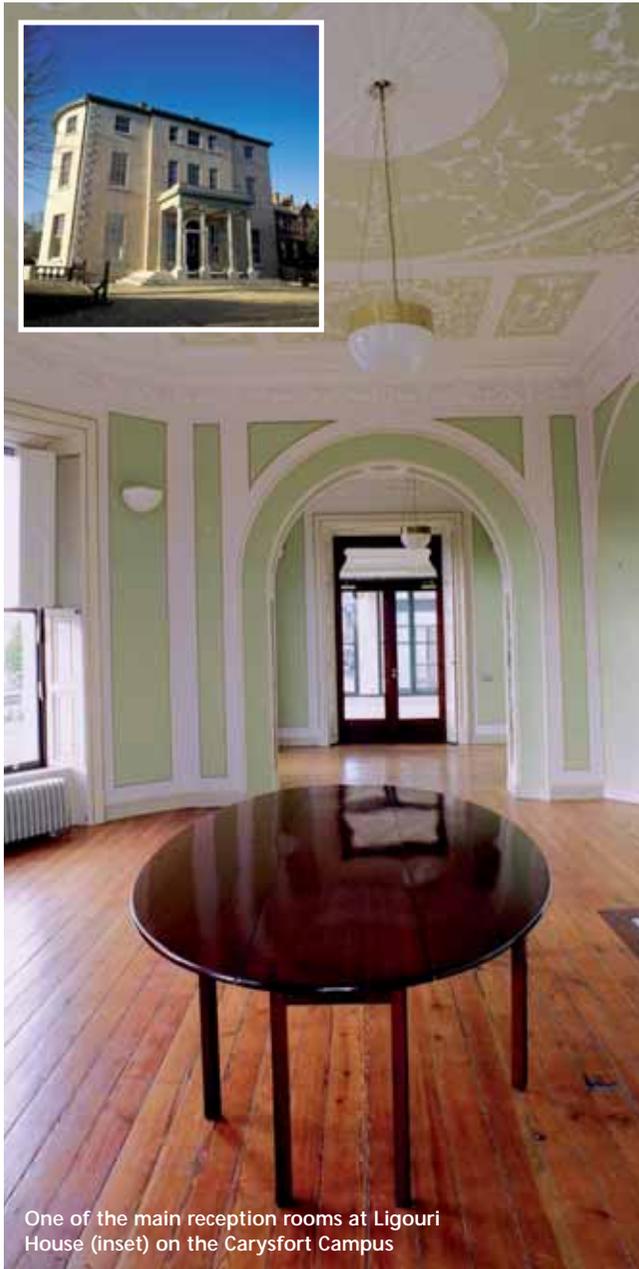
day. Indeed, the Oval Room was a feature of many great Irish houses, and Irish-born architect James Hoban is believed to have been inspired by these when designing the White House in Washington. Appropriate then that today it houses the UCD Clinton Institute for American Studies.

"This house was of particular importance to us," says Sean Brennan. "After all it's the first house that was purchased here and represents the beginnings of the Belfield campus. We're delighted with the result. Anne Fitzgerald has done a marvelous job on the project. Fitzgerald of Fitzgerald Kavanagh was the architect on this and the Ligouri House project.

"We have restored the integrity of the spacious reception rooms on the ground floor and removed any unsympathetic add-ons from over the years," says Fitzgerald. And the reception rooms will now serve a purpose not unlike their original usage — to receive important visitors in elegant and impressive surroundings.

Merville House

"Every year, we try to find the funding to finance another restoration," says Ceannt. "The first to be tackled under the



One of the main reception rooms at Ligouri House (inset) on the Carysfort Campus

Programme for Preservation of Period Houses was Merville House, and again here we linked it up with funding for the NovaUCD Innovation Centre.”

Undoubtedly one of the finest houses on campus, and indeed in south Dublin, Merville was built around 1750 for the Right Honourable Anthony Foster, then chief baron of the Irish Exchequer. Foster Avenue still bears his name. Upon his death in 1778, the house passed to his son, Sir John Foster, the last speaker of the Irish House of Commons. It subsequently passed through various hands until the Hume Dudgeons took up residence there in 1890. Col. Joseph Hume-

Dudgeon set up the renowned riding school, which was still in place when purchased by UCD in 1958. Several of the surviving stable-yard buildings were renovated to form part of the Nova centre.

The concept for the centre was to restore the magnificent house as the centrepiece of a complex of subsidiary buildings that surround it. The whole project was funded by a unique public-private partnership, involving AIB, Arthur Cox, Deloitte, Ericsson, Goodbody Stockbrokers and Xilinx who contributed 75% of the €10 million raised to develop the first two phases. The balance of funds was contributed by Enterprise Ireland and UCD.

While many essential fabric repairs had been carried out over the years, the house was in need of significant restoration, says chief architect, Brian Kavanagh of Kavanagh Tuite. “The ground floor had to be reconstructed, the floors were in poor shape and we brought in a specialist gesso contractor and plaster restorer to painstakingly repair the wonderful plasterwork.”

The elegant reception rooms have been restored to their former glory, having previously by necessity been employed for academic use, according to Kavanagh. “Now these rooms can again be used much more suitably as reception rooms, conferencing facilities and formal areas for the Nova centre.” All other activities are housed in the modern wing and converted coach houses, which have been cleverly designed so as not to detract from the old house.

Ligouri House (formerly the Grey House)

At the Carysfort campus, again there was a fair deal of ingenuity employed in getting the lovely Ligouri House back to its best. “We wanted to build 2,500 residences at Carysfort, and it was decided to incorporate the old Grey House into the development,” explains Ceannt. “This allowed the restoration to be funded by an overall commercial package to manage and run the residences.”

Renamed Ligouri House in honour of the pioneering educator Mother Ligouri Keenan who first made it a college, the house is believed to have been built in 1804 or 1805 by John Joshua Proby. Restoration of the four-storey Palladian block, with bow ends, was completed in 2004, again under the auspices of architects Fitzgerald Kavanagh. According to Anne Fitzgerald, later partitions were removed, as was the faulty cement rendering which was replaced with the breathable lime render in pinkish brown that gives it its distinctive appearance today. The majority of the original floorboards were saved and reinstated, as were the decorative plaster ceilings.

Today, according to Brennan, the upper levels serve as faculty apartments, the garden-level floor houses the Drama Studies centre and the Hall level is used for formal receptions. The parterre garden has been restored to its Victorian scheme.

University Lodge (formerly Roebuck Grove)

University Lodge, the official residence of UCD presidents past and present, has an elegant Greek façade thought to have been added around 1840 to an earlier, more modest Georgian villa or even farmhouse. It too has been transformed through a sensitive



The fine Greek façade at University Lodge, the official residence of university presidents past and present



The plasterwork in the great stairs of No 86, Newman House, by renowned stuccoist Robert West

restoration project completed in 2004. To date the one exception to the funding strategy has been the lodge, for which funds had to be found internally — causing some controversy at the time.

“Unfortunately, time constraints meant we had to carry out the badly needed restorations in an eight-month time period between one president leaving and the other arriving,” says Ceannt. “Indeed, we had to ask President Hugh Brady to delay his move for several months even at that. It just didn’t allow time for fundraising.”

According to Desmond Barry of Sheehan & Barry Architects who worked on the restoration, the difficulty of accessing the property during tenure of various UCD presidents meant that “the house had become somewhat rundown and lacked the full range of services required in a modern residence”. He adds that it was unsuitable for its second role as a venue for public events. “It did not even have a separate catering area — the family kitchen had to be used when receptions were held there.”

Barry explains how the house has now been cleverly restored, so that the fine formal rooms of the Greek revival section can be employed for public receptions, while the rear section of the house allows the president and his family to live a normal life with the privacy they might expect.

“The fine architectural features of the original building have now been returned to their former splendour giving the lodge a new lease of life,” he concludes.

Newman House

Sheehan & Barry Architects were also responsible for the much-lauded restoration in the 1990s of 85 and 86, St Stephen’s Green, collectively known as Newman House. Both houses are often cited as the model of good conservation practice, and visited annually by groups of scholars who want to better appreciate conservation architecture or indeed the history of important period townhouses in Ireland.

No 86 was where the Catholic University first started teaching classes back in 1854. Its neighbour No 85 was purchased 11 years later, after the death of its then owner Judge Ball. While both are

marvelous examples of 18th-century architecture, the 25 years that separate them in age mean that they have greatly contrasting styles.

Designed by the country’s leading architect of the day Richard Castle for Hugh Montgomery, MP for Fermanagh, and started around 1738, the earlier No 85 is a splendid example of the more restrained Palladian style. No 86, built for Richard Chapel Whaley in 1765, is of the later, more flamboyant Rococo style. These differences are reflected in the impressive but contrasting plasterwork in both, all of which has been meticulously restored and preserved.

“The plasterwork in No 85 is an example of the wonderful work of the Lafranchini brothers, Paul and Philip, superb craftsmen who were in great demand among the owners of fine country houses in Ireland,” says Ruth Ferguson, curator and fount of knowledge when it comes to Newman House. “The ceiling in the Saloon and the plaster reliefs in the Apollo room are fantastic examples of Baroque influences in Dublin in the first half of the 18th century.”

In contrast, in the later No 86, everything is bigger and bolder. The remarkable plasterwork is the craftsmanship of Robert West, widely regarded as Ireland’s greatest stuccoist. “The walls and ceilings of the great stairs are quite remarkable,” says Ferguson. Today it is all preserved carefully for posterity and can be visited in the summer months, or by appointment. It was this remarkable restoration job that was undertaken in the 1990s that inspired the Programme for Preservation of Period Houses.

And the work will go on, says Ceannt. Ardmore House has been partially restored in order to keep its integrity while awaiting funding, while Woodview is also earmarked for attention. Roebuck Castle, one of the most significant buildings on the Belfield campus, will benefit partially from funding donated by Peter Sutherland for a new Law School (see page 22). A lot has been done, but there’s a lot more to do.

Ann O’Dea (BA ’90, MA ’92) holds a Diploma in the Fine & Decorative Arts awarded by the Institute of Professional Auctioneers and Valuers and the Irish Antique Dealers Association. Her thesis Anatomy of an Irish Country House and Gardens c.1730-2004: The Altamont Estate was awarded first prize in 2004.