

## The last word

# Arguably the most beautiful house in Ireland

ESB's upkeep of the lakes that surround Russborough House adds to the beauty of the area.

**I**N AN ERA when the currency of superlatives has become somewhat debased it is difficult to find words to describe the beauty of Russborough House and the views that it commands. Nestling in a quiet corner of West Wicklow just south of Punchestown Racecourse and next to the Blessington Lakes the words spectacular, breathtaking, splendid, magnificent and exquisite come to mind. But none of them quite do it justice.

The house itself is one of the finest examples of Palladian architecture still in existence anywhere in Europe and it is probably the most beautiful to survive the depredations of civil unrest, economic upheaval and natural disaster that have befallen many of its fellows down

through the centuries. It has also survived its own few brushes with notoriety in recent years.

Russborough House dates back to 1741 when it was built by Joseph Leeson, the son of a wealthy brewer in Dublin and a contemporary of a certain Arthur Guinness. The architect was a German, Richard Cassells, and Russborough is widely considered to be his finest achievement.

Russborough is built of silver-grey granite that came from a quarry at Golden Hill, situated just outside Blessington. The front facade is the longest in Ireland, 700 feet end to end. However, only seven bays are given to the central block which, is joined to wings by colonnades.

The Germanic influence of its architect is possibly best noted from the main avenue or driveway to the house. The British tradition was for the avenue to lead directly up to the front door and to be seen disappearing



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into the distance from the house. Cassells, however, preferred not to spoil the view of the house commanded and instead created a beech lined avenue running from the east side of the house, which doesn't impinge on the view of the lakes and the Wicklow mountains in the distance.

And that's just the exterior. Russborough's interior is highly ornamented and wonderful to behold. The main rooms downstairs in

the central block are adorned with magnificent baroque plasterwork. The ceilings in the music room, salon and library are almost certainly by the famed Italian plaster artists the Lafranchini brothers.

In 1763 Joseph Leeson gained the title, Earl of Milltown. The house stayed in the Milltown family right up to the 6th Earl. It then passed to a nephew, Sir Edmund Turton, whose widow subsequently sold the house to Colonel Denis Daly in 1931 for the not so princely sum of £9,900.

The house then passed into the ownership of Sir Alfred and Lady Beit in 1952. Sir Alfred was a renowned art collector who bought the house chiefly to hold his collection, which included rare paintings by the likes of Vermeer, Metsu, Goya and so on. Sir Alfred had inherited his own fabulous wealth from his uncle, also Alfred, who was Cecil Rhodes' partner in the establishment of the De Beers diamond empire in South Africa. Back in the nineteenth century version of the 'Rich List' he was reputed to be the world's second richest man behind Nelson Rockefeller.

Despite a famous armed raid on their house in the 1970s, the Beits remained loyal to their adopted home of Ireland and very generously gifted the house and entire art collection to the nation in 1976 and established the Alfred Beit Foundation. In 1978 the house opened its doors to the public – the first of the 'Great Irish Houses' to do so.

And this brings us to the present day and the work of the Alfred Beit Foundation and its Chief Executive, Eric



*Pictured Russborough house interior.*

Blatchford, to preserve this uniquely beautiful house for the Irish nation. "It costs many hundreds of thousands of euro each year to maintain the house and we have to try to raise this money in whatever way we can," he observes.

Fundraising is achieved largely through guided tours that have seen more than one million visitors pass through the house and its grounds during the past 30 years, as well as an impressive series of events such as the *Music in Great Irish House* classical music concerts, monthly farmers' markets, art exhibitions, drama evenings and musical recitals. Upcoming events include an intimate concert by Clannad's Moya Brennan on September 5th and a special Antiques Roadshow event on September 6th.

"We will continue to put on events which are appropriate to Russborough House," says Blatchford. "We won't be putting in a golf course or developing a shopping mall or anything like that. Nor will we be doing

anything which could detract from the natural splendour of the view."

He regards the view as among the house's greatest assets and is grateful to ESB for its stewardship of the nearby woods and lakes in this regard. "When Joseph Leeson chose the site for the house back in 1741, it was for the view," he points out. "This is one of the few great houses anywhere that retains an unspoilt view such as the one we still have. This is largely due to ESB who have kept the lakes and surrounding lands in such marvellous condition. ESB does a great job of promoting visitors to their amenities in the area and this in turn attracts visitors to Russborough House – I like to think of this as a sort of partnership with each of us benefiting from the activities of the other."

Looking to the future he is hoping to build on the success of various events and tours to reach a break-even position of the house. "This will take several years but I am confident that with the support of our very dedicated staff here we can break even," he notes. "We are looking to capitalise on the success of our Kitchen Garden restaurant which is increasingly in demand for Christmas parties and cookery classes and we hope to develop more and more events which are appropriate to the House."

With the natural advantages of the beauty of the house itself, its splendid views combined with the imagination and resourcefulness of Eric Blatchford that day may not be too far off. **EM**



*Pictured Eric Blatchford, Chief Executive of the Alfred Beit Foundation.*