



Castletown in State ownership: reviving an Italianate palazzo, 1994-2017

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CASTLETOWN, IN THE WORDS OF THE LATE KEVIN B. NOWLAN, FORMER CHAIRMAN OF the Castletown Foundation, ‘is a great Italian palace in the Liffey valley’,¹ a description that deftly encapsulates the successful confluence of a distinct design and a particular locale. It acknowledges the international scale and significance of this neo-Palladian country house, which opens up to embrace the landscape and vistas towards the river and the Wicklow Mountains. Maintaining Castletown’s integrity in this natural setting and preserving it for the enjoyment of current and future generations has been the task of the Office of Public Works (OPW) for the past twenty-four years. This article offers an overview of Castletown’s revitalisation under OPW management since the house, a surrounding thirteen acres of land, and the Conolly Folly came into State ownership in 1994. It charts the major stages in the conservation of the house’s interior, the restoration of its wings, designed landscape and farmyard, each step reinforcing the link between the house and its setting, enhancing our understanding of its history, and offering visitors an enjoyable experience.

When the Castletown Foundation transferred ownership of Castletown to the State in 1994, the building was in need of extensive repair. An OPW team, led by Kevin Conolly and John Cahill and comprising conservation architects, structural engineers and mechanical specialists, began the urgent work. In the first phase, external repairs to the roof, the parapet and the cornice of the main block were completed. The main block was covered with a protective temporary external roof that allowed the entire roof and parapet to be dismantled and repaired (Plate 1).² The original quarry in Edenderry was reopened in order to provide suitable replacement stone, ‘hand-tooled to match the originals’.³

In parallel with the external repairs, non-destructive investigative works were

*1 – Parapet removed and roof works in progress under protective roof
(photo: Frank Fennell Photography; courtesy Office of Public Works)*



2 – Load-testing in the Long Gallery using bricks
(photo: Frank Fennell Photography)



3 – The Hunting Room in the east wing prior to restoration
(photo: Davison & Associates)



4 – The Hunting Room restored as an events venue, April 2012
(photo: Dara Mulhern)

(all photos courtesy OPW)

carried out, including load-testing the timber beams in the Long Gallery (Plate 2). The house contents – the majority of which are the property of the Castletown Foundation – were removed to environmentally stable storage facilities. The second phase of work involving ideal solutions for modern heating, power, emergency lighting, smoke detection and lift requirements began.⁴ This service installation phase was completed in 1998. The third phase then followed, focusing on internal finishes in the main block and on installing a reheat kitchen, coffee shop and security room in the basement. The ceiling of the Long Gallery was strengthened and the plasterwork conserved before the house contents were returned.⁵ The front and rear steps were removed, repaired and relaid, and the colonnades' plaster ceilings and west kitchen wing's roof were repaired. Castletown reopened to the public in 1999, but conservation continued (Plate 5).

Another extensive programme of works took place in 2006 and 2007. Careful paint analysis informed the selection of paint colours for the main house interiors, and lighting improvements, plaster and joinery repairs, and the conservation of the original mahogany handrails and doors, all contributed to 'the overall enhancement of the historic interior'.⁶ The magnificent cantilevered staircase, which had been closed for a time, passed load-testing successfully in May 2007 and was subsequently reopened to the public.⁷ Original timber panelling on the disused second floor was refreshed and the floors carefully repaired and cleaned to reveal their natural patina. This allowed a gallery to join this floor's OPW-Maynooth University Archive and Research Centre, launched by President Mary McAleese in 2008.⁸ The Centre facilitates access to collections related to the history of Irish estates and holds several collections relating to Castletown and to other historic houses. During 2006-07, the kitchen wing also received considerable attention, with works revealing the unique character of the Old Kitchen, Housekeeper's Room and Ironing Room and incorporating an upgrade of the café and visitor services. Not surprisingly, this side of the house then became a magnet for visitors.

In 2009, craftsmen from *Vetzeria Artistica Galliano Ferro*, a Venetian firm of historic glass-makers, came to Castletown to clean and restore the set of three Murano glass chandeliers in the Long Gallery. These date back to the 1770s and are unique in Ireland (Plate 6).⁹ More recently, the Red Drawing Room's nineteenth-century silk wall-hangings and interiors were carefully conserved, a project realised in partnership with the Castletown Foundation and the Apollo Foundation, and discussed elsewhere in this volume by Christopher Moore (see pp.108-23). All these conservation projects were informed by research, and the current preparation of a conservation management plan will guide Castletown's management in years to come. Commending both the OPW's significant investment in preserving this historic site, and its staff's dedication, the Heritage Council awarded Castletown House full accreditation under its Museum Standards for Ireland Programme in 2012 and renewed its accreditation in 2016.¹⁰

Once the main block had been transformed into a safe museum environment and the kitchen wing converted into an attractive hub catering to visitors' needs, attention shifted to the former stable wing and east courtyard with the intention of restoring these



5 – View of Castletown's façade, June 2016

(photo: Will Pryce; courtesy COUNTRY LIFE Picture Library)

‘for public use incidental to the house’.¹¹ The proposal submitted to Fáilte Ireland in 2008 by the OPW Architectural Services argued that the conversion of the stable wing would both create a unique venue in close proximity to the capital – one which broke the mould of ‘the homogenous venues that are on offer’ – and would contribute to ‘the original concept of a demesne house ... where the productivity of each element is important for the support of the house’.¹² The project’s main purpose was to provide public access to the first floor of the stable wing and to connect this wing to the main house. With financial support of €3.5 million from Fáilte Ireland, the OPW’s project team, led by Angela Rolfe and external consultants, transformed the stable wing within four years of securing matched funding. The new Events & Conference Centre was launched by the then Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, Leo Varadkar, just before Christmas 2011.



Castletown's vaulted stables, executed according to plans designed by Edward Lovett Pearce, are arranged on either side of the coach house and supported by Tuscan columns. As Patricia McCarthy points out in her essay 'Stables and Horses in Ireland c.1630-1840', they set a trend which Pearce's assistant, Richard Castle, continued in the stables he built at Carton and elsewhere in Ireland.¹³ During restoration, the timber partitions, iron hayracks, mangers and iron fittings in the tack room were left *in situ* as a testament to the equestrian history of Castletown.¹⁴ The coach house was returned to its previous form, its twentieth-century concrete floor was replaced with a limestone flagged floor, and the blocked-up arches were reopened and fitted with double-leaf doors.

The stable wing's two upper floors had been substantially destroyed in a fire in 1975 and had subsequently been converted into three domestic apartments. Only the long room on the first floor, fitted out in 1871 to accommodate a large library, had retained some of its distinct character (Plate 3).¹⁵ A range of events now takes place under the

6 – *The Long Gallery* as
featured in *COUNTRY LIFE*,
July 2016

(photo: Will Pryce; courtesy
COUNTRY LIFE Picture Library)







7 – East wing and courtyard prior to restoration, with light streaming through the ‘magic door’ in the colonnade, January 2007 (courtesy OPW)



8 – East wing and courtyard following restoration with new quadrant building, April 2012 (photo: Dara Mulhern; courtesy OPW)



9 – Pond dredged and silt removed to be used elsewhere in the demesne for planting (photo by: Gretta Doyle; courtesy OPW)

Hunting Room's timber-boarded roof with its exposed trusses and ornate carvings (Plate 4). The original double height of the first-floor billiard room next to it was also restored. A lift, toilet facilities and a servery were installed to maximise the use of these spaces, and staff offices were added on the second floor.¹⁶

Unlike the link building behind the west colonnade, there had never been a physical connection between Castletown's stable wing and the central block. Instead, what the architects involved in the restoration referred to as a 'magic door' in the colonnade led directly into the east yard (Plate 7). Using materials that were sympathetic to the historic fabric, a new quadrant building was erected, linking the stable wing to the main house. It is just wide enough to accommodate a stairs and ramp, and narrow enough to be tucked within the depth of the existing annex building.¹⁷ The east courtyard received an external surface of limestone setts, making it accessible for public use in all weather (Plate 8).

A look at Castletown's vibrant annual events programme will reveal that this part of the house is in use throughout the year for events and exhibitions, concerts and theatre performances, and it is the home to the popular monthly country and craft markets. As intended, the stable wing is today once again a productive element in its own right, adding to the overall sustainability of the country house setting.

Equally important to the remit of protecting the integrity of Castletown and enhancing the visitor experience has been the preservation of the historic setting, which was greatly helped by acquisitions of land that had formed part of the historic demesne. In 1997 the State acquired one hundred acres south of the house, and in 2001 the farmyard. In 2007 the OPW restored even greater integrity to the estate footprint by acquiring the former Coillte woods north and east of Castletown House, the Celbridge gate lodges, the Batty Langley Lodge and their surrounding lands. Of the 580 acres sold at auction in 1965,¹⁸ by 2007 the State had slowly reassembled approximately 227 acres.

In tandem with the development of the Events and Conference Centre, and timed to coincide with the 300th anniversary of William Conolly's purchase of the Castletown estate in 1709, the OPW proposed a second major project under Fáilte Ireland's Capital Investment Programme, for which it received matched funding in 2011 – the restoration of the historic designed landscape and pathways between the house and the river Liffey.¹⁹ Informed by research completed by Finola O'Kane and John Olley of University College Dublin,²⁰ a multidisciplinary team led by conservation architect Gretta Doyle – and including a civil construction engineer, a hydrology engineer, an ecologist, a hydrologist, the head gardener, a historic landscape consultant, and the estate manager – carried out an ambitious programme across the demesne to restore the historic parklands and pathways. In 2007 a new entrance from the motorway and a temporary car park were built at some distance east of the house, removing all traffic from the sensitive and scenic areas in front of, and around, the house. Over the course of the next six years, the OPW's garden and landscape conservation team restored Castletown's eighteenth-century landscape, which, as Finola O'Kane demonstrates in her book *Landscape Design in Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, owes much to Lady Louisa Conolly. Under her care, the emphasis shifted



*10, 11 – Batty Langley Lodge prior to conservation, December 2007
and after restoration, July 2016*

(photos: Davison & Associates; courtesy Irish Landmark Trust)

towards the river Liffey to the south and away from the woodlands and avenues north of the house that had been the focus of attention for the first two generations of Conollys at Castletown.²¹ Lady Louisa's designed landscape included a network of paths around meadows and along waterways, with man-made accents carefully inserted into nature to create intimate, picturesque or downright dramatic settings – a classical temple here, a gothic lodge there, clusters of rare imported trees dotting wide open spaces, still ponds reflecting the house, gushing cascades and lively watercourses adding aural and visual effects.

A lot of this remarkable landscape had become overgrown or had disappeared from view entirely by 2007. In successive rounds of clearing, self-seeded trees and undergrowth were removed, the historic vistas towards the Conolly Folly and the Wonderful Barn – both created by Katherine Conolly in the first half of the eighteenth century – were opened up again, the completely silted-up lower pond was dredged (Plate 9), a tree survey, ecological surveys, a geophysical survey and archaeological excavations were carried out (in the process of which a bronze age burial ground was discovered on the front lawn). Once vegetation had been cleared and historic features made visible, structures could be repaired and the original paths south of the house relaid in accordance with his-

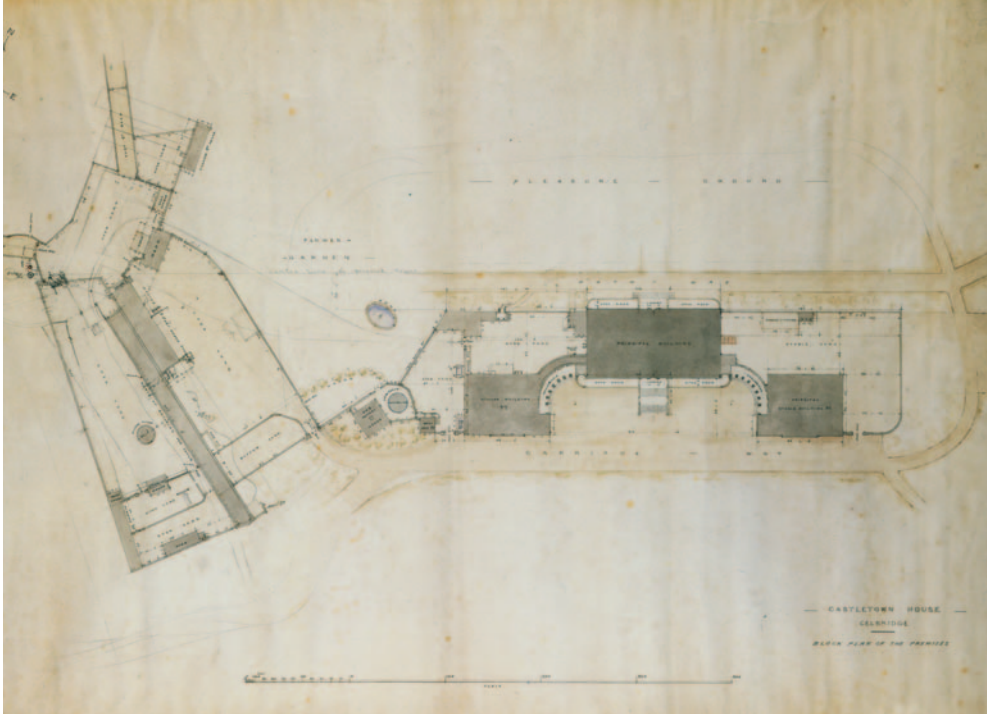


toric maps. Even the gravel was carefully chosen to be as close as possible to the historic paths, visible in, for example, George Barrett's *View of Castletown* from c.1764. From 2012 onwards, the demesne features were tackled one by one: Mrs Siddons' Temple exudes elegance again, with its step base uncovered and its columns and cornice conserved. A mound of clay and grass now covers the ice house. The ruin of the bathing house was made safe. The gothic Batty Langley Lodge, conserved with financial support from the OPW, was turned into an enchanting holiday accommodation (Plates 10, 11).²² The two cottages at the Celbridge gate were also conserved with financial support from OPW and they, too, are on long lease to the Irish Landmark Trust. The old stone bridges were repaired and additional wooden ones were made to straddle ha-has and watercourses in strategic places. The ha-ha walls, which function as crucial drainage throughout the estate, were also repaired, as was the dam at the end of the lower pond. Since the latter was refilled in early 2013, water has been rushing again down the restored cascade on its way to meet the Liffey (Plate 12). Visitors are now able to enjoy Castletown's parkland and the reciprocal views it affords. Data collected by people counters at various access points indicates the enduring popularity of Lady Louisa's designed landscape, with an average number of 50,000 people accessing the parkland each month in 2016. In July 2017 Castletown demesne received a Green Flag Award from An Taisce, as well as the Best Country House Park Pollinator Award in recognition of the sustainable and successful management of this wonderful natural resource.



*12 – View of Castletown from the refilled pond
(photo: Alex Keys; courtesy Fáilte Ireland)*

In 2016 a further element of the landscape was restored to the west and rear of the house – the former pleasure grounds. A survey drawing of Castletown from the 1850s, believed to be the work of Frederick Darley, clearly identifies the area behind the house as the pleasure grounds, and the area to the west – between the farmyard and west courtyard – as the flower garden (Plate 13). Evidence from the first (1837) and second (1870) edition Ordnance Survey maps and the 25” Ordnance Survey map (1899) shows that this part of the garden underwent considerable development in the nineteenth century when the walls and buildings that enclosed the garden were removed, although the linear flower beds and paths remained. Some time after 1840 and before 1870, a pond was created with an island to the west of the farmyard. By 1900 this pond had been extended to meet the area that formed the flower garden, erasing the clear distinction between pleasure grounds and flower garden, and signalling, it would seem, a transition to a more ornamental, less horticulturally demanding area. Archaeological exploration in 2012 revealed the infilled remains of a large oval water feature that corresponds to one included in the 1850s drawing by Darley. Other early garden features were probably levelled when a tennis court was installed in the western end of the garden in the 1940s/50s.²³ In the decades following the sale of the house in 1965, the area had become overgrown. It has now been restored as an enclosed flower garden offering a pleasurable retreat for visitors and an area for pri-



13 – Frederick Darley (attrib.), plan of Castletown House
with pleasure grounds behind the house, c.1850s (photo: Davison & Associates)

vate outdoor events (Plates 14, 15). Existing features such as a cypress grove and yew walk were incorporated into the design, and flower borders were planted against the western, eastern and south-eastern boundary fences. A path leads around the central lawn and to the cart gate into the farmyard.

This connection between the newly opened pleasure grounds and the farmyard has enabled the development of a new visitor experience distinct from touring the house or visiting the parklands. A key component in facilitating this new element is the restoration of the farmyard, which formed part of the original project proposal to Fáilte Ireland in 2008, together with the stable wing renovation and the landscape restoration, but did not receive funding. At the time, it was envisioned that the farmyard buildings could be converted, restored and refurbished to house a visitor orientation hub, plant centre, café, and home farm with some livestock. A new extension with public toilet facilities and a lift was proposed to allow universal access to all levels of the former cowshed, the largest farm building, including the top floor, which accommodates a room that measures almost 80m. Enabling works started in early 2009, and specialist contractors were hired for stone repairs, repointing and replastering, as well as roofing repairs to protect the integrity of the historic fabric. Phase two is ongoing and comprises the restoration and adaptation of the individual buildings and associated landscaping works.



14 – Pleasure grounds prior to restoration, January 2016
(photo: Liam Murphy)

15 – Pleasure grounds after completion, autumn 2016
(photo: Kevina Dunne)

16 – Upper paddock in the farmyard with view of the piggery and steam house, 2008
(photo: Davison & Associates; courtesy OPW)

opposite



17 – Upper paddock with restored piggery and steam house, July 2017
(photo: the author; courtesy OPW)

(all photos courtesy OPW)





Like the parkland, the home farm in Castletown was built to specifications from Lady Louisa Conolly in the 1780s to conform to her ideas of improved function and form. In a letter to her sister Emily, Duchess of Leinster, from 29th December 1787, Louisa joked that her delay in writing might be forgiven by sampling some of the produce from her recently built farm:

...when you come to eat some of the excellent pork, bacon, and ham that I hope our new piggery will afford, the good butter, cream and cheese that our new cow house (I hope) will produce, and the fine beef that our new bullock hovel will (I make no doubt) also furnish, I think that you will also pardon my neglect of writing, and allow that my time has been well-bestowed. Joking apart, we have engaged in a great deal of building of that sort which has required my constant attention, being the chief overseer, and having, as you know, great amusement in it. I am very proud of having made fifty cheeses this summer, which next year will nearly keep the family in that article, and my dairy is grown quite an object with me.²⁴

A travel account written ten years later, in 1797, confirms this positive assessment of the home farm in Castletown and makes a point of referencing the productivity of one aspect as particularly noteworthy:

Within these few years, Lady Louisa Conolly, wife to the present proprietor, and sister to the present Duke of Richmond, has erected a most spacious piggery, adjoining to the house, planned with the greatest neatness and convenience for the breed of that species of animal, containing several hundreds of beautifully-mottled and striped swine, of very curious colours.²⁵

Since 2015 the carefully conserved piggery and adjacent smaller buildings in the upper paddock of the farmyard have been reopened to the public as a venue for children's art workshops over the summer months and, more recently, as the home of a visiting pet

farm on summer weekends (Plates 16, 17). At present, the main farm building (the former cowshed) is being restored by the OPW team, and significant progress has been made to reintegrate this complex into the running of the demesne: service trenches have been dug and mechanical and electrical services installed, the cobbles conserved, windows inserted, doors repaired, and floors strengthened. In July 2017 two fully finished rooms at ground-floor level welcomed young visitors to the Big Brick Exhibition. It is hoped that once the remainder of the building is restored and accessible, it will serve as a resource that nurtures a playful, engaged encounter with Castletown's legacy and unique natural setting.

Of necessity, an overview of the work of over two decades condenses conservation and restoration projects into a few paragraphs and risks glossing over the vision, determination and sheer effort involved in realising their success, not to mention the countless smaller interventions that are part of the daily management of the site. All of these add to the way we can enjoy and experience Castletown today, and while the twenty-four years it has been in the ownership of the OPW account for little in Castletown's almost 300-year-long history, the long list of projects completed in the course of this short period is an achievement of which to be proud. In outlining the many steps that were involved, I hope that this article serves not just as an opportune reminder of these achievements, but also as a source of inspiration as we plan for Castletown's future. Just as importantly, I hope that it serves as testimony to the powerful connection that still exists today between the locale and the many individuals who have revitalised Castletown over this period, including the many staff, past and present, of the Office of Public Works.



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ENDNOTES

The following abbreviations are used: OPW Office of Public Works

- ¹ Castletown House audio tour, script written by Tom Swift, produced by the Performance Corporation.
- ² Caroline Pegum, *Building for Government: the architecture of State Buildings, OPW, Ireland, 1900-2000* (Dublin, 1999) 147.
- ³ John Cahill, 'Castletown House, Celbridge Co. Kildare', *Obair*, no. 8, 2002, 20-23: 21.
- ⁴ *ibid.*, 22.
- ⁵ Pegum, *Building for Government*, 148.
- ⁶ Architectural Services, OPW, 'Event and Conference Centre, Visitor Orientation Hub, Liffey Walks and Water Features: Fáilte Ireland Funding Proposal', unpublished document, December 2008, 2.
- ⁷ *ibid.*, 26. Also see White Young Green, 'Report on Load Testing of Cantilever Stone Stairs, Castletown House, Celbridge, Co. Kildare', September 2007.
- ⁸ Architectural Services, OPW, 'Event and Conference Centre', 2, 26.
- ⁹ Ann Keller, "'In Great Vogue": The Long Gallery of Castletown', in Elizabeth Mayes (ed.), *Castletown, Decorative Arts* (OPW, Trim, 2011) 57-65: 65.
- ¹⁰ The Heritage Council, 'Museums Awarded for High Standards in Collections Care and Management', press release, 18th July 2016, <<http://www.heritagecouncil.ie/news/news-features/museums-awarded-for-high-standards-in-collections-care-and-management>>.
- ¹¹ Architectural Services, OPW, 'Event and Conference Centre', 9.
- ¹² *ibid.*, 21.
- ¹³ Patricia McCarthy, 'Stables and Horses in Ireland c.1630-1840', *The Provost's House Stables: buildings and environs, Trinity College Dublin* (TRIARC, Dublin, 2008) 28-71: 39.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*, 47-51. See also Sarah Conolly-Carew, *The Children of Castletown House* (Dublin, 2015).
- ¹⁵ David Griffin, 'An Architectural History of Castletown', in *Castletown, Decorative Arts*, 43.
- ¹⁶ 'East Wing, Castletown House', *Obair*, 2012, 12-15:13f; Architectural Services, OPW. 'Event and Conference Centre', 15-19.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*, 14.
- ¹⁸ 'Castletown House Sold by Auction', *The Irish Times*, 20th May 1965.
- ¹⁹ The grant in question amounted to just over €1.5 million.
- ²⁰ Finola O'Kane, 'Castletown Landscape Report', unpublished report for the OPW, 2 vols, 1997; Finola O'Kane and John Olley, 'Designed Landscape Assessment of Castletown, Celbridge and Adjacent Demesnes for Kildare County Council', 2006; Finola O'Kane and John Olley, 'Submission of behalf of the OPW for the Local Area Plan for Castletown Demesne', 2007.
- ²¹ Finola O'Kane, *Landscape Design in Eighteenth-Century Ireland: mixing foreign trees with the natives* (Cork, 2004) 59.
- ²² For more information on the conservation of the Batty Langley Lodge, see Blackwood Associates, 'Batty Langley Lodge', *Architecture Ireland*, no. 253, 2010, 38-39.
- ²³ Melanie McQuade, 'Test Excavations Pleasure Gardens Castletown House, Celbridge, Co. Kildare', report for the OPW, 2012, 8f.
- ²⁴ Brian Fitzgerald (ed.), *Correspondence of Emily, Duchess of Leinster (1731-1814): Vol. III: Letters of Lady Louisa Conolly and William, Marquis of Kildare (2nd Duke of Leinster)*, (Dublin, 1957) 410.
- ²⁵ P.S., 'Tour in the Vicinity of Dublin Performed in the Autumn of 1797', *The Monthly Magazine*, 5 July 1798, 545-52, transcribed and edited by Rolf Loeber and Magda Stouthamer-Loeber, 'Dublin and its vicinity in 1797', *Irish Geography*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2002, 133-55: 150.