

# HOTELS *by* DESIGN

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designed hotels in the world*

HOUSE  
& GARDEN

# IRISH RENAISSANCE

Over the past century, Ballyfin in County Laois had deteriorated from being one of Ireland's grandest country houses to a crumbling secondary school, but its recent lengthy restoration and conversion into a luxurious hotel represents a triumphant return to form

OPPOSITE: The domed rotunda, with its superb parquet floor, forms part of a magnificent axis through the centre of the house. THIS PAGE: The austerity of the Greek Revival entrance hall is offset by the warm colour chosen by Colin Orchard for the walls, which was specially mixed to pick up tints in the Roman mosaic pavement.





Since its construction in the 1820s, Ballyfin has been one of the very grandest country houses in Ireland, but from 1930 until 2011 this was not perhaps immediately apparent. Designed by the father-and-son team of Sir Richard and William Vitruvius Morrison, the building was conceived in the most opulent Regency manner for Sir Charles Coote, whose punning family motto, 'Coûte que coûte', can be freely and aptly translated as 'Money no object'. World War I and the ensuing political upheaval spelt an abrupt end to the Anglo-Irish idyll, and the 13th Baronet sold up to the Patrician Brothers, a Catholic teaching order that established a flourishing boys' secondary school on the estate. This new use probably saved Ballyfin from a far worse fate. But, much as the priests loved the house, there simply wasn't the money to keep out Ireland's fine soft weather indefinitely, and as decay accelerated alarmingly, they took the reluctant decision to move out in 2001.



At this stage it was difficult to see just what the future was for a mansion of this size and grandeur, sited well away from Ireland's established tourist hotspots, and the prospects looked bleak indeed. Miraculously, Ballyfin found its ideal saviours in Fred Krehbiel, a very successful American businessman, and his Irish wife, Kay, who were already looking for an architecturally fine house to turn into a select deluxe hotel. The deal was struck in 2002, and in May 2011 Ballyfin opened in its new incarnation as Ireland's grandest hotel.

It was a huge project, for which Fred and Kay assembled a large team comprising the finest talents available on either side of the Irish Sea. In overall charge was Jim Reynolds, already well known for the outstanding garden he had created for himself at Butterstream, County Meath, while the key role of project manager went to Englishman Woody Clark –

working in tandem with the English architectural firm Purcell Miller Tritton – who had made a resounding success of the restoration of one of Ireland's most beautiful Georgian houses, Castletown Cox. But perhaps the greatest challenge was to find the right person to mastermind the redecoration and furnishing of the interior. The Krehbiels' old friend Imogen Taylor, formerly of Colefax and Fowler, felt that it was too massive a job to take on as she neared retirement, so she recommended London-based interior designer Colin Orchard. He worked in constant consultation with the Krehbiels and Jim Reynolds, and the results are impossible to fault, with infinite attention to detail in both aesthetic and practical matters.

Once the house had been reroofed and made watertight, and the crumbling external stonework had been repaired, the focus moved





OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Ballyfin's exterior is noble and restrained. The rotunda home has a stained-glass Oculus. The airy conservatory was added by Richard Turner around 1955. Jim Reynolds designed the new cascade in the garden front. THIS PAGE The atmosphere of the library is that of a gentleman's club, but cozier. The rugs were specially made for Walter



CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PICTURE The colours in the Gold Drawing Room take their cue from the carpet, made by David Bamford after an Axminster original; the silk and Koen damask on the walls was woven specially. The top-lit saloon, with its Ziegler carpet, is the heart of the house. The painted screens in the dining room and the staircase hall are by Lucinda Dekes. Many of the paintings in the staircase hall are Coote portraits that have been reacquired



to the interiors. The Morrisons had created arguably the most magnificent sequence of classical rooms in Ireland, arranged around a great toplit saloon. The craftsmanship deployed here represents the very apogee of Regency achievement, bringing together lusciously modelled plasterwork, scagliola in different colours, stained glass, gilding and sumptuous drapes. Most exceptional of all are the floors of staggeringly intricate parquetry, unequalled on this scale anywhere in the British Isles. Specialist local conservator John Hart revealed the beauty of these from beneath decades of well-meaning varnish, while Cliveden Conservation oversaw the other internal restoration work. With advice from Imogen Taylor, the results of Catherine Hassall's careful paint analysis were incorporated into Colin Orchard's schemes for the wallpapers, furnishings and fabrics, before Con Farrell from nearby Mountmellick moved in with his team of painters and decorators.

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No expense was spared in reacquiring furniture and paintings that had once been in the house, and in supplementing them with other appropriate pieces. For instance, John Hoppner's charming portrait of Sir Charles Coote as a fresh-faced boy now hangs behind the reception desk, while Sir George Hayter's great family group of his four children dominates the Gold Room. In the tripartite library the central space is lit by a magnificent ormolu gasolier that once hung in the Royal Academy in London, which has been replicated on a reduced scale in the two end compartments. The interiors now recall those shown in Victorian and Edwardian photographs of the house – minus the aroma of damp and dogs that in reality must have permeated them – but with a lavishness of creature comforts unknown even in the Cootes' heyday. In fact, as general manager Aileesh Carew remarks, 'Ballyfin has the feel of a private house with all the amenities of a five-star hotel.' And, as Jim Reynolds sums up the ethos, 'The idea is that Sir Christopher

and Lady Coote have just gone out, but you are their house guests – so if you decide you want to dine in the library rather than in the dining room, so be it.’

In its present state the house contains 15 impeccably decorated bedrooms, including two splendid suites, allowing a possible total of 29 guests. Many, it seems, prefer to spend their stay simply relaxing, which they can do in various ways on the 614 acres of the walled estate. For those wanting to explore beyond the bounds, a car and driver are available for excursions to, say, the historic town of Kilkenny, to the Lutyens gardens at Heywood, or over the Slieve Bloom Mountains for lunch at Birr Castle with the Earl and Countess of Rosse. Although work continues on the outlying parts of the garden – notably the rock garden, which had been overwhelmed by bamboo and Japanese knotweed – the



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resurrection of Ballyfin is essentially complete. Having seen the place at its low ebb a decade ago, I believe that no praise is too great for what has been achieved here by Fred and Kay Krehbiel, Jim Reynolds, Colin Orchard and the rest of their superb team. Just one little quibble, though, which concerns the piped music in the saloon: the *Hallelujah Chorus* and Allegri's *Miserere* are unlikely to have featured in any Edwardian house party, even at a carol service for the tenantry □

*Ballyfin, County Laois, Ireland: 00-353-5787 55866; [www.ballyfin.com](http://www.ballyfin.com) | Double rooms cost from €975 per night, based on two sharing, including breakfast, lunch, tea, pre-dinner drinks and dinner*

Each of the bedrooms has its own character. Lady Caroline Coote's Room (top left and right) has a trompe-l'oeil Mauny wallpaper, recoloured and made to order in France. The Sir Charles Coote Room (centre right) was formerly the study; the bathroom (centre left) has as its bath a Roman sarcophagus acquired by Sir Charles in 1822. The Marquis de Massigny Room (bottom left and right) deploys toile de Jouy on the walls, curtains and bed





In the Westmeath Room, the French *lit à la Polonoise* probably dates from about 1900. The paper is by Mauny and the bed hangings and curtains are by Andrew Christy, who worked throughout the house

