

THE SEAT OF POWERS

Until brought to heel by the Tudors, the Norman Power family ruled the Waterford area in Ireland as a personal fiefdom for some 500 years. In the 1770s, to mark a new alliance, one of its four castles was transformed into a monumental Neoclassical pile, complete with James Wyatt interiors, Rococo stucco work and dynastic portraits aplenty – fitting, says Cosmo Brockway, for one of the nation's largest landowners and mightiest clans. Photography: Mark Luscombe-Whyte





Previous pages: the barrel-vaulted entrance hall is a triumph of James Wyatt, whose original plans from 1778 lie in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. At the foot of the stairs, a pair of French gilt-bronze-and-pewter electroliers stand sentinel atop scagliola pedestals. Opposite: in the Blue Drawing Room, the Adam ceiling incorporates roundels by Peter de Gree and semicircular panels attributed to Antonio Zucchi. A 17th-century Lombardy commode seen here at far left is an important piece of furniture. Below: a portrait of Catherine the Great – an unlikely sighting in rural County Waterford – was purchased in the 19th century from an estate sale of the Duke of Hamilton's London town house. The exquisite Axminster carpet dates from 1770 but retains its brilliant colour



Underneath the dancing plasterwork of the inner hall comes a very Irish juxtaposition – shaggy floor mats placed with aristocratic nonchalance at the doorways of Wyatt’s dining room and the Blue Drawing Room. In the coppery glow of the former can be seen Flemish painter Peter de Gree’s oval grisaille panels of the gods of Olympus and other Classical subjects, intended to imitate bas-reliefs

Gallegons arriving into Waterford harbour in the mid-1750s would soon find themselves at the mercy of a lady on a mission. Dropping anchor in the Irish Sea from the hazy climes of the Ottoman Straits, the Cape of Good Hope and Polynesia, they had a bounty of shimmering seashells that Catherine Beresford, Countess of Tyrone, was after. She would climb aboard and sift through the clams, the calico scallops and conches, much to the sailors’ bemusement. The shells were taken by carriage to her nearby estate of Curraghmore and, ‘with her own proper hands’, Lady Tyrone encased the walls of a grotto with swirls and stalactites across three circular apses, over 261 days. The subterranean splendour inspires awe still.

The aristocratic shell-fancier was a great heiress in her youth, daughter of the mighty Power family, who first came there in the 12th century descended from an advisor to Henry II, Sir Robert le Poer. Before being killed in battle by ‘Gaelic bandits’, Le Poer established a clan that ruled this part of Munster as their own personal fiefdom until tamed under the Tudors and, cannily, raised by Henry VIII to the title of barons Le Power and Coroghmore.

Inheritor of this fiery legacy, Catherine was married at 15 to a magnate from the North, Sir Marcus Beresford, and brought Curraghmore, an enormous estate, as her dowry. The couple became progenitors of one of the country’s most colourful political dynasties, producing 15 children in between transforming Catherine’s ancestral seat with the help of noted local architect John Roberts, as well as Italian *stuccodores* the Lafranchini brothers.

A great, grey palazzo wrapped about the bones of a Medieval tower house, Curraghmore (from the Celtic *corogh more*, meaning ‘great bog’) exudes pomp and circumstance. Its romance is undeniable still – to drive through the winding avenue, sunlight flashing through the gnarled pink chestnut trees, is to feel the flutter of anticipation mounting. Flecked by flocks of ring-necked pheasants and passing the oldest stone bridge in the country, the road comes to a bend, wrought-iron gates rise to view and, with a climactic crash, the house comes into sight. Centuries of breath-catching at the same moment.

The entrance court, the largest in the country, was compared to the Esterházy Palace at Eisenstadt by one 19th-century visitor. Its curved curtain walls, in crisp stonework, with their statue-filled niches and Gibbsian doorways, lead the eye to the façade’s vast plate-glass windows – a relic of Victorian ‘improvements’ by Samuel Ussher Roberts. The central block is dramatically crowned with the silhouette of the stag of Saint Hubert mounted with a crucifix. The quasi-religious adornment once saved the house from destruction in the 1920s, when a rebel intent on burning Curraghmore to the ground caught a glimpse of it in the moonlight and, assuming the incumbent family to be good Catholics, extinguished his match.

The entrance hall could hardly be more Irish, with its barrel-vaulted ceiling and peeling ice-blue walls. It is dominated by a mammoth portrait of 1758 by John Astley, which depicts the Le Poer Beresford tribe, gazing across to a pride of lions peering through long grass in an etched-glass box. ‘It was all the trophies in this hall that are my earliest memories as a child,’ recalls the present owner Henry, the current Marquis of Waterford, as we stand gazing up. ‘Most of them have been removed and they exist only in my memory now.’

The first rapture of James Wyatt’s Neoclassical garlands are found in the inner hall, dancing around a splendid forest of ancestral sprigs in oils. The paintings include those by Louisa, Third Marchioness, a noted Pre-Raphaelite and descendant of the explorer/poet Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Her goodness to the local people and artistic flair meant her death was lyrically described as ‘the ceasing of exquisite music’ by biographer Augustus Hare. Henry points out a wooden birching block, carried off from Eton as a prank by Louisa’s husband, the Third Marquis. ‘You can see two small pieces are missing: my ancestor had them mounted in silver, made into snuffboxes and sent to his former headmaster and provost,’ he says with a laugh, before showing me a crack on the cantilevered granite staircase caused by a horse being ridden up it by another 19th-century relative.

In New York’s Metropolitan Museum can be seen Wyatt’s designs for the dining

room, where meals are eaten on an Irish damask tablecloth stitched with the date, 1875, below a tiny coronet. In this ravishing room, I watch the smoke from candles wisp up towards ethereal roundels depicting the four seasons, painted by either Antonio Zucchi or his more celebrated wife, Angelica Kauffmann. ‘Everything looked like enchantment... mythological pieces painted with the utmost skill of the artist.’ So wrote a distant relation, the diarist Dorothea Herbert, after a ball here in honour of the future William IV. Accounts of that evening recall the lusty Hanoverian insisting on kissing each woman present and positioning himself by the door ‘so as not to miss a single one’.

Henry and his wife, Amanda, who inherited the estate in 2015, have had all the paintings in the Blue Drawing Room restored to their original brio. They are as mystified as I am by a cuckoo-like portrait of Catherine the Great, topped with a gilt crown. The doughty imperatrix is hung next to a richly brocaded screen, woven with textiles from Marie Antoinette’s rooms in Versailles. ‘The fabric came to us in a strange way,’ recounts Amanda: ‘Somehow they had ended up in Hamburg, perhaps looted in the revolution, and were very nearly destroyed in a great fire of 1842 in that city, but were presented to a past châtelaine and, happily, now lie safe in the depths of County Waterford.’

The grisaille panels by Peter de Gree are a triumph of *trompe l’oeil*. That Dutch artist’s hand at Curraghmore is made all the more poignant by his rather tragic, brief life. Having arrived in the country with a dazzling introduction by the then lord-lieutenant, the Duke of Rutland, De Gree became de rigueur among the Irish *ton*. He charged far too little for his glorious work, however, most of his meagre earnings being sent back to his parents in Antwerp. Dying in penury in his Georgian garret in Dublin, he left a legacy in great houses such as Curraghmore – proving, perhaps, that these palaces belong to the craftsmen and artists who made them what they are, as much as the vaunted families within © Curraghmore House, Portlaw, County Waterford, Ireland X91 X598. To book a tour, ring 00 353 051 387101, or visit curraghmorehouse.ie







Previous pages: in Wyatt's glorious dining room, a George II stained-limewood-and-mahogany pier table in the manner of William Kent stands to the right of the fireplace, alongside a marble bust of the Duke of Wellington by Humphrey Hopper. Opposite: arrayed in the Yellow Drawing Room can be seen a 1771 portrait of Marcus, Lord La Poer, by Gainsborough Dupont (nephew of Thomas), and above it, George, First Marquis of Waterford, by Gilbert Stuart. This page: a Stephen Slaughter portrait of the Earl of Tyrone hangs above the fireplace. To the right can be seen a contemporary portrait of Lady Alice Beresford, artist sister of the present Lord Waterford



Opposite: in the inner hall, the cantilevered staircase sports a crack (not visible here) after having been mounted by a family member on horseback in the 19th century. A pretty George III painted camelback sofa serves as an elegant foil to the collection of sombre family portraits hung on the wall above. This page: accorded a special box, Victorian fire buckets filled with sand line a bedroom corridor



Above: atmosphere abounds in a guest bedroom with its George III mahogany tester bed, c1780, and eccentrically layered carpets. Opposite: in the first-floor billiards room, unseen by the visiting public, a Burroughes & Watts late 19th-century table stands below a splendid Rococo ceiling by the Lafranchini brothers. Paolo (1695–1776) and his younger brothers Filippo (1702–79) and Pietro-Natale (1705–88) were the most celebrated ‘stuccodores’ of their day. Their work can still be seen in many of the greatest Irish country houses