A 50-Year Battle to Save Old Ireland

Derek Speirs for The New York Times

TRIUMPH Saving Castletown, Ireland's largest Palladian house, above, was one of Desmond Guinness's biggest victories. More Photos >

By CHRISTOPHER HANN
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LEIXLIP, Ireland

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WHEN Desmond and Mariga Guinness first lived here in the 1950s, they were unlikely champions of Irish architecture. Mrs. Guinness, the daughter of a German prince, had grown up in Europe and Japan, with no real link to Ireland. And although Mr. Guinness had Irish roots going back more than two centuries, he had been raised and educated in England (Oxford, class of '54).

But he was a Guinness, descended from the 18th-century brewer who put the family name on the lips of stout drinkers the world over. His father, Bryan Guinness, Lord Moyne, kept a home in Ireland, and by the mid-'50s his mother, Diana, one of the famous Mitford sisters, was living in County Cork with her second husband. And Ireland's long economic decline had made property far more affordable than in England, making it an attractive

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furnishing it with his collection of Irish antiques. More Photos »

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COLLECTIBLES Leixlip Castle's front hall, left, has a marble mantelpiece from Ardgillan Castle, County Dublin, and an 18th-century Florentine tapestry depicting the Medici coat of arms. More Photos >

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King John's Room in Leixlip Castle, where Mick Jagger once slept More Photos >

Irish Sea in 1950.

In the two years they spent searching for a home, driving through the countryside and making regular forays into Dublin from a house they rented in County Kildare, the Guinnesses became familiar with the country's architecture — particularly its 18th-century buildings, from grand country homes to town houses filled with working-class flats — and found themselves increasingly bothered by its state of decay. And given that they did not have to work for a living (Mr. Guinness lived off family money), they were in a rare position, they realized, to do something about it.

In February 1958 they announced plans to re-establish the Irish Georgian Society, a group that had created a photographic record of Dublin's best Georgian buildings earlier in the century; this new version, Mr. Guinness wrote in The Irish Times, would "fight for the protection of what is left of Georgian architecture in Ireland." The following month they began restoring a building of their own, Leixlip Castle, a dilapidated 12th-century fortress on 182 acres west of Dublin, which would be their home and the group's headquarters.

Now observing its 50th year with a series of celebrations and a lavishly illustrated book, the revived Irish Georgian Society has been credited with restoring dozens of architectural gems across Ireland, from a former union hall for Dublin tailors to the country's oldest Palladian house. (The society's early preservation efforts focused on Georgian Dublin, but in later years it expanded its mission to cover noteworthy buildings from any period.) Perhaps more impressively, the group has helped bring about a national change of heart regarding Irish architecture.

"We weren't the only people concerned, but we had the time and the youth — 50 years ago — and not much to do," said Mr. Guinness, now 77, as he reclined in the circular sitting room at Leixlip, beside one of the castle's 20 fireplaces. He still lives here, now with his second wife, Penelope, whom he married three years after his divorce from Mariga in 1981. "You know," he continued, "we were free. We didn't have to go to the office every morning."

Free or not, Mr. Guinness and his followers faced a tall order. Saving old buildings was hardly a priority in Ireland in 1958. The year before, more than 50,000 Irish citizens emigrated and 78,000 were unemployed. There were few, amid the grinding poverty, able to maintain a 200-year-old mansion. Many Irish people also reviled the lavish Georgian buildings for their association with the British occupation. "May the crows roost in its rafters," one farmer is said to have remarked about the large house on his family's land.

Meanwhile, the Irish government had neither the money nor much inclination to support preservation. Some officials openly assailed the Irish Georgian Society as elitist, a charge that endures to a lesser degree today. In 1966 the Lord Mayor of Dublin dismissed the society's efforts, saying ordinary citizens had "little sympathy with the sentimental nonsense of persons who had never experienced bad housing conditions."

Mr. Guinness was equally dismissive in return. "We were confronting a philistine state," he said, a point that was driven home to him one day in 1957 when he saw workers systematically dismantling a pair of 18th-century houses on Kildare Place in Dublin. The city, which owned the houses, planned to demolish them in favor of new construction.

"People on the roof slinging slates down from perfectly good, beautiful buildings, with red-brick facades and good interiors," recalled Mr. Guinness, indignation still evident in his voice. "And now they'd be worth millions."

Mr. and Mrs. Guinness envisioned their group as a guardian of the nation's architectural heritage, never mind that neither had formal training in architecture, Irish or otherwise. With 16 volunteers — Trinity College professors and students, friends who owned country houses and some whom Mr. Guinness called "ordinary civilized people" — they set out to spread their preservation ethos.

"They did start a quest, a sort of mission, when Irish 18th-century buildings were completely unfashionable," said Desmond FitzGerald, the Knight of Glin, an early convert to the Guinness cause and, since 1991, president of the Irish Georgian Society.

The Guinnesses led members of the society on regular scouting missions to view buildings at risk. They lobbied local and national authorities, reminding policy makers that Irish craftsmen had constructed these buildings. They held cricket matches and galas and lectures to raise money, and Mr. Guinness, and later Mr. FitzGerald, began traveling to the United States to lecture on Irish architecture and design.

Two projects in particular helped galvanize public support for the society's work. The first was Mountjoy Square, a cluster of town houses in north-central Dublin that dated to 1791. By the early 1960s, many of them had been abandoned, and a developer was buying them up with plans to replace them with a large office development. In 1964, the Guinnesses intervened, buying a single decrepit property, 50 Mountjoy Square, that stood in the middle of the proposed construction. The standoff got plenty of attention in the Irish press, and two years later a court hearing resulted in the developer's backing out of the project.

The following year Mr. Guinness wielded his checkbook again, buying what many considered the most important house in Ireland for $259,000. The house, Castletown, in County Kildare, was the country's largest Palladian house and the only one designed by the Italian architect Alessandro Galilei. It was built starting in the 1720s for William Conolly, the speaker of the Irish House of Commons, and had been in the Conolly family for nearly 250 years.

But by 1967 Castletown had been abandoned for two years. A housing development had recently sprouted next door, and an auction of its possessions, accumulated over two centuries, had left it virtually empty. Preservationists worried that it could succumb to the whims of a short-sighted developer. To buy it, Mr. Guinness borrowed against a trust he would come into in a few years.

Led by the Guinnesses — who, for aristocrats, were unabashedly bohemian and did not shy from taking a paintbrush in hand or climbing a ladder to remove moldy wallpaper — an army of volunteers descended on Castletown. Donors supplied period furnishings to fill its vast rooms, and that summer, Castletown opened its doors for visitors. Jacqueline Kennedy made a surprise visit and was given a well-publicized tour. Today, Castletown is owned by the Irish government and remains open to the public.

"When you think that that house was nearly lost to dereliction," Mr. FitzGerald said.

Mr. FitzGerald, now 71, studied art history at Harvard and has written about Irish art, furniture and architecture. He also knows a few things about restoring old houses. Glin Castle, his home in County Limerick, has been in his family for 700 years. He inherited it when he was just 12, after the death of his father in 1949. At that point, according to Mr. FitzGerald, the family had no money and the house was in disrepair. His stepfather, a Canadian businessman, saved it, he said.

Today Mr. FitzGerald and his wife, Olda, live in a wing of Glin Castle, which they operate as a 15-room hotel. (They have a second home in Dublin.) His own experience, he believes, underscores the importance of preservation to Ireland. "I think we need the historic houses if we're going to set ourselves up in the grand shop of tourism that the rest of Europe takes part in," he said.

Under his leadership, the Irish Georgian Society operates on an annual budget of less than $1 million, raised from private donors. Based in Dublin, it keeps an office on Manhattan's Upper East Side; 600 of its roughly 3,000 members live in the United States and provide two-thirds of its funding.

The group now publishes an annual scholarly journal, gives scholarships to Irish students of architecture and preservation, conducts trips abroad to historic sites and funds grants for restoration projects, like the recent repair of a conical roof at the 15th-century Barmeath Castle in County Louth.

This year the society organized a series of fund-raising events for its golden anniversary, to pay for restoring the "eating parlor" at Headfort, an 18th-century estate in County Meath, in its original colors — what Mr. FitzGerald called "a very intricate and complicated paint job." The parlor, a high-ceilinged room with ornate plasterwork, is part of a suite of six rooms designed in the neoclassical style by the renowned Scottish architect Robert Adam. They are the only rooms he designed in Ireland that are known to exist.

LEIXLIP CASTLE has its own place in Irish Georgian Society lore. For many years it served as the organization's de facto clubhouse, the scene of picnics and parties and a magnet for glitterati. (Mr. Guinness remembers Mick Jagger and Marianne Faithfull visiting in the 1960s and walking off into the grass just as lunch was being served. "I suppose they got bored with our conversation," he said.)

Over the years, the Guinnesses have outfitted their home with objects largely reaped from native soil. The library's gilt mirror, which Mr. Guinness bought at the Castletown auction in 1966, was made by John and Francis Booker, premiere mirror makers of mid-18th century Dublin. Mr. Guinness bought the dining room sideboard at a 1973 auction at nearby Malahide Castle. The 1740s Kilkenny marble chimneypiece in the front hall came from Ardgillan Castle in County Dublin. Mr. Guinness acquired it around 1960 by swapping the Victorian fireplace that had been in the front hall.

"I try to collect Irish furniture and pictures," Mr. Guinness said. "And you used to be able to buy it very cheaply. Now people have discovered it."

He has only himself to blame. Mr. Guinness, who has written extensively about Irish architecture and design, received an award in 2006 from Queen Sofia of Spain on behalf of Europa Nostra, a pan-European cultural heritage group, which cited his "fifty years of unrelenting voluntary efforts" on behalf of Ireland's architectural heritage. The following month the Irish government provided about $645,000 in start-up funds for the Irish Heritage Trust, an independent charity designed to take ownership of historic properties.

Kevin Baird, the executive director, said the trust is just the sort of government-sanctioned body for which the Irish Georgian Society had long lobbied. "The Georgians deserve huge praise," Mr. Baird said. "They were swimming against the tide for so long, and they were instrumental in turning that tide."

That the tide had truly turned became evident last month, when the society published a book by Robert O'Byrne, an Irish journalist, documenting its history. The foreword, which described the society as "a fine example of the extraordinary lasting effect that a small but committed organisation can have," was written by Mary McAleese, the president of Ireland.

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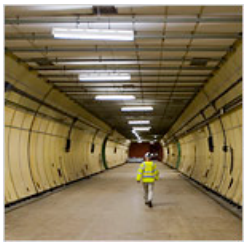
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