



Jeremy, Justin and Jenny Green at Ballyvolane House, Co Cork.



Picture:
Dan Linehan

Hidden Ireland's shining star

ONLY a single item of furniture at Ballyvolane House hints at what in Ireland might be considered the exotic nature of its recent history. It is a large, glass-fronted cabinet, surviving from the Green family's pre-Ballyvolane days. Those were World War II days, when Cyril Hall Green and his wife, Joyce, had to leave their home in Malaya, abandoning all they possessed in their haste. On their eventual return they found that the bundle of jewellery which Joyce had buried in her garden was still there, as was the cabinet.

Their son, Jeremy Green, tells this as just one of the tales which enliven the provenance of other houses around Ireland. Their portraits tell the stories of rise and fall — the landscapes suggest the acquisitions and losses, the photographs beneath the lamps and beside the vase of lilac show faces still not forgotten. These are the people of Hidden Ireland, owners of historic or architecturally important houses which, 30 or so years ago, were clinging on to farms and parkland in an unsympathetic political environment and looking for ways to keep a house in the family by making it earn its living.

A template had already been established at Ballymaloe House, where Myrtle and Ivan Allen had raised the banner of impeccable country house hospitality. Even where magnificent restoration projects or brilliantly adapted mansions have entered the heritage hospitality lists, some now gathered under the Blue Book catalogue. The outline set by the Allens was taken as a strong hint by the owners, who came together in 1986 to form the Hidden Ireland.

"We were just overburdened with these huge houses and not enough land to support them. So we had to support one another," remembers Jeremy Green, who, with his late wife Merrie and with John Coakley, the Maddens



Ballyvolane House continues to adapt to our changing times, says **Mary Leland**

of Hilton Park, Nick Wilkinson of Nenagh and six or seven others, gathered to organise Hidden Ireland. Their dilemma was how to market themselves as hidden without actually hiding. The solution was to provide accommodation with unique features, while offering a strong sense of the history of a house or a place in the context of a tradition of welcome and ease — even in some of the grander houses.

From this shared understanding grew a collection of properties with accepted requirements, ensuring that comfort was balanced with authenticity and that houses, above all, preserved their architectural integrity. Home-grown food was properly cooked and beautifully presented and hosts and hostesses were graceful representatives of Irish warmth — even where they weren't all Irish.

"It's a first-class organisation now," says Jeremy. "And there's young, new blood in charge, with Mark Hewlett of Kilmokea as chairman and so many of the founder members still involved, some of them also in new young hands."

Italianate Ballyvolane, dating

originally from 1728, has become the epitome of this collection and it seems appropriate that Jeremy has been designated first Honorary President of Hidden Ireland. Yet when the Greens came to Cork in 1953 the plan was to work the farm with the fine old house as the family home.

"In fact, I think it was really bought for me," says Jeremy now, remembering that at the time he was studying at the Royal Agricultural College in Cirencester. "My parents wanted to live in Ireland and while they actually saw about 80 other places this was the first one, and the last."

The fact that it had fishing beats and shooting rights attached made it even more attractive — what the Greens might not have imagined then is that these rights and beats became the distinguishing factor for Ballyvolane when it opened its doors to paying guests. "The house isn't particularly beautiful," says Jeremy. "It's just that it lies so well in its landscape. Somehow it's become part of all of us."

Familiarity makes him too modest — the house is lovely, its face turned to sloping parkland and trout-pools and its back to terraced lawns, splendid trees, woods reaching from the avenue to the nearby fields and a fine, productive kitchen garden. It becomes part of most of us who stay here, touched by its atmosphere of enduring serenity.

Its generosity has not faltered since the Greens first offered hospitality to a friend's party of fishermen. Merrie was ghillie for Peter Dempster on his Blackwater salmon fishery, Jeremy guided shooting parties. While the shooting has tapered off, fishing is as important as ever "We've had some great years," says Jeremy. "And Merrie was such an integral part of what we were doing, she was a unique person. We were always developing, and I can say that it was a good decision to

start taking guests, even though there were times of struggle — and we're in another one now — but overall it's been a good time at Ballyvolane, we've had a good life."

Although officially retired, Jeremy's special role now is as gardener, breakfast-setter, hen, pig and donkey-minder, while his son, Justin, and Justin's wife, Jenny, returned from their international hotel management roles to take over at Ballyvolane. As at Hilton Park, Roundwood, Temple House, Martinstown and Ashley Park, the reins of Hidden Ireland are passing into younger hands, and Justin is now on the organisation's marketing committee.

"The future is going to be great," he says as he reveals the transformation of Ballyvolane's grouped outbuildings into a wedding venue which links into the accommodation and facilities of the house itself.

Guided by architect John Hegarty and working to their own design, Justin and Jenny find themselves falling in love again with the old farm buildings. The resulting dining, dancing and bar areas will be inaugurated with a theatrical dinner-party and a performance of *The Picture of Dorian Grey* next month. "You've got to adapt to the times you're in or else you'll sink," says Justin.

"You devalue your own business by trying to compete with places which are undercutting their rates, so instead we're adding another dimension to our existing business. We're young enough, we still have the appetite and the energy to take up the challenges and to give it our best shot. And our wedding parties can trust us, they can be sure we'll still be here, come what may."

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ANTIQUES & FINE ART



Des O'Sullivan

Rare vase set to fetch \$23m

A SELECTION from one of the greatest private Chinese porcelain collections in the world will be sold by Sotheby's in Hong Kong on April 7. The Meiyintang Collection, assembled over a period of 50 years, is world-renowned for having brought together magnificent examples of imperial porcelain. The 80 lots on offer are estimated to make from US\$80 million to \$120m.

The highlight is a Qing Dynasty (1736-95) Falangcai ('foreign colour') vase, in-set, with golden pheasants, estimated to make more than HK\$180m/US\$23m. This unique 20.3 cm high vase displays one of the finest paintings ever achieved on porcelain. Falangcai designates a style of enamelling on copper, porcelain and glass introduced by European artisans working in the palace workshops of the Forbidden City. A piece of this quality would be rare even in the former palace collections of Beijing and Taipei.



Irish art sale in Limerick

DOLAN'S Irish art sale takes place at the Carlton Castletroy Park Hotel in Limerick at 4pm tomorrow.

It includes a collection of 22 lots from the studio of Jack Donovan, headmaster at the Limerick School of Art from 1962/78. There are a further 20 lots from the studio of Fermanagh artist Douglas Hutton.

The 236 lots on offer include works by Thomas Ryan, Alex McKenna, Douglas Alexander, Frank Egginton, John Morris, Thelma Mansfield, Geraldine O'Brien, Mark O'Neill, Arthur Maderson, Norman Teeling, Elizabeth Brophy and Charles Harper.

There is viewing from 9am to 9pm today and from 9am to 3.30pm tomorrow.

Doggy delight

ADAM'S first fine art sale of the year takes place in Dublin next Tuesday at 11am. It includes a portrait of a famous Pointer called Hamlet, painted about 1865 by George Earl. The painting is estimated at €3,000/€5,000. There are four maps of the Provinces of Ireland by John Speed (1552-1629) estimated at €2,000/€3,000 in a sale that also includes paintings, silver and furniture. The catalogue is at www.adams.ie