

Belvedere House

Today Belvedere House, Gardens and Park is a magical 160 acre lakeside estate at Lough Ennell outside Mullingar Co. Westmeath. Owned by Westmeath County Council since 1982, the estate has been developed into a major tourism asset for the midlands region. Belvedere House itself and the estate underwent a major restoration between 1998 and 2000 when it opened to the public in its present guise. The estate attracts over 160,000 visitors annually and is open all year round with a full programme of events. Throughout its 270 year history the estate has been in constant use but strangely no children were ever born or grew up at Belvedere. Nowadays the grounds echo to the sounds of children's laughter as families enjoy both the tranquillity and security of the Belvedere estate. The grounds play host to numerous events during the year with 2009 proving to be a particularly busy year.



“Belvedere is constantly changing, adding new attractions and events and this is part of the reason why it proves to be so popular. We are currently championing a growing Self-Sufficiency movement providing information and practical advice to budding gardeners. We also have a full programme of events this year including our annual garden festival, several music festivals, painting courses, steam trains and outdoor garden theatre to name just a few.” Said Bartle D’Arcy Belvedere General Manager.

It is a far cry from the estates original function where its high walls were designed to keep people out. Belvedere has a fascinating history that has permeated some of the best known literary works including James Joyce’s “Ulysses” and Maria Edgeworth’s “Castle Rackrent”.

A desire to escape from the formality of country house life during the eighteenth century led to the emergence of small, comfortable holiday retreats known as villas. Undoubtedly the best example of such a building in Ireland is Belvedere – an exquisite house with an unusual elongated plan set in a fine landscape park overlooking Lough Ennell. Belvedere was built around 1740 to a design by Richard Castle, for Robert Rochfort, Lord Belfield, whose seat at Gaulston lay five miles away. But the very strange and terrible events that preceded its construction ensured that Belvedere was never really used as a villa, but rather became a country house in its own right.



A colourful history

Belvedere had hardly been completed when a great scandal broke out surrounding its builder Robert Rochfort, and his wife Mary Molesworth. She was only sixteen when she married Robert in 1736, but at the time the match seemed highly suitable; he was intelligent, handsome and one of the country’s richest young men, she was the pretty and well-connected daughter of the third Viscount Molesworth. They settled at Gaulston and all seemed well until 1743 when Robert, now Baron Belfield, was informed that his wife had committed adultery with his young brother Arthur, then living near Gaulston at Belfield. Robert, evidently a hot-tempered and self-centred individual, at once removed to his newly completed house at Belvedere, incarcerated his wife at Gaulston and plotted revenge against his brother, who fled to England.

For thirty-one years his wife remained confined at Gaulston with only servants to keep her company. Once, in 1756, she managed to escape, but her father refused her entry into his house and within twenty-four hours she was back in Gaulston. Henceforth her movements were further restricted and she was no longer allowed visits by her children. It is said that she used

to walk up and down the gallery at Gaulston gazing at the portraits “as if conversing with them”. After her husband’s death in 1774 she was released by her son, who was horrified to find that she had acquired a “wild, scared, unearthly look, whilst the tones of her voice, which hardly exceeded a whisper, were harsh, agitated and uneven”. As for the unfortunate Arthur, he made the mistake of returning to Ireland in 1759 and was sued for adultery by his unrelenting brother, now Earl of Belvedere. Fined £20,000 in damages, he spent the rest of his life in the Marshalsea, the debtor’s jail in Dublin.

Lord Belvedere’s trouble-some younger brother George made the initial allegation of the affair and later completed building Rochfort House a short distance away from Belvedere. Rochfort House was much larger than Belvedere and was built by the same architect, Richard Castle. Robert Rochfort built The Jealous Wall in 1760 so he would no longer have to look at Rochfort.

Following the death of the ‘Wicked Earl’ (as he was later known) in 1774, the house was inherited by his son, the second Earl, who sold Gaulston and continued to live at Belvedere where he added a small wing to the back. Although his father had left him “very embarrassed in his circumstances” he managed to revive the family fortunes sufficiently to build a magnificent town residence – now the home of the famous Dublin school, Belvedere College. He died without heirs in 1814 and the property was inherited by his sister, the Countess of Lanesborough, and later passed in 1826 to her great-grandson, Charles Brinsely Marley, who lived at Belvedere until his death in 1912.

Marley laid out the Italianate terraces in front of the house and assembled a remarkable collection of pictures and objets d’art which was given to Cambridge University upon his death, forming the core of the Fitzwilliam Museum. The residue of this collection together with the house and estate were left to his cousin Lieutenant Colonel C.K. Howard-Bury, leader of the 1921 Mount Everest expedition, who after his death in 1963 bequeathed it to Rex Beaumont. The contents were auctioned by Christie’s in 1980 – a catastrophic loss for any such house. However, the interior of Belvedere is so fine that it still retains its soul, and is now furnished by period pieces of the time. ♦

Belvedere House, Gardens and Park is open all year round and full details of opening hours and events can be found on www.belvedere-house.ie