



MAP LEGEND

- |                   |                 |                        |                       |                 |                     |
|-------------------|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| 01 MAIN HOUSE     | 05 TENNIS COURT | 08 SHOOTING AREA       | 11 THE ROCK GARDEN    | 14 PICNIC HOUSE | 17 GROTTO           |
| 02 ROSE GARDEN    | 06 FERNERY      | 09 UPPER WALLED GARDEN | 12 LADY COOTES AVIARY | 15 CHURCH       | 18 THE RUINED LODGE |
| 03 HELICOPTER PAD | 07 TOWER (WC)   | 10 LOWER WALLED GARDEN | 13 ICE HOUSE          | 16 BOAT HOUSE   | 19 WINTER WATERFALL |
| 04 ARCHERY        |                 |                        |                       |                 |                     |

## INTRODUCTION

The walled 614 acres of Ballyfin demesne contains the home farm, park, woods, pleasure grounds, gardens, lakes and farmyards which were all essential appurtenances of the big house. The word demesne common in Irish place names is of Norman French origin and designates the ‘Home Farm’ or lands directly managed by a landlord. First enclosed in the early 1600’s the demesne has developed and gradually changed under successive owners. These changes being dictated, partly by economic concerns and also by fashion and taste.

The demesne provided a home for the owner, his family and a retinue of servants indoor and outdoor who ensured the smooth running of a considerable enterprise. The farm produced as wide a range of foodstuff as possible – pigs, sheep and cattle were slaughtered in the slaughter house, meat not consumed fresh was salted or stored in the ice-house. Poultry hens, ducks, pigeons, geese and turkeys provided eggs and fowl for the table. The cow house and its occupants’ milk and cream, the farm crops for baking and cooking, the lake fish and the walled garden a huge range of vegetables, herbs and fruit. The woods too were regarded as a crop providing trees for the saw mill, in turn producing timber for building, for repairs for farm machinery and equipment, firewood etc. Even the final essentials of a coffin. His own saw mill here produced the coffin for Sir Algernon Coote in November 1899.

Within the economic framework the actual presentation and appearance of the demesne was of great importance. It was no accident of nature that caused Lady Kildare the leading aristocrat in Ireland to write in May 1759 –

*“Yesterday I saw a most delightful place, indeed much beyond any place I have seen in Ireland, Ballyfin.”*

Changing taste and fashions caused the evolution of the man-made landscape and from the mid-18th century more formal elements, straight lines, alleés, avenues and a regimented layout was softened, sometimes merely hidden by new groves and stands of trees and shrubs set in a new gently undulating parkland. It was all to look very natural but was actually highly contrived. Here and there ghosts of the old formal park of the late 1600’s and early 1700’s can be found in spite of all the naturalising improvements of the late 1700’s and 1800’s.

## 02 - THE ROSE GARDEN

This little trapezoidal enclosure has a long and varied history. Now enclosed by ruined walls and a newly planted beech hedge, this in the 18th and early 19th century was the grapery. Greenhouses lined the two brick walls and here vines produced dessert grapes for the table. Harvested in autumn the bunches of grapes could be stored in dark cool cellars kept fresh in grape glasses right through winter allowing the family and guests in the big house a varied menu of fruit. It is likely that pineapples were also produced

here, quite a commonplace on the big house table in the days before imported fruit from across the ocean made it available to the masses and so caused the pineapple to lose its social cache.

By 1900 the glasshouses here had disappeared as new ranges of glass in the main walled garden made them redundant, old photographs show the place as a rose garden. With the coming of the school after 1928 the walls were adapted and heightened to make the handball alleys, an essential element in every 20th century school in Ireland. With the final departures of the school in 2009 the concrete walls were removed to expose the remains of the 18th century stone and brick, now it is a rose garden once again.

## 06 - THE FERNERY

This represents a sophisticated creation inspired by ideas of the picturesque with pathways leading through a series of inventive rockwork features – a tunnel, arched caves and a waterfall – all enmeshed in gnarled tree roots. Work would have commenced mid 19th century. All this artifice was to enhance the walk from the house to the tower. The tunnel under the farm road ensured that the gentry did not come face to face with the workers.

## 07 - THE TOWER

Prominently sited on a hill above the house, the formidable tower was one of the greatest undertakings in the demesne in the mid nineteenth century. The tower rises above the former lime kiln in six stories to a glazed observatory and flagstaff tower at the top. It is a stout structure, built of rubble, formed into an elaborate mock fortification with a deep fosse, now with its mechanical drawbridge restored. You can take the narrow steps for a spectacular view of the surrounding countryside.

## 09/10 - THE WALLED GARDENS

There are two walled gardens here, which is a little unusual and both with walls 10 to 12 feet high date back to the 18th century. The large garden is 4.5 acres in extent with the old head gardener’s house in the south east corner and the old ‘bothy’ or lodging for the unmarried male gardeners in the north east corner. The south west facing wall is lined with bricks to retain the heat of the sun and so help ripen fruit in the days before glasshouses. During the second half of the 19th century extensive glasshouses were erected in the northern end of the garden enabling the gardeners to produce lots of fruit and vegetables out of season. With a large household and a much larger staff to feed year round it was essential to make the place self-sufficient in the time before greengrocers’ shops and supermarkets.

In restoring the garden over the past 10 years, the ruined remains of the glasshouses have been removed. The walls are now planted with apple trees and roses. Some of the oldest apple trees survive and are about 150 years old. The garden again produces

essential fruit, vegetables and herbs for the kitchen.

The central paths are lined with borders of flowers. The north east to south west path has wide herbaceous borders again producing a succession of cut flowers for decoration in the house. The colour scheme is loosely based on a plan of the great Edwardian gardener Gertrude Jekyll. At the south end it starts with white, silver and grey moving into pale blues, yellows then reds and orange and finally into mauve and pink at the north end. An occasional stray plant upsets the order but that is part of the fun of gardening. The upper walled garden, now home to the hens, is 2 acres in size and is being reinstated as an orchard for old varieties of apples, pears, figs and gages. The ground between the two walled gardens known in the past as the slyp garden is now planted with plums, damsons and cherries

## 11 - THE ROCK GARDEN

Captain Ralph Coote the 13th Baronet turned the old quarry into a wonderful rock garden. It’s impressive waterfall was fed by the old mill pond, and with the remains of the old saw mill these were to become the centrepieces of an Edwardian rock garden

## 12 - LADY COOTES AVIARY

The little building set in an ornamental garden with a fountain in the centre was created in the late 19th century as a special place for Lady Coote’s fowl. The small doors below the windows gave fancy hens and a white peacock access.

## 13 - THE ICE HOUSE

The ice house was used to store ice throughout the year, prior to the invention of the refrigerator. During the winter, ice and snow would be taken into the ice house and packed with insulation, often straw or sawdust. It would remain frozen for many months, often until the following winter, and could be used as a source of ice during summer months. The main application of the ice was the storage of perishable foods, but it could also be used simply to cool drinks, or allow ice-cream and sorbet desserts to be prepared.

## 14 - THE PICNIC HOUSE

A small wooden hut with a veranda is set on the hillside with wide views over Laois, Offaly, Kildare to the Dublin and Wicklow Mountains. It is an ideal place for a picnic lunch. In colder weather the fireplace provides welcome warmth while the veranda is ideal for warmer days.

## 15 - THE CHURCH

The church of St John the Baptist was built for the household and for the estate workers and tenants under the terms of the will of William Pole in 1792. The building was extended further and the spire added by Sir Charles Coote in the 1850’s to create an “eye catchers” for those entering the demesne by the

Portlaoise gate. The church has not been part of the demesne since the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869.

Service is held here every Sunday at noon (Church of Ireland, Anglican/Episcopalian). Visitors may enter the churchyard via a pedestrian bridge and gate. To gain access please ask the butler on duty for the key.

Several members of the Coote family are interred here and tomb stones proudly proclaim the roles fulfilled by others within the demesne in the 19 century such as the steward, the head gardener and coachman.

## 16 - THE LAKE

*“There is a piece of water there very like what I fancy ours will be, only broader; fine plantations and the greatest variety of trees and flowers almost that ever I saw anywhere”*

Thus Lady Kildare gives us a tantalising glimpse of Ballyfin in May 1759. The lake must have been completed a few years before and thus is quite an early example of a naturalistic sheet of water in Ireland. We know nothing of the designer or engineer or indeed of the huge workforce of men and boys, armed with shovels, spades and pickaxes and the essential horses, donkeys and bullocks hauling carts, who were required for what must have been a painfully expensive undertaking. The lake seems to incorporate an older fish pond or canal, a common element in demesnes, in the later 1600’s and early 1700’s and an essential part of the economy and food supply for the big house. The north east, the south, and the south east side’s give some indication of the scale of labour involved in the making of the 28 acre water feature. Enormous embankments of earth and stone were built over 20 ft high to block off the ends of a declivity which was then flooded with water channelled and culverted on a five mile course from Conlawn Hill in the foothills of the Slieve Bloom mountains. It was all to look as if nature had put it there herself. The 18th century water supply stills functions well and the place is home to pike, roach and perch as well as a variety of water fowl. The boat house at the north west side is a recent replacement on the footprint of the 19th century boathouse. Two rowing boats are located here and are for the pleasure of the guests who may wish to row or to fish.

## 17 - THE GROTTA

Situated close to the house, in the beech woods overlooking the lake, the Grotto at Ballyfin is a wonderfully novel building reflecting 18th century desires for curious and novel incidents in the landscape to enhance variety, excitement and aesthetic pleasures. The grotto served to add human interest while also trying to demonstrate in a meaningful way the presence of man in harmony with nature. The main room has a fireplace and was used for dining while the small circular chamber was used as a cold shower. A cold bath or shower often occurred in the pleasure grounds of 18th century houses.