



Why this house is still Ireland's loveliest

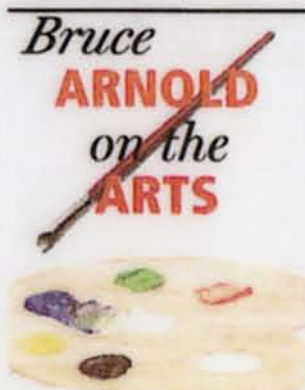
Russborough House, Wicklow, the magnificent former home of Sir Alfred and Lady Beit, right.

Last Saturday morning I drove out to visit Russborough House. It lies on the softer side of Wicklow, four miles beyond Blessington. Its setting is serene; sheep on the higher ground behind the house, a view of Lackan Reservoir from the front, mountains beyond. These were obscured by the falling mist and rain.

It was my first visit in many years. The last time I was there the Beit collection was hanging in the house, virtually in all its glory. That is now all changed. The walls throughout the house are grimly bare. The alarm fittings that were once behind the paintings, with their little electric sockets, were a reminder of past robberies, of which there have been a few, and at present uncertainty is felt by the staff who run the house about when something like normality will return. It should. The absence of art throughout the house is a great pity and its remedy an urgent requirement.

Why did I go? Several reasons, perhaps the most compelling of all being the indisputable fact that this is the most beautiful house in Ireland and should be visited from time to time to take pleasure in that fact alone.

It was built in the first half of the 18th century by Joseph Leeson, a smart Dublin operator, involved in property development, who made a great deal of what might, today, be called 'New Money' and decided to have a handsome house. The closest analogy today would be JP McManus, whose own



splendid house is an expression of similar urges and accomplishments.

Joseph Leeson had the good fortune to choose as his architect Richard Castle, who began the building in 1741. His death meant that he did not see the house completed, but he was alive in 1748 when it was described as "a noble new house forming into perfection". Leeson, who later became the 1st Earl of Milltown, was also a great collector of art. His portrait, by Batoni, hangs in the National Gallery; he was the quintessence of the new man with new money. His descendant, the widow of the 6th Earl, presented most of the paintings and furniture to the National Gallery, greatly enriching its collection.

The house went to the 6th Earl's nephew, who was sold in 1931 to Captain Denis Daly, a racing man from Galway, and then in 1952 was bought by Sir Alfred Beit. He saw it advertised in *Country Life* and bought it without visiting it. He was the son of Otto Beit, and his uncle, also Alfred, was

a partner of Cecil Rhodes. The two made fortunes out of diamond mining in South Africa and the first Sir Alfred, under guidance from Wilhelm Bode, director of the Berlin Museum, acquired a magnificent collection of paintings.

One might think that without the paintings the house would appear stripped and bereft. Not so; it is the most personalised of great houses, every room furnished well, everything in its place. It is as though Sir Alfred and Lady Clementine had just walked out, or gone on holiday. The dining table is laid; tea for three is set in another room.

It is a pity that the six Murillo paintings — masterpieces by the artist and full of feeling — are not hanging round the dining room table. But perhaps they will come back. What was surprising about the visit was the extent to which our guide, Barbara, brought it all to life. Her knowledge of each room and each piece of furniture, was impeccable. She knew it all and loved it. She has been

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guiding for many years and gave a dazzling performance of what a good guide should be, down to important details about ensuring that the children on the tour were also entertained.

Another reason for going was to refresh my memories about the two people in whose debt the whole country should be proud to be. The preservation of this truly beautiful house and its contents was the mission of Sir Alfred and Lady Beit over the best part of a half-century.

They started from a time when Ireland, economically and in most other ways, was in the doldrums. The country's deliberate isolation, during and after the Second World War, and the poor management of the economy, which at times was so perverse as to seem deliberate as well, made it an unappetising place for a wealthy cosmopolitan couple to choose for what became an important residence.

It was one that suited their magnificent collection, their style of life, their good taste and their love of opera — satisfied over many years by the Wexford Festival, of which they were generous patrons.

Alfred Beit continued to collect paintings. For a time he even considered dealing. This ambition was activated by the departure from Ireland of Jack Yeats's dealer, Victor Waddington. Beit had no particular interest in Yeats — actually thought him over-rated — but did see a gap in the market. But Ned McGuire, the head of Brown Thomas, who was a painter himself and a collector with tastes not



unlike Beit's, started a gallery in the store; there were two other commercial galleries. Beit thought better of it and relaxed back into enjoying his house.

His wife, Clementine, was a witty woman and both of them enjoyed entertaining. In fact, in those rather bleak early years from 1952 onwards, they reputedly maintained "pre-war standards of celebration" and filled the house with guests.

They both loved food. He was as thin as a stick but she betrayed her indulgence in chocolate and shared the taste with anyone else who was like-minded. She was also gifted in the difficult art of writing good postcards.

To one plump chocolate-lover she sent a postcard of Ben Marshall's portrait of a famously fat person whose tombstone carried the following message: "In remembrance of that prodigy in nature Daniel Lambert, a

native of Leicester who was possessed of an exalted and convivial mind and in personal greatness had no competitor. He measured three feet one inch round the leg, nine feet four inches round the body and weighed 52 stone, 11 pounds. He departed this life on the 21st June 1809 aged 39 years."

To her friend Clementine wrote: "Do be careful — no more buttered brazils! Love C." There are charming photographs of him as a young man, of her as a girl, of their grandparents and one of Clementine beside a vintage car — they were sports car enthusiasts when it was all the rage — dotted about.

The life of the house, possibly more than in any other great Irish house, is invigorated by these mementoes. For this to happen in the most beautiful house in Ireland is quite an achievement.