



The Hugents walk in the grounds of Ballynough Castle. The main part of the house was built in 1814, and the castellated, recently rendered addition, with its round towers was built 150 years later.

fairytale living



Ballinlough Castle may be best known today as the location for boutique music festival, Garden Party, but it's also home to the Nugent family, resident since the 1600s.

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ABOVE The drawing room, which boasts magical views over two lakes, is lit by a series of full-height windows, thought to be the tallest in Ireland. The gothic pastelerwork detailing is all original and the white marble fire surround is thought to be by James Wyatt, the famous English designer. In 1770 it cost the enormous sum of £500. **OPPOSITE** On the right of the entrance hall is the morning room, which Alice plans to decorate as a family sitting room.

Ireland is justifiably famous for its romantic country houses and castles. Ranked high among those still in private occupation is Ballinlough Castle, Co Westmeath, home to Nick and Alice Nugent and their two daughters, Lucy, five, and Katie, three; the youngest members of the many generations of the Nugent family to have lived here since the 1600s.

The castle today comprises two distinct parts. The first, built in 1614 on the site of an older dwelling, is a compact square house containing one of Ireland's most stunning entrance halls. To the left is the "new" wing added in 1770. Recently repaired and lime-washed, it glows in the soft light but in a few years it will age and become grey like the old house. At one time, Ballinlough sat at the centre of a six thousand acre estate. Now the Nugents have 320 acres of lakes, woods and fields, part of which has been turned into a magnificent golf course.

Repairs and maintenance are something the Nugents are getting used to. When Nick inherited Ballinlough from his parents in 2004, he discovered that the new wing was leaning, as if about to fall into the nearby lake. Large cracks had formed in the walls and the





TOP RIGHT The old-fashioned kitchen is at the back of the house and was built in the 1920s. It is a large room with a family dining table and several scrubbed pine Victorian cupboards. **TOP LEFT** There are separate rooms for keeping china and glass as well as utility rooms and linen storage. **AUCOPE** Designer Kaito Earle of Yodanis Earle helped to edit the furniture — much of which was inherited with the house — to create a fresher look.

towers on the corners were in a precarious state. With help from the Heritage Council, the whole structure was under-pinned to the bedrock below. Only once all the important structural work was completed could Alice think about painting and decorating the interior. Fortunately, Nick's parents agreed to leave some of their furniture in the house as well as a collection of wonderful family portraits and documents. "If the house had been empty I can't imagine where we would start trying to fill these huge rooms," says Alice.

Right from the beginning Nick decided he needed to make some commercial use of the property. Ballinlough is only one hour from Dublin and is surrounded by beautiful scenery, wonderful rivers for fishing and many miles of good horse riding, racing and hunting. The Nugents decided they would rent the whole house out from time to time. "There are many groups of people from America and all over Europe who want that special experience of living for a week or two in a real Irish castle," says Nick. They also use the gardens and grounds for different events like Garden Party, the boutique music festival they successfully launched in 2006 and held in their three-acre walled garden. Moving in and out of one's own house on a regular basis might seem like a nightmare but Nick and Alice just pick up their things and move into the old stables nearby.



While the vast drawing room and dining room, containing important gothic plasterwork and reputedly the tallest windows in Ireland, remain as they were decorated in the 1930s, Alice decided to modernise all nine bedrooms. She contacted her friend, the designer Kate Earle of Todhunter Earle in London, and together they began the task of choosing paint colours and fabrics as well as moving furniture and pictures from room to room. "I could never have done it without Kate," says Alice, "she is a true professional and Nick and I love her particular style." The great success of their work has been the creation of bedrooms and bathrooms that are modern but still in keeping with the atmosphere of an ancient country house. All the old fireplaces, plasterwork and panelling remain and each room was treated as a unique space and decorated individually. Alice is planning to ask Kate to return to help her with the morning room on the ground floor. "We need a cosy, smaller family living room full of books and sofas, somewhere to watch TV and relax."

Although Alice gave up her career in the advertising industry when she had Lucy, she says it is a full-time job running the house, the garden and looking after her sheep, horses and cattle. Alice describes herself as a "hobby farmer" but it is hard work nonetheless. It was the

ABOVE: An elaborate plasterwork overdoor embellishes the door to the dining room, which is hung with family portraits. Fortunately, Nick's parents left the couple much of the furniture required for these large rooms including the fine early 19th century mahogany dining table and chairs.



This guest room is in the older part of the house with lower ceilings. Alice and Kate decided to treat it in the French style by using the same Cath Kidston wallpaper for the walls and the ceilings. The flower-print bedcovers were bought at O.K.A.



ABOVE LEFT: The original panelling in the bathroom has been painted pale lac.

ABOVE RIGHT: The Tower Room is papered in Magnolia, by Farrow & Ball. RIGHT: In the main bedroom, the curtains and bed hangings were re-made from fabric found in the house and the new wallpaper is from Farrow & Ball.



couple's shared love of horses that brought them together. Alice's father bred horses and she met Nick at a sale in England. Nick is a well-known auctioneer and works for Godf travelling the world, from New Zealand to Dubai, to sell horses.

"We live pretty hectic lives and although the house is demanding it is a fabulous place to live in, especially for the children." Most people would agree it is a bit like a dream to live in a house like Ballinlough but it takes plenty of vision, courage and most of all energy to keep it all going. They have many plans and ambitions for the place, which they're hoping to put in place over the next year or two. Nick and Alice are young; they love the house and are rapidly bringing it back to life as a busy family home. "Our plans are evolving, but it's so important to get the happy balance for our home and for the business," says Alice.

Liam O'Neill, the renowned Galway-based wood sculptor will exhibit at Ballinlough for three weeks from June 27. The gardens will be open to the public for two weekends; June 30 and July 7.

To rent Ballinlough Castle, Clonmellon, Co Westmeath, contact 046 943 3234; www.ballinlough.com.