HOUSE & GARDEN®

MAY 2007
£3.40



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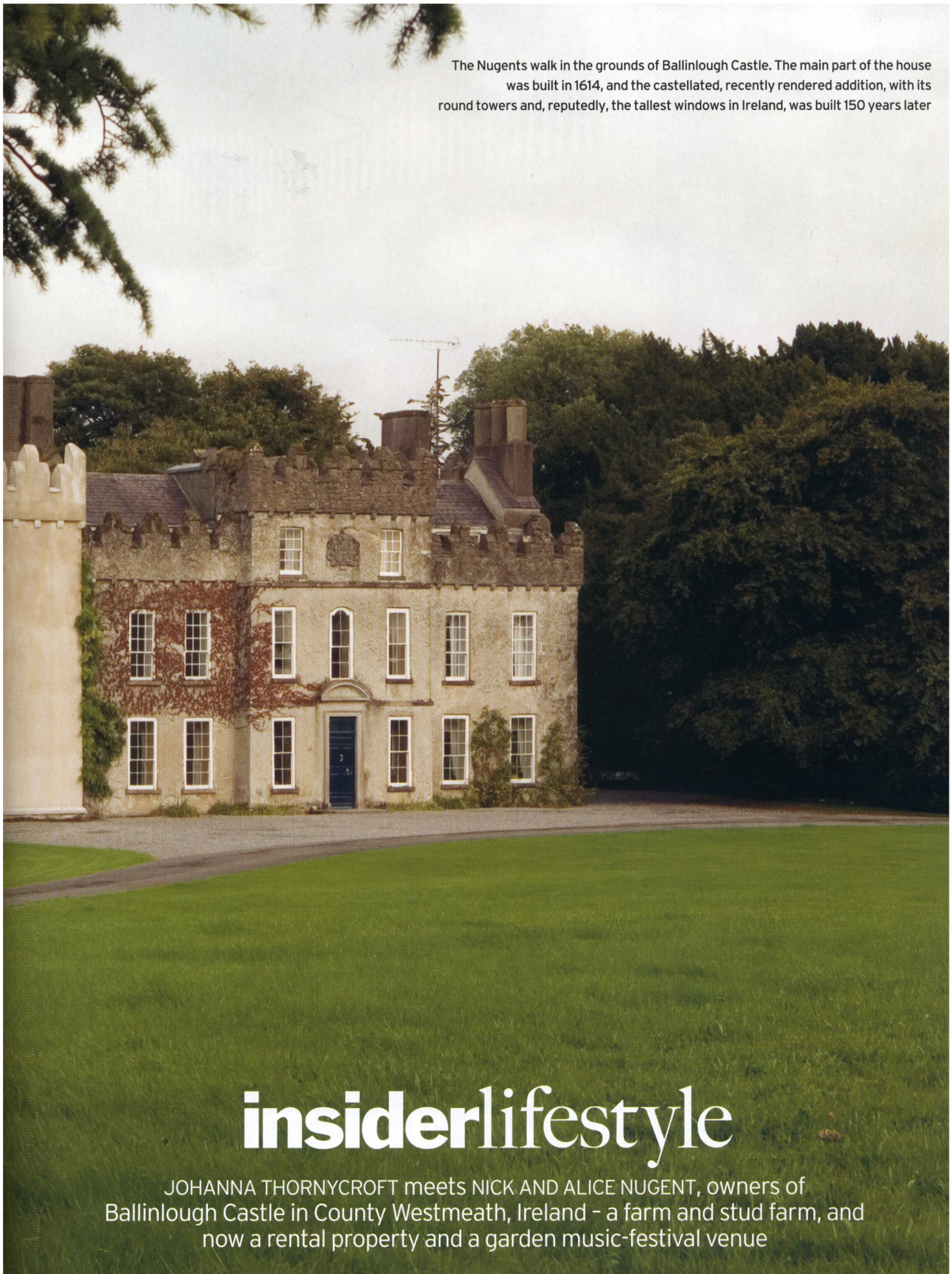


The Nugents walk in the grounds of Ballinlough Castle. The main part of the house was built in 1614, and the castellated, recently rendered addition, with its round towers and, reputedly, the tallest windows in Ireland, was built 150 years later

insiderlifestyle

JOHANNA THORNYCROFT meets NICK AND ALICE NUGENT, owners of Ballinlough Castle in County Westmeath, Ireland – a farm and stud farm, and now a rental property and a garden music-festival venue



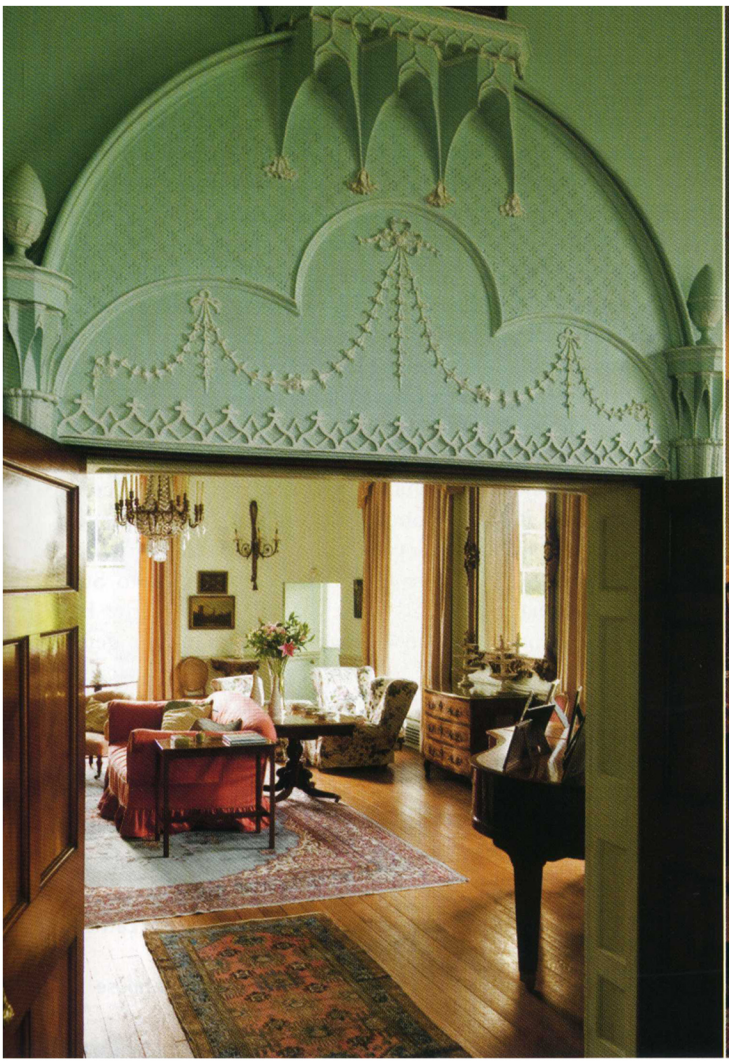
built in 1614. The imposing, twin-tower lakeside addition was constructed in 1770, and in the mid-twentieth century, the kitchen was moved from the basement to a ground-floor extension. The castle required a major structural survey, the result of which proved alarming. 'We knew the cracks in the towers were serious,' says Nick, 'but it was a shock to discover that the towers might pull away from the house and fall into the lake.' With financial help from the National Heritage Council, the couple began what is likely to be a lifelong project.

Working with Tommy Powderly, 'the best builder in Ireland', who, sadly, died before the project was completed, they replaced the roof with blue Bangor slate, pinned the towers to the bedrock, and rendered and lime-washed the whole eighteenth-century section of the house. Eleven windows urgently needed restoration, so Alice called in Paddy Grimes, a master craftsman whose business, Kells Windows, specialises in removing and repairing old windows. She reckons the Kells team will be working at the castle for ever. 'Our drawing- and dining-room windows are reputedly the tallest in Ireland and they are next on the list.'

'Long before taking over Ballinlough I knew it would be demanding. Alice and I talked incessantly about how we could make it work,' says Nick. The young and energetic Nugents have taken up the challenge. 'Our inkling that there was a strong demand from Europeans and Americans to rent a house like ours for a week or two has proved spot on,' he continues. Only an hour's drive from Dublin and surrounded by golf courses (the nearby K Club hosted the 2006 Ryder Cup), racing, hunting and fly-fishing, Ballinlough sits romantically above a pair of lakes in idyllic parkland. 'We always have interesting people who often come to us with their own staff. We decamp to the stables below the house, having made all the arrangements and settled the guests in, and we usually return for dinner which is quite amusing.'

Before any marketing could begin, Alice ▷

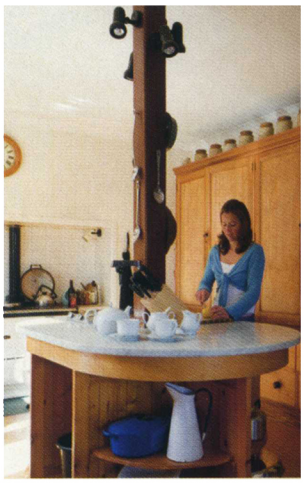
TOP In the drawing room, designer Kate Earle helped to edit the furniture – much of which was inherited with the house – to create a fresher look.
ABOVE Master craftsman Paddy Grimes, of Kells Windows, helps Nick get to grips with the frames of Ballinlough's windows







CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
The large mirror and commode in the drawing room are original to the house. An elaborate, plasterwork overdoor embellishes the door to the dining room, which is hung with portraits. The kitchen, fitted in the Thirties, is in an extension to the rear of the house. The Tower Room is papered in 'Magnolia' by Cole & Son. The original panelling in the bathroom has been painted pale lilac. The wallpaper in the main bedroom is by Farrow & Ball











CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Nick and Alice have a post-sale drink with auction assistant Eithne Hetherton. Jockey Norman Williamson sells horses through Nick at Goffs. Horses are shod in the stable yard

1999, Alice was a director of a London advertising agency, and later worked in Dublin before having their two daughters. 'I describe myself as a hobby farmer now,' she says. But although that sounds like a gentle country pursuit, looking after her brood mares and foals, a flock of Suffolk-cross sheep and a herd of Aberdeen Angus cattle is no small task. With a three-acre walled garden, too, restored as part of the Great Gardens of Ireland programme, and 300-odd acres of woodland and pasture, it is a full-time job. 'Thank goodness for Gordon!' she says of her assistant, who helps her with the garden and livestock.

In the summer of 2006 the park was rented out to the Midlands Music Festival, which set up a stage on the grass adjacent to the house. Some 10,000 people came, many of them camping in the fields, to hear the likes of Glen Campbell, Dwight Yoakam and Emmylou Harris. Ballinlough also hosts a musical fund-raising party in the walled garden – after 7,000 people attended the first one, Alice plans to make it an annual event.

Nick knows all the major Irish breeders, but the Nugents take Alice's mares to stallions standing at the Tally-Ho Stud at Mullingar, run by the O'Callaghans. Breeding horses is a shared passion and between them Nick and Alice have a pretty good eye for a horse. 'It was such a thrill when we got 80,000 for one of the foals,' says Alice, 'but all the profits go back into the pot.'

Nick says that life is divided between horses and the house. 'Actually we are a bit like a combination of *To the Manor Born*, *The Good Life* and *Fawlty Towers* – living beyond our means and loving it' □

ADDRESSES

Ballinlough Castle (website: www.ballinlough.com) • **Goffs Ireland** (website: www.goffsireland.com) • **Kells Windows** (tel: 00-353-46 924 1235) • **Mullen Bros Auctioneers** (tel: 00-353-49 854 1107) • **Tally-Ho Stud** (website: www.tallyhostud.net) • **Todhunter Earle** (tel: 020-7349 9999, website: www.todhunterearle.com)

