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Richard Castle's Egyptian Hall at Powerscourt, Co. Wicklow

David J. Griffin

Powerscourt probably the most famous Irish country house was built between 1731 and 1740 for Richard Wingfield M.P. (1697-1751) afterwards First Viscount Powerscourt of the third creation to the designs of the German born Richard Castle (c. 1690/5-1751) Ireland's most prolific Palladian architect. Castle however did not build a new house instead he fitted his plan into the substantial walls of the castle of the de la Poers who gave their name to the place.

The entrance hall and the Egyptian Hall or Saloon on the first floor, the largest and grandest eighteenth century domestic interior in Ireland, formed the core of the house, until the tragic fire of November 1974 which gutted the main block, were probably built in the U-shaped courtyard of the old building.

The purpose of this article is to concentrate on this room modelled on Palladio's version of Vitruvius's description of an 'Egyptian Hall'.



Fig. 1 General view looking south 1974.

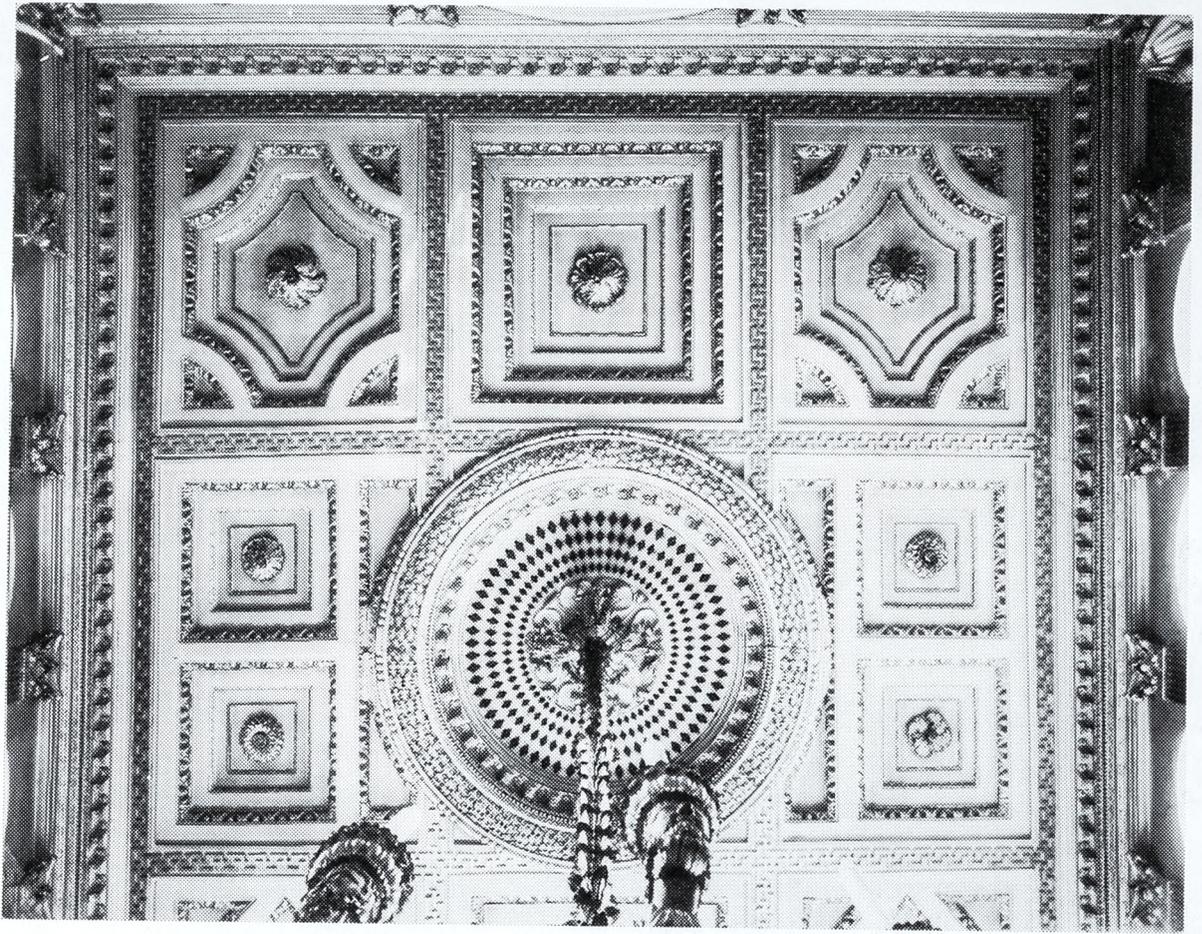


Fig. 2 Ceiling 1974.

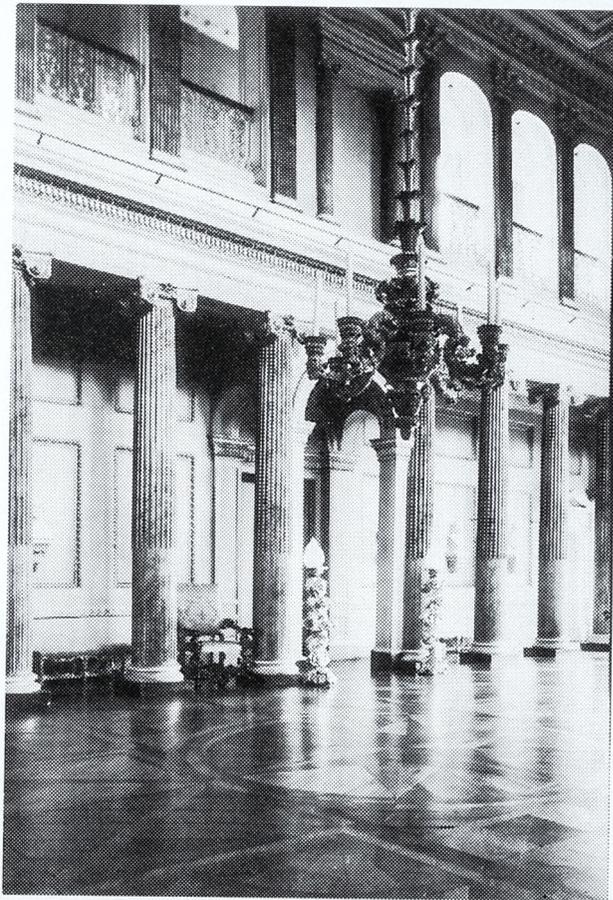


Fig. 3 West wall 1974.

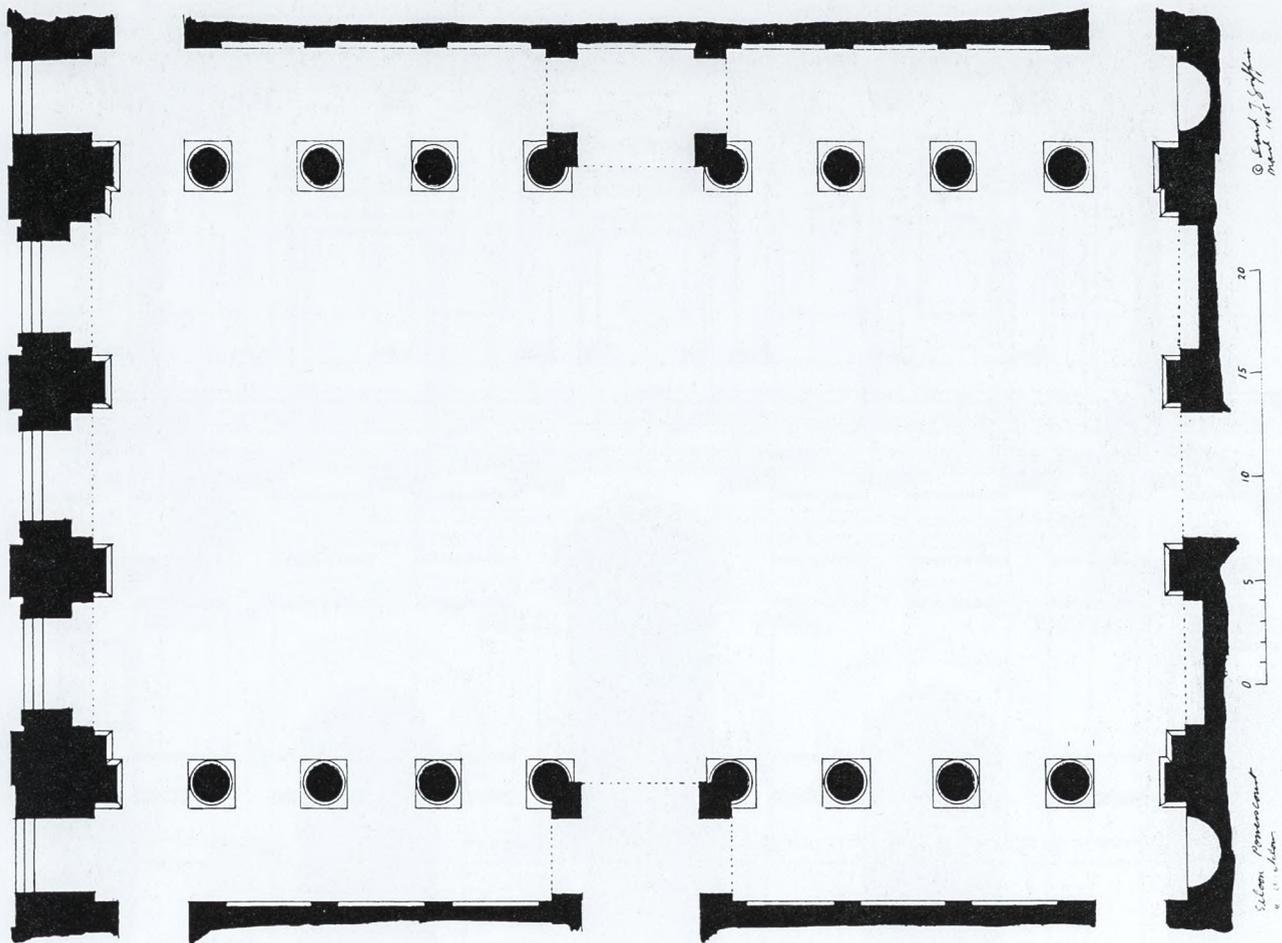
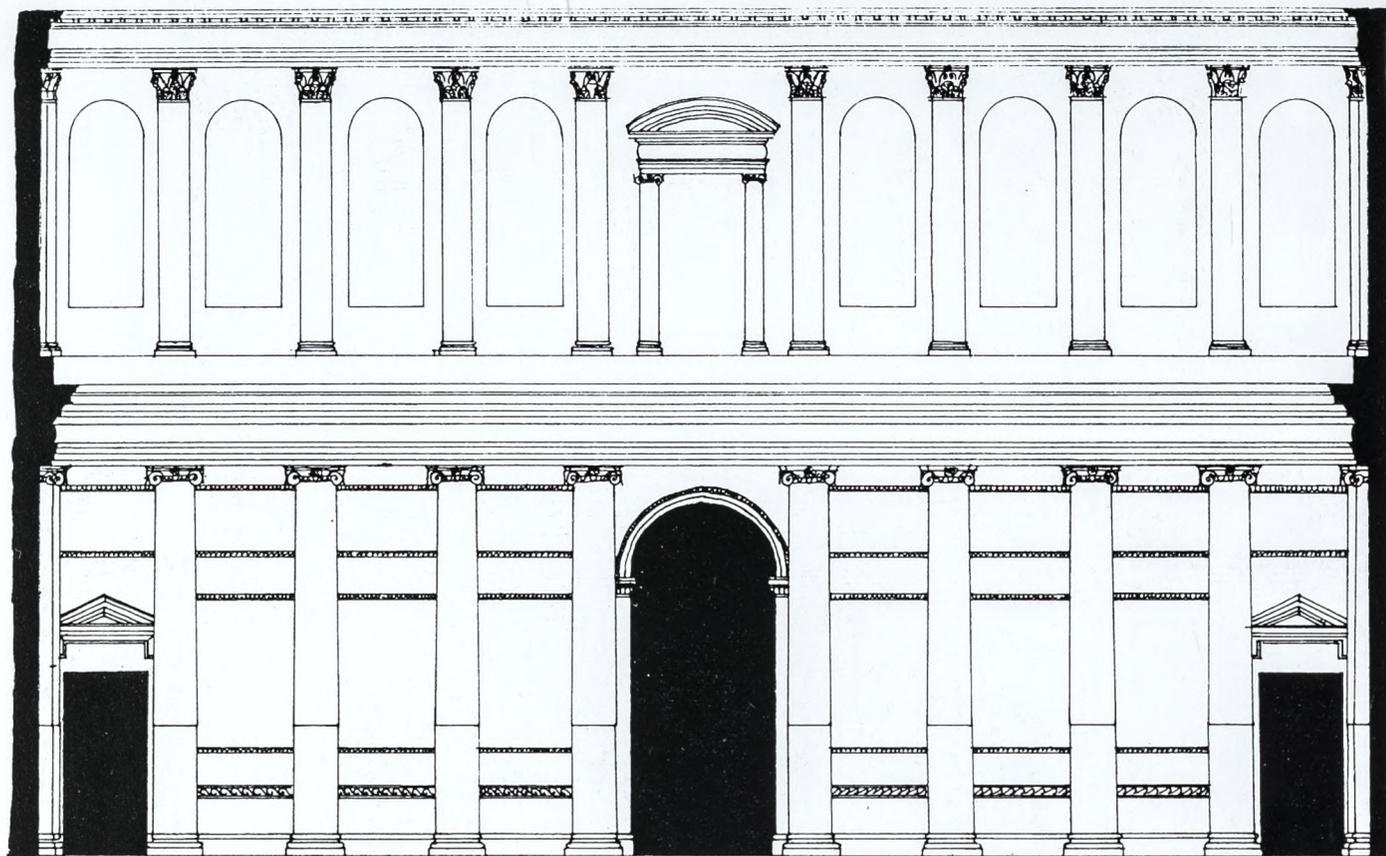


Fig. 4 Plan of hall (reconstruction)

Castle's saloon measured $55' \times 41'$ and not $60' \times 40'$ the most often quoted measurements, the space between the colonnades being on plan a double square. His interior differs in a number of respects from Palladio's interpretation of Vitruvius and Lord Burlington's contemporary Assembly Rooms at York (1731–3). For example in the proportion of the central space, Castle replaces Palladio's and Burlington's lower Corinthian order with Roman Ionic and Burlington's Composite upper order with Corinthian. He uses colonnades on the long side only and these he interrupts with central arched openings, and replaces those on the shorter walls with pilasters between which are arched recesses and windows. The Egyptian Hall was lit originally only from the lower stage whereas Burlington placed windows in the upper register of the walls of the Assembly Rooms. Moreover, in contrast to Burlington's plain ceiling Castle introduces one which is richly compartmented.

This room was reached from the main staircase through mahogany double doors similar to those to the main drawing room probably introduced in the early nineteenth century, though it is possible that it was originally treated as a great central hall and open to the main staircase. Four smaller doors (one originally false) gave access to the white staircase, white bedroom and long room, though also nineteenth century replacements they retained their original splendid door-cases consisting of egg and dart enriched lugged architraves with upward breaks supporting triangular pediments.

The long sides of the room consisted of colonnades each of eight fluted columns of the Roman Ionic order, in the centres of which was an arched opening identical in detail and size to those on the north and south ends of the room, these were continued as vaults to the inner walls decorated with diamond shaped panels, taken from Palladio's *The Four Books of Architecture*, Book 4, plate XXIII.



*Saloon Powerscourt
Co. Wicklow*



*David T. Griffin
March 1895*

Fig. 5 Longitudinal section of hall (reconstruction)

The soffit of the entablature was decorated with panels of oak leaves, again taken from Palladio's *Four Books*, and the underside of the main cornice usually left plain was decorated with a Greek key used later by Castle at Number 85, St. Stephen's Green and Number 2, Kildare Place, Dublin and at Russborough House, Co. Wicklow.

The ceilings of the aisles behind were flat and level with the top of the architrave. The lower walls of the room were replastered in the early nineteenth century but following the original scheme of panels as was revealed by the recesses in the brickwork following the fire.

To date no evidence has come to light to show that the room had a chimney-piece before the nineteenth century. Laurence McDonald (1799–1878) the Irish sculptor then in Rome produced a design for the sixth Viscount *c.*1843 as did John R. Kirk R.H.A. (1821–1894) which like the former remained unexecuted because of Viscount Powerscourt's early death in 1844. Nothing more was done until 1868 when his successor the seventh Viscount commissioned Signor Pegrazzi, sculptor of Verona to carve a chimney-piece based on one at the Doge's Palace, Venice.

The walls of the upper section of the room were decorated with fluted pilasters of the Corinthian order. The North and South walls each had three blind windows, the outer of which have enriched lugged architraves surmounted by pulvinated friezes and triangular pediments. The central blind windows of all four walls have segmental pedimented Roman Ionic aedicules.

A close inspection of the ruins carried out following the fire revealed beyond doubt that the corridors overlooking the saloon through arched openings from the second floor were a

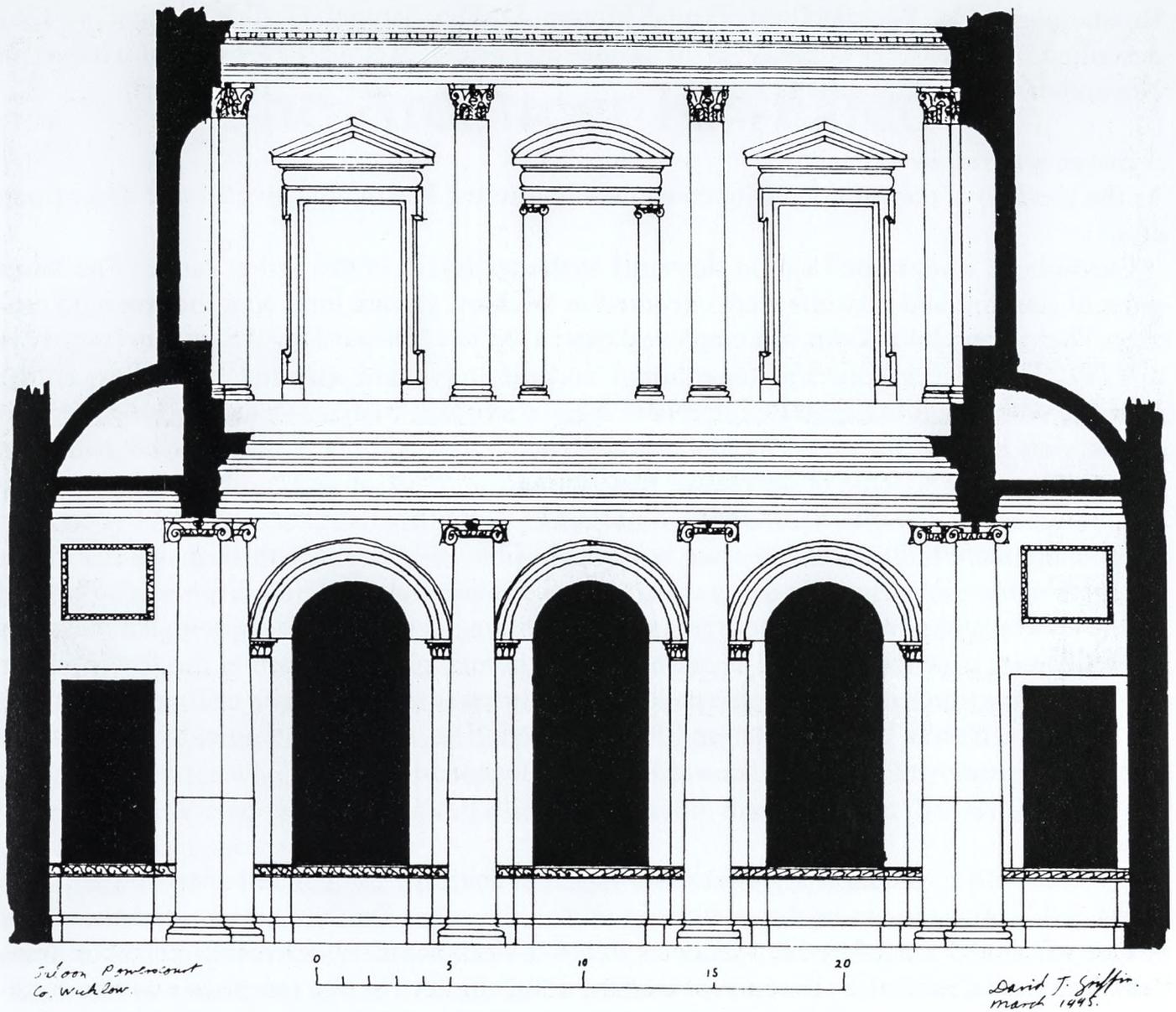


Fig. 6 Transverse section of hall (reconstruction)

latter addition possibly late eighteenth century but more likely early nineteenth century. It seems likely that originally there were niches between the pilasters as the intercolumniation would not allow space for windows and architraves as on the north and south walls. The room was finished with a Corinthian modillion cornice which supported a magnificently enriched compartmented ceiling. A number of plasterers are mentioned in the building accounts, Hugh Kelly, George Semple and William Spencer, both Kelly and Spencer had worked under Sir Edward Lovett Pearce at the Parliament House, Dublin (now Bank of Ireland), which underlines the close connection between Castle and Pearce. And it is evident that they shared the same team of craftsmen, most of whom were taken over by Castle following Pearce's death in 1733. William Spencer executed the ceiling of the octagonal cedar room and the saloon ceiling has similarities with the staircase ceiling at Number 10 Henrietta Street, Dublin and the saloon ceiling at Bellamont Forest, Co. Cavan both designed by Pearce *c.* 1730.

The room had a magnificent walnut parquetry floor which reflected the design of the ceiling as it did in the cedar room. Such floors were a feature of many of Castle's houses an idea no doubt introduced by him from his native Germany. Other examples can be found at

Russborough, Co. Wicklow and Tyrone House, Dublin Samuel Derrick writing in 1767 described 'the floor so slippery as to render it useless' walnut had been purchased in November 1733 and August 1734.

A note on construction

As the method of construction is of considerable interest I shall now give a brief description of it.

Castle built a brick shell within the walls of the courtyard of the earlier castle. The lower order of columns and pilasters were executed in Wicklow granite including the splendid capitals. The carvers John Kelly was employed from 1735 to 1738 and David Sheehan from 1738 to 1739. The spaces between the columns and pilasters were spanned by shallow stilted relieving arches and the spaces underneath were afterwards filled with brickwork supported on wooden lintels. The walls behind the colonnades were built with recessed panels to accommodate the scheme of decorative plastering.

The upper walls of the room, unlike those at the Assembly Rooms, York, which were timber framed, were built of load bearing brickwork. The walls two feet thick partly resting on the brick vault above the side aisles which also acted as a buttress. Stability was also helped by the central arches and vaults of the east and west arcades and yet despite these measures the walls were described in 1767 as out of repair. Photographs taken before the fire show the east colonnade much out of plumb. shallow timber trusses supported the ceiling and the roof which unlike that at York was flat and lead covered. The side aisles originally had shallow lean to roofs removed when the second floor corridors were created.

Conclusions

The estate with its wonderful gardens and waterfall continue to be maintained and are open to the public and remain in the ownership of the Slazenger family who acquired the entire property from the ninth Lord Powerscourt in 1961. Work has just been completed on making the structure safe and the clearance of the fire debris. It is hoped that funds will be forthcoming to permit the planned re-roofing of the shell with a view to the eventual restoration of the main block.

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For the fullest account of the house see:

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