

A brief history of Owners of Kells Bay Gardens

To an informed reader, the following list - Alexanders, Vogels, McCowans, Preece, Blennerhassett families - the reverse chronological ownership of the estate at Kells - encapsulates recent Irish history, and especially the history of the 'big house' in Ireland.

Since Rowland Blennerhassett purchased land at Cappamore and built 'a small hunting lodge' there almost 180 years ago, the nucleus of the estate has remained intact and in the ownership of just five families. Kells, by virtue of its size and isolation, is small in a 'big house' context. Its location and size have at certain times required a more careful management of the relationship with local people than is the case elsewhere in rural Ireland. The different owners are recalled with varying degrees of affection by the people of the area. Each family has interpreted their ownership responsibility in a different fashion, or as the cliché would have it 'put their own unique stamp on the place'. As Ireland's economy strengthened in the second half of the 20th century, the pace of ownership changes increased. To appreciate this, it is necessary to place the respective tenancies in a broader context which assists us in understanding the motivations and ambitions of the various owners. There is no doubt that the estate and its owners impacted the economic and social lives of the local people in a massive way, and though considerably reduced, the impact continues to the present day. A striking feature of any review of the Kells area over the last two centuries would be to show the diminishing economic gap between the owners of the estate and the local people. This is one of the key contexts in which Kells Bay House & Gardens approaches its bicentenary, and now endeavours to preserve its heritage and provide a sustainable future.

The briefest experience of the estate leaves one in no doubt that the different owners have appreciated the magnificent location and topography and have been concerned to enhance and develop the natural advantages it enjoys. The following paragraphs outline what is known and recalled about the various owners, to whom we all have reason to be thankful, that the estate is so well preserved and is such a wonderful place to visit.

The Blennerhassetts. 1837 -1953

When Rowland purchased the land at Kells from the Marquis of Lansdowne and built the original hunting lodge, he was extending the boundaries of his family's interest in Kerry.

Based in Ballyseedy Castle, the family had owned land in Ireland since the late 16th century and had been largely responsible for the development of the town of Tralee. They developed Blennerville as the port for Tralee and in 1800 built a windmill there for the production of flour. They were extremely wealthy by Kerry standards, carried considerable economic and political influence, and were active establishment figures of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Hunting was one of the major pastimes of the landed gentry of Ireland so it is not surprising that when an opportunity arose a member of the family would have sought to acquire additional hunting grounds. Rowland's brother, Richard, was a well-known ship's doctor and served for a number of years aboard the Jeanie Johnson. It is reputed that he never lost a passenger. It is not inconceivable that he brought back from his travels some of the plants that still grow at Kells.

Whether this Rowland ever resided in Kells is unclear, but another Rowland, his son, born at Kells in 1850 is widely held to be the man responsible for extending the original hunting lodge and laying out the Ladies Walled Garden and planting what is now the Primaeval Forest. The roadways which the present Green and Red walks now follow, were built to his design toward the end of the 19th Century. At this time the estate would have provided a large amount of local employment. There is also evidence that in hard years relief was dispensed from the house, and one of the large iron Famine Pots, used in the 1840's for the preparation of 'soup' can still be seen on the terrace. The Blennerhassetts were landlords to the small farmers of Cappamore and Kells, and their landholdings would have been considerably larger than what remains of the estate today. The Land Wars and subsequent Land Acts meant the transfer of ownership to the smallholders, reducing the size of the estate in the decades from 1880-1920. This Rowland won a seat for Isaac Butt's Home Rule party in 1872 at the age of 22.

By and large, the present estate at Kells is a legacy of the Victorian age, and its fashion for formal gardens and plant collections. What is different about Kells is the informality, almost an acknowledgement by generations of gardeners that nature itself is the best designer, and recognition that attempts to impose too heavily on the Kerry landscape, are unjustified. This can be clearly seen in the extensively planted Walled Garden which obviously owes more to design than nature, though the plants seem determined to contest the fact.

The bigger non-native trees were also planted at this time, however there are no known planting records for the gardens. There is some debate as to when the first tree ferns arrived, but it is clear whichever Blennerhassett introduced them, was passionate about these southern hemisphere exotics. These plants are common to a number of other gardens of the landed gentry in the West Cork and Kerry areas and adapted enthusiastically to the area. The lush growth of native ferns in Kells might have indicated to the early planters that the imports had considerable potential, but the extent of their successful colonisation at Kells, and their integration with the native species is a wonder of botany. Following Irish independence, the estate remained in Blennerhassett hands, and the death of Richard (b. 1879) in 1938 appears to have been the precursor to a change of ownership. His daughter Diana, (locally Deenagh) who lived from 1916-2000, was the last of the family to have residential connections. This period would have seen the decline of the Big House in Irish society and life at Kells would have mirrored the experience of the rest of the country.

The Preeces. 1953-1973

In 1953 the Preeces, Roland and Nora, arrived at Kells in circumstances that are shrouded in mystery. They had been staying in Cork, with Lady Doneraile, for a number of months when it appears they were made aware of Kells, and subsequently took a lease on it. Both were young divorcees at this time and arrived in Cork from an impoverished England that was recovering from WW II. There was not much discussion of their origin locally, but whether the arrangement was intended to be temporary or not, they appear to have settled into the polite society of south-west Kerry seamlessly and remained at Kells for the following three decades.

The Preeces maintained their household in line with the lifestyle of their class and the expectation of that class in Irish society, which during that post-colonial period was ambiguous. They had many peers in Kerry at the time and they appear to have made an active contribution to the social life of the area during the forties and fifties. The gulf between big house society and locals was significant during those years. Both Preeces seem to have made considerable efforts to know and work with the locals, Roland is remembered for his engineering skills and Nora was well known in a benevolent role to the local families. She is fondly remembered by many who were children in the 1950's for dispensing largesse at festive times of the year and she appears to have taken a keen interest in the welfare of local families. Their relative wealth, and their provision of local employment gave them considerable status in the area. They appear to have maintained friendly relations with all strata of society during their time in Kells. Mrs Preece received instruction from the Parish Priest of Cahersiveen and was received into the Catholic Church there in 1961.

The Preeces left Kells in 1973 and returned to England, having been popular and responsible custodians of the estate for the preceding thirty years. They lived through a period where their class of society were in decline throughout Britain and Ireland and increasingly during the 1960's many of their peers on the west coast began to feel increasingly isolated. Their age, the isolation of Kells the emergence of the Northern troubles, as well as some local unpleasantness over the building of a slipway on the beach may have hastened their departure.

There was little development in the house or the gardens during the time the Preeces lived at Kells, it appears there was no economic pressure on them to make the estate pay. Their care of the gardens was exemplary, they maintained them to an adequate standard, and ensured the preservation of the major parts of the plant collection. Local history recalls Roland Preece taking a tree fern to the Chelsea Flower Show during the early '60s where his claims that it had self-seeded in Kells were greeted with much scepticism. In the society of the time this was construed as further evidence that Preece had gone native.

Iain McCowan. 1973-1979

Iain McCowan's arrival belatedly brought the Swinging Sixties to this quiet corner of the Iveragh peninsula. He was young and rich and cut a dash in the Kerry society of the time. He was from a Scots Irish background, had a reputation as a bon-viveur and loved life. He enjoyed country living and liked the fresh air and seafood that Kerry offers. He liked to entertain and the house hosted a number of parties during his time. Though there is no evidence of his being denounced from the pulpit, local legend has it that it was a close-run thing on occasion. His love of gardens or plants is unrecorded; however, he managed Kells responsibly in the tradition of the big house in Ireland. As Ireland developed economically through its accession to the EEC inflation appeared and the purse strings of the 'young laird' may have proved unequal to the growing expense of maintaining a small estate on the periphery. He considered developing the house as a profit-making venture but was unable to develop a profitable model. The reason for his sale of Kells in 1979 was viewed as being for mainly economic reasons though it may have been precipitated by his upcoming marriage to Lady Phillipa Baillie.

The Vogels. 1979-2006

When the estate came on the market in 1979 there was much local interest, however Ireland's economic development was still such that it was highly unlikely to have been bought by any of the natives. Oral history records that XXXX of Glanleam gardens on Valentia Island was very interested in acquiring the estate, most likely for its botanical interest, but the first to meet McCowan's asking price were a German couple Friedrich and Marianne Vogel. Ireland's south western counties, Cork and Kerry saw a noticeable influx of German families during the late 60's and early 70's. There were many and complex reasons for this, Germany's economic boom, the Cold War, the relative value and availability of suitable properties land. As a number of the Anglo-Irish families moved out it appears they were replaced by relatively wealthy German people looking for an alternative to the highly industrialised society on offer at home.

Originally from Bochum in Germany the Vogel family had a house on Caragh Lake but were immediately interested and moved quickly to acquire Kells when it came on the market. They had two children, Friedhelm and Eva and it is likely they considered that Kells would prove a suitable residence/project for them. Eva trained in horticulture and was heavily involved in the work when Roy Lancaster completed his plantings here in the early eighties. (see Roy's own account in this book)

The Vogels refurbished the apartments and marketed them for short term leases exclusively to German guests. The family fully appreciated the rich botanical legacy of the estate and worked hard to preserve, protect and extend this. For over 20 years the estate was maintained discreetly with the contents of the gardens known to a growing circle of plant lovers. Family circumstances and the early death of Friedhelm led to the disposal of the estate early in the new millennium when his widow, Victoria, moved out.

Alexander 2006 - Present

In 2006 Ireland was riding high on the breaking wave of an economic boom. As Billy Alexander settled into middle age, enjoying a moderately successful banking career, reflecting on his hockey and athletic achievements, while managing his modest portfolio of property, he was conscious of a growing itch. He had become aware of his green fingers in the garden of his maternal grandfather Harry Hart-Barry in Wicklow's Rocky Valley, a landscape somewhat reminiscent of Kells. The sight of his first tree fern (a plant from Kells) in the suburban garden of family friend Cora Maguire had been an epiphany. His subsequent fascination with these plants led to numerous trips to far-flung places to see various fern species in the wild and also to an enthusiast run small business, importing exotic plants and ferns and selling them to fellow plant lovers. In an uncrowded field he was becoming Ireland's leading pteridologist. Unbeknownst to him the road was leading inexorably toward Kells and when an order for some New Zealand ferns came through from the southwest, fate beckoned. Driving through the front gates he was struck by the irony that though he had flown, boated and hiked thousands of miles to see these plants, a world class collection had lain undiscovered on his doorstep.

Shortly afterwards he became aware that the estate was on the market with an asking price of €2 million. The notion that he could buy it refused to go away. That a person of his means could aspire to ownership was a product of the unique circumstances prevailing in the Ireland of the time. A competitive lending environment meant banks were not averse to risk and when Alexander's bid was accepted in the winter of 2005, he set about raising the money. Time and tide had met, and he was prepared to take it at the flood.

That he underestimated the challenge of Kells is debatable. His instinct and his passion was to preserve and protect the plant heritage that existed. He was unaware of the full extent of this heritage as over the years the gardens had become overgrown and numerous plantings were hidden by the fast-growing native foliage. The pontic rhododendron had colonised vast swathes of the garden. As he explored and tried to imagine a future the enormity of the task became apparent.

Billy's unspoken plans were compounded in the following years by the rapid deflation of Ireland's economic bubble. He realised that preservation and protection could not be guaranteed without some development and that to achieve sustainability for Kells would require a multi-faceted approach. Developing a sustainable future for the gardens would mean modifying his more grandiose plans. It would also require greater commitment, and his banking career and south Dublin lifestyle were sacrificed to Hegemone. Through the years 2008-14 several business plans were tried and refined. With scant resources the house was restored to the point where it now offers excellent 4-star accommodation. Additional gardens have been added as detailed in Seamus O'Brien's accompanying chapter. The size of the gardens, their exposure to recent meteorological upheavals and the speed of growth in the Kerry climate mean that their ability to consume resources is massive. It is a testament to Alexander's success in reaching towards sustainability that the increasing footfall of casual visitors and experts records universally positive feedback in relation to the gardens and their walks. As Alexander remarked on hosting the first Southern Symposium in Kells in September 2014, the gathering of a broad spectrum of Ireland's plants-people in the gardens marked 'the end of the beginning'. There is increasing recognition of Kells Bay's unique place in Kerry's and Ireland's cultural heritage. The opening of Sala Thai has brought an influx of visitors that come for the food but are captivated by the gardens.

As the third decade of the Alexander era approaches, local feeling is that the gardens have once more found their rightful custodian and that as the bicentenary of the building of Hollymount Cottage approaches this wonderful place is at last attracting the recognition it deserves, both nationally and globally.

Billy's journey with ferns will not stop in Chelsea.