



The arts past and present

Ireland: Castletown House

Narrator

By the 1960s, some 2,000 country houses, the seats of Anglo-Irish landlords, had been destroyed, many of them by neglect. When Castletown House, the finest Palladian house in Ireland, was auctioned in 1967, it seemed destined for the same fate.

Actuality archive of auction followed by interview with Lord Connolly-Carew

Auctioneer

One hundred and sixty six thousand. All Done?

Interviewer

Lord Carew, how do you feel now that the place is actually sold?

Lord Carew

Well, I'm very, very sorry because it's been my home for very many years. It's been the home of my family for 250 years past and one just hates giving it up. But economic conditions don't give me any option. I just can't afford to keep the place alive.

Narrator

One of the bidders at the auction was the Honorable Desmond Guinness, member of the famous brewing and banking family and the founder, in 1958, of the Irish Georgian Society. The Society had campaigned for a decade to save Georgian Dublin. Now it faced an even bigger challenge in trying to save Castletown.

Desmond Guinness

This has always been really to me the most beautiful house in Ireland. The importance of it. I mean the sheer scale, the sheer size, the sheer beauty of all the rooms and practically untouched, unaltered.

Narrator

Outbid for the house itself by a property developer, Desmond Guinness did manage to buy many of its contents, including the vast Murano glass chandeliers imported into Ireland in 1776.

Desmond Guinness

I bought the chandeliers intending to put them back if I was lucky and was able to buy the place. But of course when I didn't get it, I had to remove them rather sharpish otherwise the man who did buy it would have owned them. Everything you leave in the house belongs to the new owner and so I had to move all the busts that you see on the pedestals, the 3 chandeliers and everything else that I bought which was a sort of nucleus of the contents of the house.

Narrator

Just a few years later, Desmond Guinness persuaded the developers to sell him the house. The glass chandeliers returned and restoration began.

Desmond Guinness

We had a lot of young people with us and behind us and we organised work parties when we bought Castletown and when people arrived who would say, what do you do during the week. Oh, I work in the office or I said well in that case, you'll want an outdoor job and what do you do? Oh I'm a gardener, well you'll probably be happy indoors. We tried to suit the person to whatever they were doing. It was wonderful and the atmosphere was very good.

Narrator

The restoration of Castletown not only saved one of the greatest monuments to Irish craftsmanship, it began to shift attitudes towards the Big House and 18th century buildings.

Terry Dooley

Obviously the saving of Castletown was very important as a result of the efforts of the Irish Georgian society. And the saving of some of its surrounding parkland and landscape and so on was equally important. But it began the drive to secure more of these country houses as part of a shared Irish heritage.