

# Vernon Mount: The

## Owners' welcome for plans

### The owners

THE owners of Vernon Mount House have welcomed the plans put forward by the residents and say they are open to finding a solution so the house can be saved. Olaf Maxwell, secretary of Vernon Mount House Restoration Limited, said they were willing to come to an agreement with the council, but stated: "whatever the development outcome, it must be commercially viable".

Mr Maxwell said when the discussions ended in 2006 between them and the council, the authority recognised the "deficiencies in the development plan as it then existed and which had become a stumbling block due to recent changes in zoning preventing development of any kind".

The understanding was, he said, that when the necessary zoning was achieved it would be possible to proceed.

Mr Maxwell said discussions took place in 2006 and later years with another developer on a joint-venture basis centred around the proposals and remained ongoing while the council worked on the development plan.

The type of development planned, he said, was left open "to avoid creating a ghost town of any kind". He mentioned potential usages such as incubator business units, craft units, community use and residential which were under consideration at the time.

Many ideas and discussions were put forward in 2006, he said. These ideas recognised the architectural importance of Vernon Mount House, the need for sensitive and architecturally sound development.

Mr Maxwell cited the costs involved, pointing out as well as the €2 million estimated cost for the refurbishment of Vernon Mount House there would be professional fees and development levies.

During the last discussions in 2006, other costs facing the developers included public amenity costs associated with a walkway and the pedestrian bridge planned to cross the South Link Road — estimated to cost about €2 million. Mr Maxwell pointed out that the 2006 plan had to sufficiently meet the lending criteria at the time, and that those criteria were even stricter in the current market.

Previous discussions with the council, said Mr Maxwell, received excellent support from councillors, fronted largely by Cllr Deirdre Forde.



**KIERAN DINEEN** examines the bid by residents to see Vernon Mount House — the Cork mansion that is home to significant artworks and was once at the centre of a scandalous kidnap — restored to its former glory

Art work on the ceiling of Vernon Mount, painted by Nathaniel Grogan in the 18th century.

**W**HAT may look no more than a rundown, dilapidated building is in fact an 18th century stately home with artistic, architectural and historical importance.

Vernon Mount House was once the home of the colourful Sir Henry Browne Hayes, who through his misadventures led an amazing life both in Cork and in Australia, which opens up the tourist opportunities for this residence.

The grounds are best known as being the home of the Cork and Munster Motorcycle Club racetrack — with the heritage of the house itself hidden from the view for most.

The house itself was heavily styled on Freemason ideals and beliefs, and includes some fine works by the brilliant Cork artist Nathaniel Grogan including a painting on the ceiling — a very rare occurrence in the Ireland of the time.

The Grange-Frankfield Partnership say the photographic evidence shows that very ceiling is in serious danger of falling in altogether. They are also concerned about the condition of the interior of the building and its structural condition.

Spokesman Ger Lehane said he feared the house may be as little as "four or five days, or even hours" away from being permanently beyond repair — with its heritage value lost forever.

## Superpark proposal

THE Grange-Frankfield Partnership want a superpark to be created which would link Douglas and the city centre.

● Cork City Council are currently working on plans for a public park which will replace the former landfill site at Kinsale Road Roundabout.

● Cork County Council has allowed for the creation of a pedestrian bridge over the South Link Road which would link the planned new park and green space over the county border.

● The residents group want the city and county councils to come together and work towards unifying their proposals and to turn the green space on the county side into a

public park area too.

● The residents want the County Council to build on their proposals for cycleway and pedestrian paths linking estates in Grange and Frankfield and the village centre of Douglas. They want these to lead all the way to the city centre though crossing the planned new pedestrian bridge and the proposed park for the former dump site.

● The grounds of Vernon Mount House form part of their proposals — the residents see the residence forming part of this superpark. They want to see it restored to its former glory.

● The residents' group say the park would serve an extensive population.

The building is a protected structure, and the residents say it is incumbent on Cork County Council to make sure the owners of the property, Vernon Mount House Restoration Limited, protect it and its heritage. They said if the owners do not comply then the local authority must act, through a Compulsory Purchase Order if necessary.

The owners, for their part, say they had been in talks with the county council up to 2006 about developing

the house and its lands.

Mr Olaf Maxwell, a director of Vernon Mount House Restoration Limited, said the talks closed "on the basis that work would be done to the roof and windows of the house to improve protection".

He said Cork County Council officials were consulted on these works which were presented to and approved by the Council Conservation Officer at the time before they were carried out.

This, however, does not allay the concerns of the residents group who want to go inside and inspect the property themselves.

Mr Maxwell said he would allow the residents in to see the property. He made the comment at a recent public meeting held by the residents group where the future of Vernon Mount House was discussed.

The Irish Georgian Society maintain they have been unable to gain access.

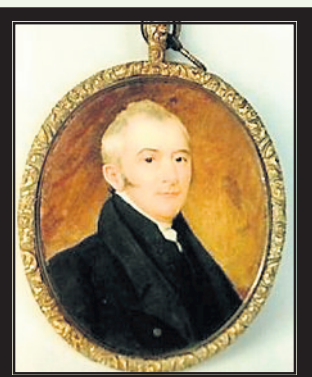
The Grange-Frankfield Partnership want the house and the grounds to form part of a superpark which would link up the planned park for the former Kinsale Road Roundabout landfill site with Douglas through the development of a pedestrian bridge across the South Link Road.

Cycle lanes and pathways would make the superpark a vital public amenity for 30,000 families living on its periphery as well as the 13 schools in the vicinity. People from Douglas would be able to walk or cycle all the way into the city without the worry of traffic. And Vernon Mount House would form part of these plans, with the stately home restored to its former grandeur.

It is in interest of all — the residents, the owners and the council — that Vernon Mount House is restored. The question is whether or not the obstacles that stand in the way can be overcome.

# jewel in our crown

## Who was Henry Hayes?



HENRY Browne Hayes was the son of Atwell, a successful merchant and industrialist with interests in brewing. In 1786, he married Elizabeth Smyth of Ballynatray on the Blackwater near Youghal. He rose to the position of Sheriff of Cork City. After organising with others a party in honour of the visiting Lord Lieutenant, the dignity — perhaps drunk on fine wine — agreed to knight all those who organised the party. Only Henry accepted the invitation. In 1794 his wife, Elizabeth, died and it is believed he had got through all of her inheritance. He decided to abduct the wealthy Quaker heiress, Mary Pike, after she was left a fortune of £20,000. Pike was staying at nearby Woodhill, the seat of her uncle Cooper Penrose, the Quaker, merchant and art connoisseur. Having brought her to Vernon Mount against her will, Hayes forced her into a sham marriage at gun point. Pike was

rescued and subsequently the family put up an award of £500 for the capture of Sir Henry Hayes. Having spent some years lying low, Sir Henry is said to have asked his friend and barber to inform on him so he could gain the reward. He was sent to trial for abduction where he was found guilty and sentenced to hang. Thanks to the influence of some of his Freemason friends, this sentence was commuted to transportation for life to the penal colony at Botany Bay. In Australia, Hayes managed to live in considerable luxury. Sir Henry was later pardoned and returned to Ireland in 1812. Hayes died in May 1833 and is buried in a vault in Christchurch in South Main Street, Cork. *Information compiled from Vernon Mount, Co. Cork: A Neo-Classical Gem In Jeopardy, an article written by The Knight of Glin and Donogh Cahill of the Irish Georgian Society, and also from www.sirhenrybrownehayes.com*



The main dining room and, right, the entrance hall, in 2006.



ABOVE: Part of the semi-circular landing with its rich decoration.



BELOW: The exterior of historic Vernon Mount, built by the Hayes family.

## Grogan ceiling key to cause

### The art

CENTRAL to the campaign to restore Vernon Mount House is the bid to save a painting by the esteemed artist Nathaniel Grogan on the ceiling of the building, pictured opposite.

This is one of the very few surviving ceiling paintings on canvas executed in Ireland in the late eighteenth century.

This decoration in the drawing room ceiling depicts in the centre of an octagonal frame Minerva, throwing away the spears of war, possibly commemorating the cessation of the American War of Independence. The house also includes other Grogan paintings in the first floor oval hall.

The sweeping cantilevered staircase retains its original neo-classical wrought-iron balustrade. Ones similar are to be found in a handful of other Cork mansions, such as Castlehyde. The staircase leads up to one of the most original features of the house, the oval landing with its series of eight Corinthian columns which are interspersed with seven doors with classical statues and urns painted by Grogan.

The house was designed along Freemason lines, with nearly every architectural structure being symbolic. It has a two-storey curved entrance front with symmetrical convex bows on either side and is flanked by serpentine walls.