



The fountain in the Upper Walled Garden at Castlewellan, one of the most important collections of veteran and Champion trees in Ireland. In spring 2018 the IDS presented a plaque to the arboretum in recognition of its significance (see pages 166 to 172).

Castlewellan

In May 2018, dendrologists and horticulturists from across the island of Ireland gathered with IDS Council members for the occasion of the presentation of an IDS Plaque to Castlewellan Arboretum and Annesley Garden. **SEAMUS O'BRIEN**¹ gives a brief background to the early origins of the demesne and its evolution over the centuries of one of the most remarkable tree collections in Britain and Ireland.

Castlewellan lies about 48 km south of Belfast in south County Down. The Castle and its famous arboretum enjoy an unrivalled setting on richly wooded slopes, sweeping parkland and a mile-long lake, with the backdrop of the Mourne Mountains and a distant glimpse of the Irish Sea. By Irish standards the climate is mild (USDA zone 9), as the gardens lie just 6 km from the coast. Annual rainfall is relatively light at 800 mm, though the soil type is rich deep brown earth, on which other notable Irish tree collections, like Fota and Kilmacurragh, for example, are found.

The demesne dates back to medieval times when it was the principal seat of the Magennis, a Gaelic clan who eventually sold their lands to William Annesley, a Dublin barrister, in 1741. Following the death of his father, William Annesley II (created Viscount Glerawly in 1766) engaged a French architect to design a new town called Castlewellan (from the Irish *Caisleán Uidhílin*, meaning 'Hugelin's Castle') with tree-lined squares and also began laying out the present landscape.

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In July 1751 artist and letter-writer Mary Delany (1700–1788), wife of the Dean of Down, wrote to her sister stating that the Annesley family had 'walled in and planted with oak, etc., three hundred and fifty acres of ground for a park. Near them is a large bleach-yard and Mr. Annesley is going to build a town.' (Llanover, 1861). The garden Mrs Delany refers to is the present walled kitchen garden, an extensive area, laid across a warm undulating south-east facing slope and with marvellous views towards the Irish Sea, the Mourne Mountains and its tallest peak, Slieve Donard.

The family rapidly rose in prominence and were further ennobled when Francis Charles Annesley (1740–1802), then second Viscount Glerawly, was created Earl Annesley in 1789. His brother Richard (1745–1824) succeeded him as second Earl and it was he who created the naturalistic landscape park (in the Picturesque style) seen today, most probably designed by John Sutherland (1745–1826), a family friend and the most celebrated landscape architect in Ireland of his day.

Succeeding generations of the family made notable improvements, one of the most striking was when the fourth Earl, William Richard Annesley (1838–1874) commissioned the Scottish architect William Burn (1789–1870) to

¹ Seamus O'Brien was a committee member of Castlewellan Arboretum Advisory Board (CAAB) for several years.



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Sequoiadendron giganteum, William Lobb's original introduction, supplied to the 4th Earl Annesley in 1856. In its youth the tree naturally layered to form a striking multi-stemmed specimen.

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design a Hiberno-Scottish baronial castle on the site of a gothic temple. Completed in 1858, the walled garden was also re-organised and extended to five hectares at this time as an extensive pleasure ground with a central axial path linking the two walled enclosures and with fountains at the centre of each. Burn also designed the Victorian terracing and flights of granite steps, all of which were completed by 1860. Between 1870 and 1871, Gray of Chelsea supplied a range of conservatories and vineries, thus by this era much of the present garden had taken shape.

The fourth Earl was responsible for planting an extensive range of exotic conifers, many of which were new to cultivation, most notably *Sequoiadendron giganteum*. Planted close to the entrance of the walled garden in 1856, this was undoubtedly supplied by the Veitch nursery, whose plant collector William Lobb (1809–1864) had introduced it just three years previously from California. Today the same tree is a multi-stemmed giant, and one of the finest trees in Britain and Ireland. (Heale, 1872)

The fifth Earl, Lieutenant-Colonel Hugh Annesley (1831–1908), inherited the title upon the death of his brother and during his tenure an astounding range of exotic trees were planted in the walled garden and in the pleasure grounds immediately nearby. He sourced his material from the best nurseries

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Left, *Picea smithiana*, the west Himalayan spruce. Earl Annesley raised this tree from seed sent to him directly from the Himalaya in 1868. Here photographed by the 5th Earl, this tree survives and is now a magnificent example of this species.

Opposite, the same tree seen here in more recent times with staff and students from the National Botanic Gardens, Kilmacurragh.

in Britain and Ireland and also imported plants from India, Japan, New Zealand and Tasmania in Wardian cases (Reeves-Smyth, 2015). Having been to Japan, Hugh Annesley had a particular fondness for maples and bamboos and also acquired a lot of material from the famous Yokohama nursery which was then also supplying other well-known Irish gardens such as Mount Usher in County Wicklow. Annesley quickly realised how mild the local climate was, and the sloping site, facing towards the splendid Mourne Mountains and falling to the sea, meant cold air drained away and frosts were rarely harsh. Inspired by the gardens of Cornwall and Kerry, he was chiefly interested in the acclimatisation of tender and half-hardy taxa and realised at an early stage that the garden's microclimate offered innumerable possibilities.

Hugh Annesley was also fortunate to employ a series of outstanding head gardeners, most notably the Limerick-born Thomas Ryan (1851–1910), who gardened at Castlewellan for over four decades and was appointed to the role of Head Gardener in January 1881. Indeed, Hugh Armytage Moore, the creator of the nearby National Trust garden at Rowallane, also in Co. Down, attributed



the success of the garden at Castlewellan to two men; Lord Annesley and Thomas Ryan (Armytage Moore, 1912). Ryan contributed a number of articles on the garden to *The Gardeners' Chronicle* and other leading publications of the day. In 1891, Frederick William Burbidge (1847–1905) visited the Annesley Gardens producing a lengthy report for *The Gardeners' Chronicle*. Burbidge, formerly employed by the Veitch nursery as their collector in Borneo, had returned to Europe as Curator at the Trinity College Botanic Gardens in Dublin and was clearly impressed by the collection and its preponderance of rare, newly introduced and tender trees and shrubs. Thomas Ryan was his guide and he singled out Ryan for praise stating that the latter 'evidently [has] his whole heart in his work' (Burbidge, 1891).

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By the turn of the twentieth century Castlewellan ranked among the best British and Irish plant collections. Burbidge, who was well acquainted with Irish gardens, could claim in 1904 that: 'The gardens and grounds at Castlewellan, apart from their natural beauty, show conclusively that their owner is a pioneer in the collection and cultivation of all choice hardy or half-hardy trees and shrubs from temperate climates of the world. It is indeed not too much to say that Lord Annesley's exertions in this direction may be mentioned in the same breath with those of the Earls of Mount Edgecumbe, the Foxs of Penjerrick, Mr Dorrien-Smith of Tresco, Lord Barrymore of Fota, Lord Powerscourt and Mr Thomas Acton [of Kilmacurragh] in Co. Wicklow ...' (Burbidge, 1904).

Five years later, Maxwell Masters (1833–1907) wrote about the garden in the same journal, listing the garden's treasures. Many of these remain great rarities even in modern-day collections and at this time it seems Ryan was receiving seeds directly from Kew and had raised and planted out



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Left, the Castlewellan daffodil, *Narcissus* 'Countess of Annesley', once a very popular Victorian cultivar, it is now extremely rare, though attempts are being made to bulk it up and distribute it.

Widdringtonia whytei, the mulanje cedar from Malawi (where it is threatened with extinction). Then, as now, Castlewellan was not just about trees, Masters goes on to praise many of the profuse wall climbers, herbaceous borders and well-stocked glasshouse ranges full of the usual Victorian stove house favourites, ferns, palms, aquatics and orchids.

In one of these glasshouses 6,000 bulbs of *Narcissus* 'Countess of Annesley' were being forced (Masters, 1896).

Lord Annesley was also responsible for introducing a number of plants to cultivation including the elegant east Himalayan bamboo, *Thamnochlamus spathiflorus* (syn. *Arundinaria aristata*), now a mainstay of many older 'big house' Irish gardens, and these plants may be descended from the original introduction (Freeman-Mitford, 1896). Hugh Annesley added many more ornamental features to the garden: the iconic Heron Fountain; a bothy yard; and a range of 22 glasshouses, including an elegant curvilinear conservatory commissioned from Richard Turner (1798–1881) the Dublin iron founder, whose works include the Great Palm House at Kew in London and the Curvilinear

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Above, left, *Abies nordmanniana*, in Earl Annesley's opinion, one of the finest of the European firs. **Above, right**, looking east across the demesne with the dark silhouette of *Picea orientalis* in the centre. Behind it is Castlewellan's mile-long lake and the view is centred on Slieve Donard and the Mourne Mountains.

Range at Glasnevin in Dublin.

By the turn of the twentieth century over 3,000 different species of choice, rare, exotic trees and shrubs grew across 10 hectares at Castlewellan and these were highlighted by Hugh using 70 full plate photographs taken by himself in his book *Beautiful and Rare Trees and Plants*, published in 1903 (Annesley, 1903). During the course of the century these reached maturity and the collection today is of international importance. It is no exaggeration to state, that alongside Fota Arboretum in Co. Cork, it holds the finest collection of mature trees in Ireland, and indeed one of the most remarkable collections in western Europe.

Upon immediately entering the walled confines of the arboretum visitors meet with veteran trees now venerable giants, of which 42 are British and Irish champions. In

Ireland only the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin can claim more champion trees. Over the years several cultivars have been selected in the gardens. These include \times *Cuprocyparis leylandii* (\times *Cupressocyparis leylandii*) 'Castlewellan', raised by head gardener John Keown in 1963. He is also responsible for raising the golden Monterey cypress, *Cupressus macrocarpa* 'Keown' in 1956.

The finest form of the weeping Himalayan juniper, *Juniperus recurva* var. *coxii* 'Castlewellan' is a superlative plant and the original tree in the Annesley Garden is a much admired, elegant veteran. Eucryphiads, the late-flowering genus of Southern Hemisphere trees and shrubs are synonymous with Castlewellan, which has a large collection of species and cultivars. The old tree of *Eucryphia cordifolia* near the garden entrance, a British and Irish champion, is probably the largest outside its native Chile. Castlewellan has also produced two outstanding cultivars of *Eucryphia* \times *nymansensis* – 'Castlewellan' and 'George Graham', the latter named for a former head gardener (see *IDS Yearbook 2017*, pp. 180–188).

In recent times, Alwyn Sinnamon, the current head gardener, re-discovered the long presumed extinct *Narcissus* 'Countess of Annesley'. Attention to this daffodil was first drawn by Thomas Ryan in 1889 and it was he who suggested

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A close up image of *Juniperus recurva* var. *coxii* 'Castlewellan' — the original tree. Its foliage is more slender than the typical tree.

it would be ideal for the cut flower market. Frederick William Burbidge, an acknowledged authority on daffodils, shortly afterwards named it, also stating it would make a very profitable market cut flower. By the 1890s the Castlewellan daffodil, as it was also commonly known, was grown in enormous numbers on the Isles of Scilly for the London market and was readily available from all the major bulb suppliers of the time including Hartland of Cork, who sold it across the globe. In 1894 it was grown in great numbers in the beds in front of the Great Palm House at Kew. Alas, by the 1930s *Narcissus* 'Countess of Annesley' had been superseded by newer varieties and in recent times was presumed lost. In the spring of 2016 Alwyn Sinnamon sent me material, that after much investigation matched early descriptions and Hartland's 1897 sketch. It is still rare in gardens though bulbs are being circulated and clumps are building up at Kilmacurragh.

Hugh Annesley died in 1908, leaving the demesne to his only son Francis (1884–1914), who became the sixth Earl Annesley. A member of the Royal Flying Corps, he was killed on a plane bound for France in November 1914. The management of the family estate then passed to the Earl's sister, Lady Mabel Annesley (1881–1959). In 1941 Mabel passed the property to her son Gerald (who changed his name by deed pole from Sowerby to Annesley). He made many improvements to the gardens, most notably the planting of the *Eucryphia* Walk in the lower walled garden, now an iconic feature in the Annesley Garden. Ultimately, rising costs meant him selling the property to the Department of Agriculture in 1967 and the tree collection was further expanded and developed by the Forest Service. Today Castlewellan Arboretum and Annesley Garden remains in the care of the Forest Service with a single full time staff member, its hard-working and dedicated Head Gardener Alwyn Sinnamon, aided by a small team of devoted volunteers. Efforts are currently being explored to secure funding to restore the garden and to begin a programme of re-planting based on the spirit of the place, when it was in its glory years under the watchful eye of the fifth Earl and Thomas Ryan.

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