



Marlfield House - A Bon Mot Cast in Stone

Back to Marlfield House, 20 years since the first visit. The Gorey bypass may cause a moment of disorientation along the journey, but the country house hotel at the heart of the 30 acre estate is still reassuringly grand, everything just so, now entering decades of decadence, heaven's in the detail, sugar crystals in silver bowls for coffee de rigueur. Marlfield is now in the very capable hands of the second generation of the Bowe family to run the hotel. Sisters Margaret and Laura and their own families live on the estate. Their parents Mary and Ray bought the house from the widowed Lady Courtown in 1977. À la mode modifications completed over the following decade allowed the building to breathe as a hotel. Through recessions and a boom, Marlfield became a byword for brilliance, a billet doux to hospitality, a magnet for the smart Dublin set.



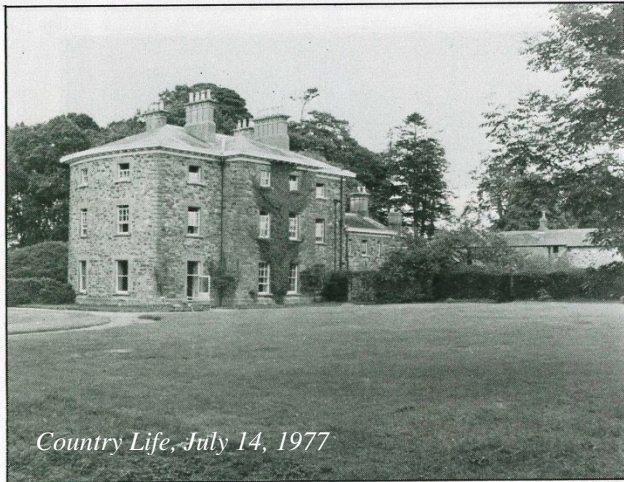
Forget the usual bog standard 20th century hotel extension horrors. Distinguished artist and architect Alfred Cochrane's work at Marlfield adventurously augments its presence, both physically and architecturally. Creative clients helped. "We're all mad about design," according to Margaret. "Our family all have a good eye." From the whimsical to the wacky, always tasteful, never tacky, it's a tour de force of neoclassical language reimagined for the spirit of the age. Petit Trianon on speed, Temple of the Winds on a high, Crystal Palace methodology. Now if Loulou de la Falaise was an annexe... Take the entrance portico. Its Doric centrepiece, confidently stepping forward from rusticated stone bays, explodes into a

not so much broken pediment as broken temple, like ruins glued together with glazing.



A vast half moon (fully completed by the half moon pond outside) entrance hall links the main house to the rest of Alfred's single storey bedroom wing. Top lit long galleries spread like elegant tentacles in all directions connecting the entrance hall to the six state suites: the Print Room, Morland Room, Stopford Room, Georgian Room, French Room and Sheraton Room. The crème de la crème is the Print Room, an octagonal cove ceilinged panelled pièce de résistance. "Mariga Guinness did the print decorations on the walls," says Margaret. "They took days and days to complete! Inspiration came from Mariga's work at Leixlip Castle and of course Lady Louisa Connolly's famous Print Room at Castletown. When the doors are pulled across the bed alcove, wedding ceremonies are often performed in this room." A handily placed harp stands next to the French

windows. She confirms the hotel can accommodate up to 145 guests for a wedding.



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The other 13 guest bedrooms, all with marble bathrooms, are upstairs in the main house. A conservatory on the garden front, also designed by Alfred Cochrane, balances the state room wing on the entrance front. History, symmetry, geometry, harmony, luxury: all are important at Marfield. The conservatory is a tripartite triumph in cast iron and glass. A central projection balloons up to a storey height ogee shaped dome. A frame of distinctive lattice metalwork pilasters topped by stylised Ionic capitals holding a frieze is as stylish as anything produced in the days of the Prince Regent. Yet more French doors lead onto a croquet lawn.

Bon appétit! Mushrooms immersed in white wine, thyme and cream on toast accompanied by poached hens' eggs trickling in black truffle oil are a culinary must in the library. "The eggs are from our neighbours, Samuel and Maurice Allen's happy hens!" Many of the herbs and vegetables are from the Bowes' kitchen garden while fish, meat and dairy produce are all sourced locally. Classy food in classical surroundings. The library is a rich blue; the sitting room next door, a pale lemon. Like all the rooms, they are filled with more antiques than Mealy's on auction day. Plasterwork and white marble fireplaces form the backdrop to colourful festoons and fabric pelmets.



Marfield House was built in 1852 by the 4th Earl of Courtown as a dower house in association with his principal seat, Courtown House. It's a classic three storey block of the middle size, four bays wide by two bays deep. The west or side elevation is bowed towards the sunken topiary garden. The other side elevation adjoins a two storey ancillary wing. A two bay breakfront projects from the centre of the south or garden front. Characterful rugged semi coursed rubble stone on cut granite and red brick quoins contrast with overhanging modillioned box eaves (c'est quoi?). A low pitched roof is punctuated by tall chimney stacks. The 5th Earl swapped some of the ground floor multi pane windows found elsewhere in the building for plate glass sash windows in 1866.



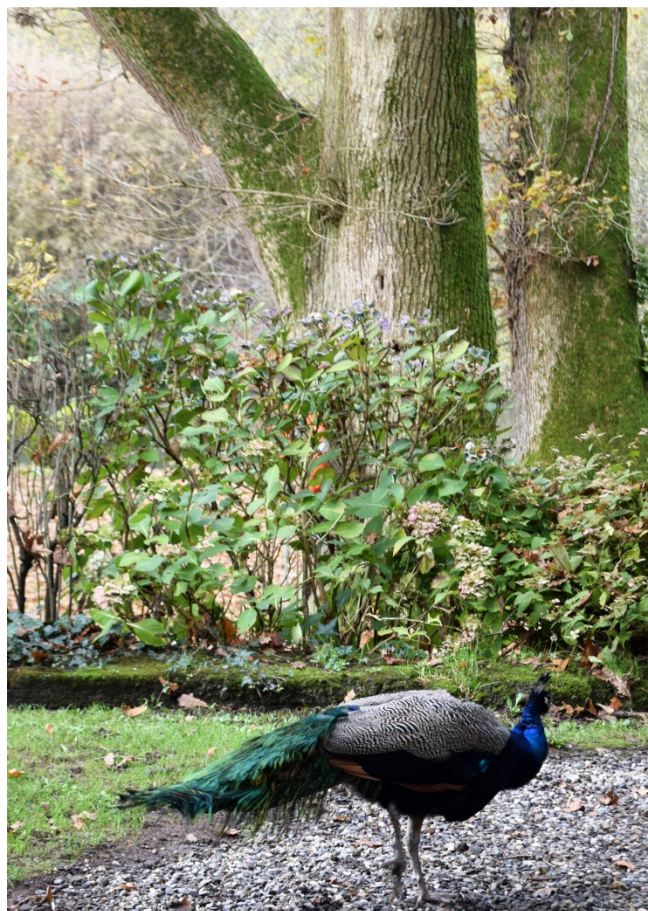




This architectural dowager, a bon viveur full of joie de vivre, not in mourning, never rests on her manicured laurels. More than 160 years after the first stone was laid, a new lease of life is underway for Marlfield. “It will be rustic and informal, edgy even!” says Margaret about the new bistro in the ancillary wing. “French doors will open onto the market garden and there’ll be a fireplace on the terrace. It will be very family friendly. We’re also opening a small interiors shop which will host pop up events every so often.”



Hopefully it won't be another 20 years till the next visit. One family, two houses, three miles apart, the fates of Courtown and Marlfield couldn't be more different. Courtown House wasn't so lucky, now deceased, its belle époque beyond living memory. It was sold to the Irish Tourist Board in 1948 and with the usual cultural myopia and political bias of that era, promptly pulled down. The 9th Earl of Courtown, James Patrick Montagu Winthrop Stopford one time Viscount Stopford, recently visited his former ancestral home. Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks stayed at Marlfield House while filming yawnbuster Saving Private Ryan at Ballinesker beach, one of the golden strands straddling County Wexford coast. Pierce Brosnan, Steve Martin, Meryl Streep and Peter Ustinov have all enjoyed Marlfield. In the word of Robert Redford who has the last word on the last word: “Sublime!”



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