

Castle garden gets royal treatment

Bees, flower meadows and native fruits are among the plans for Lismore gardens under new head gardener Darren Topps, formerly of Cornwall's Eden Project

Mary Leland

The flag aloft one of the many towers at Lismore Castle is that of the town's camogie team, winners of the All-Ireland Intermediate Club Championship. As we acknowledge this symbol of the castle's engagement with the town and the community, we notice the departure, from the courtyard, of a group of inspectors who have just awarded the first EcoMerit environmental certificate to an Irish castle garden.

"At least I think we're the first," says William Burlington, who explains that it is won by having an environmental policy, an improvement plan, a system of performance monitoring and pollution prevention.

Policy, plans, performance and prevention are all on the agenda this morning despite the unremitting rain. The Earl and Countess of Burlington, otherwise William and Laura Cavendish, are accompanied by Darren Topps, who worked at the Eden Project in Cornwall and was appointed head gardener at Lismore last year. All four of us stride gamely off to discuss the long and short-term plans for the castle's seven-acre garden.

"It's taken some time for us to galvanise our thoughts and see where the opportunities to do something really special occur," says William, leading the way towards one such opportunity. He refers gratefully to the 20-year tenure of former head gardener Chris Tull, whose son Matthew now works with Topps, and to the fact that this inherited territory is possibly the oldest continually cultivated garden in Ireland: "Laura and I recognise all the work that has gone into it before us," he says. "Now I seem to want to keep pinching myself that someone with the knowledge and experience of Darren is here to see it, and us, through the next phase of the garden's life."

All of them are evangelists, united in what less modest people might call ambition but here is expressed as a kind of mission, a five-year plan to extend the planting season, to ensure the garden is interesting throughout the year and to introduce new elements.

"It's just developing things, not wholesale change, and the five-year projection is necessary because things take a long time to come to fruition, so really it's just a means of prioritising the work and deciding on our preferences."

Stumpery

It's a reasonable philosophy which is also sensitive to this ancient and lovely landscape, but as we cross the sodden grass and feel the wind from the mist-hidden Knockmealdown mountains on one side and the wafting spiritual essences from the spire of St Carthage's Cathedral on the other, a characteristic ebullience emerges.

While Topps provides a kind of simultaneous horticultural translation William and Laura can't help but break out into their shared enthusiasms. Here we are, for example, at the proposed Stumpery. This slope in a corner of the lower garden, bordered by river and wall, will be home to stumps, boles (tree trunks) and branches and the residue of woodland losses elsewhere, rich with moss, overshadowed by trees and floored with drifts of wild flowers.

Topps explains that the overhanging eaves will heighten the atmosphere, already verdant and humid and ready for Laura's ground-planting scheme.

The idea of this secret cavity is enchanting but, as usual at Lismore, there's something else. At the site's steep angle under walls built in the 1640s is a little building with a peaked fairy-tale roof known, possi-



William Burlington and Darren Topps, the new head gardener at Lismore Castle who has introduced a new environmental policy to the centuries-old gardens around the castle.
PHOTOGRAPH: MICHAEL MAC SWEENEY/PROVISION



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bly because of the defensive storage of gun-powder, as the monkey tower. Inside the walls are covered with a design painted by artist Richard Wright.

That little conjunction is a reminder that the Burlingtons' vision for the contemporary art gallery opened at the castle in 2005 has allowed a fusion between the contributing artists and the garden itself.

The acclaimed annual exhibitions at the gallery are essentially ephemeral and yet can leave traces which last longer than intended, while outdoors the family's permanent sculptures still offer the thrill of surprise. Nothing however obscures the subtle creativity which has formed this garden over the centuries and even the descent to the stumpery allows a view over the water-meadows where a magnolia planted by William's paternal grandmother Deborah, Dowager Duchess of Devonshire, shines with self-confidence through the downpour.

William's parents, the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, gave the couple responsibility for the Lismore estate a few years ago: "My father has been very generous in letting us do as we think best here," says Wil-

liam. Getting things right at Lismore means achieving a unified framework on a diverse landscape, but Laura is not daunted: "The joy of gardens is that they're dynamic. Whether we want it or not the garden will change of itself; things die or don't flourish, and I believe in my father's saying that every loss is an opportunity."

She sees the contrasts of canopy above underlay as another facet of the subtle alchemy of the long, glazed lower garden, softening the margins without disturbing the centuries-old evolution of these spaces, although there is some on-going debate about the best place to hang a swing.

It's difficult to believe that this lower garden was divided by a road until Joseph Paxton re-imagined it in the mid-19th century and peat was carted across the valley from the Knockmealdowns to allow for this glowing wealth of magnolia, camellia and rhododendron, whose fallen petals blanket the greensward.

Paxton, head gardener to the 6th Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth, also designed the suite of glasshouses in the upper garden, itself the oldest section of a castle which dates more or less from the 12th cen-

tury. The castle's site alone suggests the territorial imperative of an impregnable fastness; when rebuilding it from 1602 Richard Boyle, the Great Earl of Cork, retained its medieval fortifications which also survived the first designs by William Atkinson for the 6th Duke. Forty years later Paxton gathered the whole scheme together in a Victorian fantasy still strongly redolent of its earlier identity, itself serenely expressed by the Riding House which links the lower and upper gardens.

Flower meadow

The terraced upper garden is more obviously structured and although recently stricken by box blight its arrangements of orchard, flights of stone steps, high framing hedges, herbaceous borders and vegetable plots have a flexible symmetry and a resilience which belies their early 17th century origin. There will be some changes of layout here, some introductions, some mellowing and some enhancement. Areas of the grassland will be hand-scythed and become flower meadow. Laura speaks of emphasising the garden's productivity while Topps sees the importance of reversing the super-

market-driven homogenising of fruit and vegetables.

"A lot of things did particularly well in a particular region and it's very important to hold on to the genetic information and to get back the old cultivars."

"We're going to have bees!" Laura announces. A pergola is to be built from a fallen chestnut tree and summer visitors will find a scissor in the rows of sweet pea so they can take away a fragrant memento.

There will also be plants for sale and jams and chutneys from the castle kitchens run by Beth-Ann Smith. But this is no flight of wishful thinking. The Burlingtons are purposeful even when excited as they are now and things have a way of developing under their watch. Their determination is to marry what is given, what is fortuitous, and what can be planned for the future; the camogie club flag is not the only signal of Lismore Castle's commitment to public engagement.

Lismore Castle Gardens open daily from 10.30am. The €8 adult entry fee includes the Wilhelm Sasnal exhibition at Lismore Castle Arts. lismorecastlearts.ie

Buildings At Risk Vernon Mount, Cork

Buildings at risk



Why is it of interest?

Vernon Mount is a late 18th century villa south of Cork city with panoramic views of the estuary of the River Lee. Its original owner, Atwell Hayes was a successful merchant in Cork City. The house was named after Mount Vernon, the home of president George Washington on the Potomac River. Its two-storey curved front is unusual and complimented by bows on either side.

Interior features include an elegant cantilevered staircase with a neo-classical wrought-iron balustrade, a fine oval first-floor landing with marble Corinthian columns. The decorative plasterwork, ceiling and wall paintings by Cork artist Nathaniel Grogan are particularly noteworthy. It remained as a family home until it was purchased by the Cork and Munster Motorcycle Club who built a motor-cross race track on the parkland.

In 1997, it was bought by developers led by San Diego based IT entrepreneur Jonathon Moss who were refused planning permission to redevelop the house and build houses/apartments on the site. Moss remains the principal owner of the house and the motorcycle club lease the grounds for their use.

What state of dereliction is it in?

Its fine front door with a large semicircular fanlight was badly damaged by burglars several years ago. Its windows

were smashed and are now boarded up. There is likely to be extensive water damage and wet rot throughout the house and the Grogan paintings in the first floor oval hall are at particular risk.

What repairs have been carried out?

Extensive roof repairs were carried out by Cork County Council with grant aid from the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in 2012. This involved replacement of 60 per cent of the roof and repair of the remaining 40 per cent.

Who is championing its cause?

The Irish Georgian Society drew the dereliction of Vernon Mount to the attention of the World Monument Fund who placed it on their list of 100 Most Endangered Sites in 2008. A local voluntary group, the Grange Frankfield Partnership was formed in 2010 to campaign for the conservation and restoration of Vernon Mount.

What happens next?

Vernon Mount is in the middle of an area currently being developed as parkland to link to a larger park with a foot bridge across Cork's South ring road. The master plan for Tramore Valley Park suggests Vernon Mount could be a hotel, conference centre or corporate headquarters.

Ger Lehane from the Grange Frankfield



Vernon Mount with its unusual curved exterior. Extensive roof repairs were carried out by Cork County Council with grant aid from the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in 2012. PHOTOGRAPH: IRISH GEORGIAN SOCIETY

Partnership says that there is "an impasse" between the owner and the county council following planning permission refusal.

"Our call is for an immediate resolution to the ongoing impasse between the council and the owner of the property, enabling essential conservation works to take place, before its rich heritage is lost for all time," says Lehane.

"The alternative is that the council exercises its powers as provided in the Planning & Development Act 2000, in the absence of any meaningful engagement by the owner. We must continue to highlight that time is of the essence in saving the house from ultimate ruin."

Nicholas Mansergh, senior planner with Cork County Council who authorised the roof repairs to Vernon Mount, adds "more favourable conditions for reuse of Vernon Mount may arise when the Tramore Valley Park is complete. The

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main part of this park is being created by the City Council, and the County Council proposes to extend it south along the valley east of Vernon Mount."

Mansergh says that almost all the land needed for the park is owned, taken in charge or being acquired by one or other of the councils. "If, in the longer term, Vernon Mount could be integrated into the park or have good connections into it, this would improve prospects for its reuse for a leisure or cultural use. The museum and café in Fitzgerald's Park is a good example of this in Cork. Alternatively, there have been cases where important heritage buildings in poor condition have been bought and restored by private owners. One recent example in the same area is Monkstown Castle, which was restored privately in 2008."

Chartered building surveyor Frank Keohane will give a talk on the Irish Georgian Society's ambition to compile a National Buildings At Risk register at 6.30pm on Tuesday next, April 29th, in the City Assembly House, South William St, Dublin 2. See igs.ie for details.

If you know of an important building that has fallen into disrepair email buildingsatrisk@irishtimes.com

SYLVIA THOMPSON