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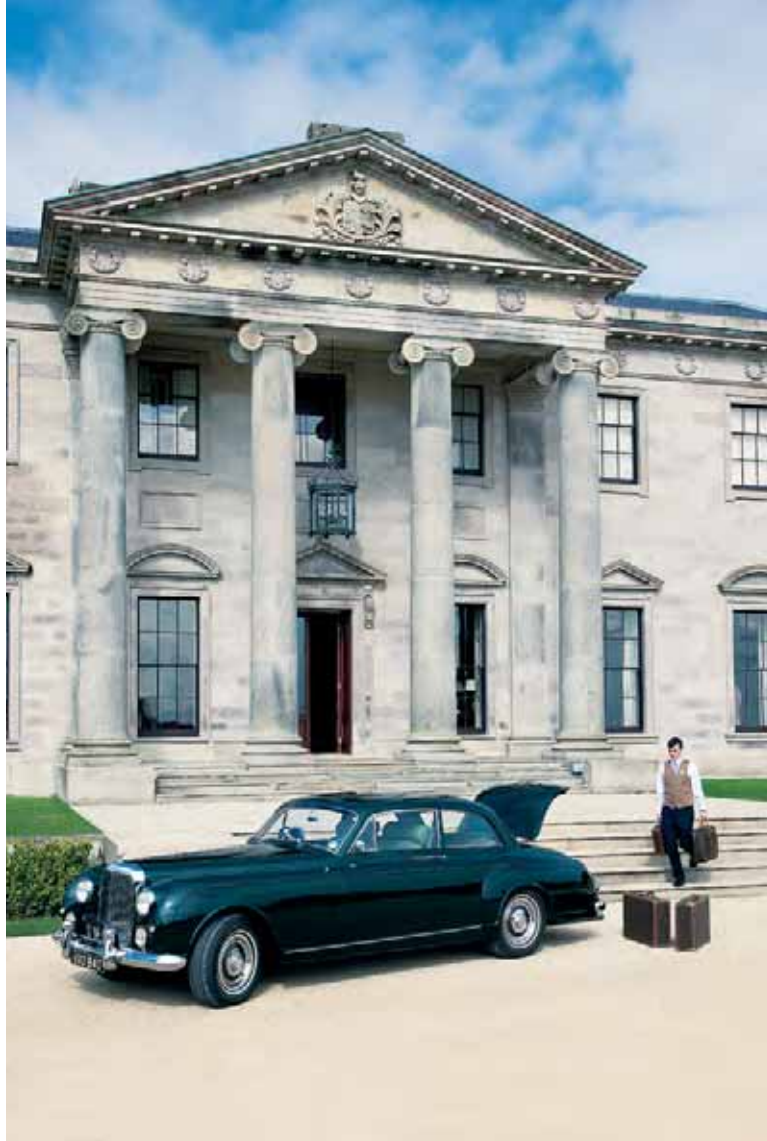
An Irish estate is painstakingly restored to its original glory, carrying the stories of its aristocratic residents from years past...

Words: Ayesha Khan

Once upon a time in a county named Laois in the greenest of Irish countryside, there lived a family called the Wellesley-Poles. Unfortunately fate was not on the Wellesley-Poles' side as the roof of their home, Ballyfin, was damaged in a fire, forcing them off their beloved estate in the early 19th century. In 1820, the newly moneyed Sir Charles Coote and his young bride, Caroline, bought the land and set about making their home the most resplendent in Ireland. The newlyweds spared no expense to procure the finest in decorative elements from around the world for the manor and its beautifully manicured gardens. This included a revolutionary cantilevered staircase in the soaring atrium, and a rotunda to rival the finest country estates and palaces of Europe.

But Lady Caroline's pride and joy had fallen into disrepair by the 1920s, when the country was in the throes of the Irish War of Independence, and in 1926 Ballyfin was bought by an order of Patrician monks who opened a boys' school on the premises. Sadly, the practicality of accommodating rambunctious boys meant that the Coote's fine finishes were at risk, until Fred Krehbiel, a Chicago man with an Irish wife, bought the property and turned it into a hotel. The current iteration of Ballyfin was nine years in the making. A talented group of master craftsmen was assembled under the watchful eye of acclaimed Irish landscape architect and historian Jim Reynolds and British interior designer Colin Orchard.

The interior design story begins in the entry foyer, where a Roman mosaic from 1822 (one of Lady Caroline's



acquisitions) holds court. In the adjacent room, named The Whispering Room – due to its shallow vault that carries a whisper across the space with perfect clarity – guests are greeted by a handsome portrait of Sir Charles Coote himself, which is said to have been painted by artist John Hoppner.

Next is the salon, where the most captivating element is the original marquetry floor. Inspired by the great Moorish designs the Coote family had seen in southern Spain, the floor had to be painstakingly restored. Deep green Scagliola columns with ornate Corinthian capitals line the space. Through a lavish rotunda that appears part Pantheon, part Lion Court at Alhambra Palace, is the library. Handsome mahogany bookcases line the entire space, which Orchard refers to as, “a slightly eclectic English gentleman’s club”. Last but not least is Orchard’s favourite space, the gold drawing room. Here, a gilded ceiling – an original from the Coote residence – presides over a French Savonnerie-inspired carpet and elegant tufted seating. A light ochre silk, linen and wool wallcovering frames the white marble fireplace, which is thought to have been imported from Italy in the 1820s. The pièce de résistance in this room is the chandelier, which belonged to Napoleon’s sister, the Queen of Naples.

Ballyfin’s upper floor is devoted to the majority of its 15 bedrooms. The most unique of the guest rooms is the Westmeath, where an elaborately carved French bed à la Polonoise sits right in the middle of the room. “At first we weren’t sure if people would be comfortable sleeping in the centre of the room,” says Orchard. “But we thought: ‘It’s made to go in the middle so let’s go with it.’” The Christopher Coote room is equally impressive and, decorated with a Chinese theme, reinforces the Coote family’s love of travel. “We had found some pieces of this wonderful Chinese wallpaper but when we unrolled them, they weren’t in good enough condition, so we cut out the best bits and planned the whole room around the panels,” says Orchard.

Ballyfin’s nine-year restoration was a labour of love. “For me, it was a gruelling job, but everything came together and it dovetailed so incredibly,” recalls Orchard. “Fred wanted to make it look like the [Coote] family had just moved out of the house,” he adds of the finished product, where every inch lives up to its owner’s exacting vision.





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Top left: The grand rotunda leads to Ballyfin's library
Above: Our favourite area is the hunting lodge-inspired sitting room with its rich red walls, curved ceiling and traditional fireplace
Left: The stunning grounds have not been neglected in the restoration
Far left: Painstaking attention to detail is apparent everywhere, taking guests back to grander, more formal ways of living



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The hotel's 15 bedrooms are equally stunning. The Westmeath room, left, features an ornate bed à la Polonaise, which sits in the middle of the room