

The curse of Russborough

Shocking inferno in the west wing is just the latest tragedy to befall the mansion

By **Conor Feehan**

THE curse of Russborough House has struck again after the house's west wing was badly damaged in an overnight blaze.

It is just the latest in a series of mishaps to befall the magnificent 18th century heritage home in Blessington.

The house has been the target of two major art thefts – by the IRA and later by the notorious Martin 'The General' Cahill.

Eight units of the fire brigade spent the night bringing the fire under control just 48 hours after a Hollywood film crew finished shooting scenes there.

The fire broke out at about 9.30pm but it was early morning before the flames were contained.

There was no one in the building and there are no reports of injuries.

Built in 1741, its last owners, Sir Alfred and Lady Clementine Beit, gifted the building to the State in 1978 but continued to live there until their deaths in 1994 and 2006.

It is now open to the public as a tourist attraction.

JEWELLERY

The extent of the fire damage is unknown at the moment.

The west wing is where most of Lady Beit's valuable possessions and jewellery were kept.

But because Oscar-winning film director Steven Soderbergh had been shooting scenes for his new movie in the historic building up to the weekend, many of these precious items had been removed.

While emergency crews succeeded in containing the fire and prevented it from spreading to the rest of the building, there are fears water and smoke dam-



DARK HISTORY: Gardai at the stately home after the art raid by Martin Cahill (above) in 2002



age could have been caused in the house with its collections of silverware, porcelain, plasterwork, and furnishings.

Russborough House previously hit the headlines when in 1974 an IRA gang, which included British heiress Dr Rose Dugdale, stole 19 paintings valued at €10m.

The haul included a Vermeer, a Goya, two Gainsboroughs and

three Rubens. Sir Alfred and one of his staff were struck with revolvers, before being tied up in the library, where they watched the gang cut rare paintings from their frames with a screwdriver.

The IRA attempted to have four members who had bombed London transferred to prison in Belfast in return for five of the most important paintings in a

ransom demand. But gardai recovered the paintings 11 days later in a raid on a rented cottage in Glandore, Co Cork.

Dugdale, an English millionaire's daughter, was jailed for nine years for her part in the robbery as well as other paramilitary crimes.

Russborough was again in the news 12 years later when in May 1986, nearly €40m worth

of paintings were stolen by Martin 'The General' Cahill.

After a massive international police operation, most of the works were recovered in Britain and Belgium.

The most dramatic incident took place in Turkey.

After failing to sell the paintings, Cahill had turned to loyalist paramilitaries who brought a Metz miniature to the coun-

A BREWING HEIR'S GEM

RUSSBOROUGH was built in 1741 by Joseph Leeson, the son of a wealthy brewer in Dublin.

The architect was Richard Cassells, a great promoter of the Palladian style of architecture in 18th-century Ireland. It took around 10 years to build.

Russborough is widely considered to be Cassells's finest achievement, it was also his last as he died before Russborough was completed.

It is generally acknowledged that the house was finished by Francis Bindon, a successful artist and architect from the country's mid-Georgian era.

Russborough is built of silver-grey granite which came from a quarry at Golden Hill, just outside Blessington.

The front facade is the longest in Ireland, 700ft end to end.

try in the belief that art dealers might buy it.

Instead, they were met by Turkish police who arrested three men.

Last night's operation by firefighters appears to have preserved many of the building's priceless interiors.