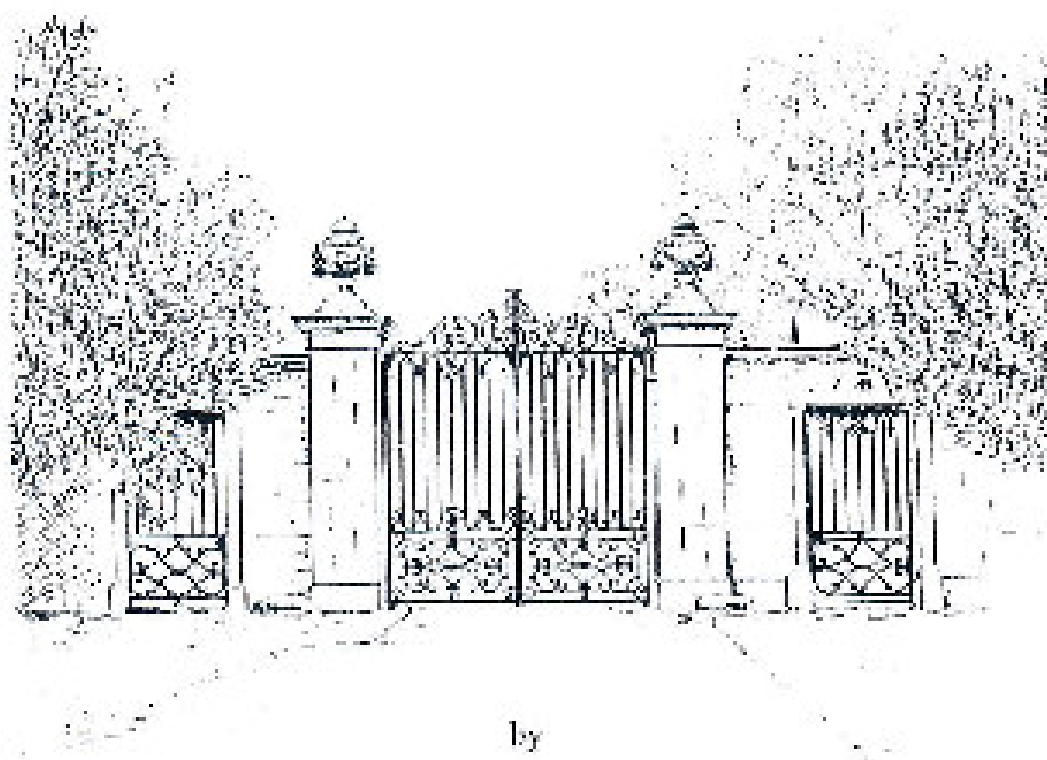


CASTLEWELLAN HOUSE AND DEMESNE

AN OUTLINE HISTORY

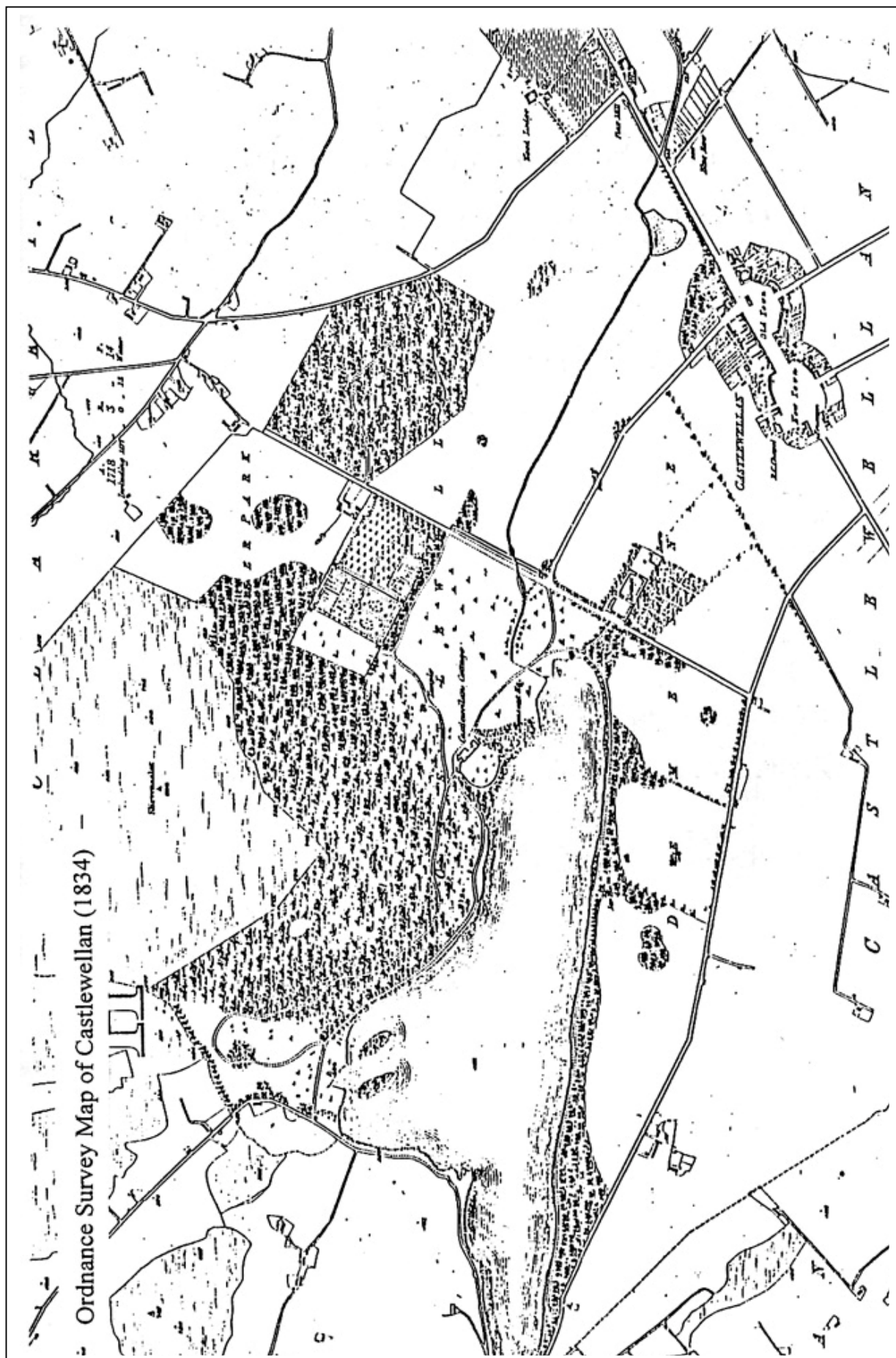


by

Terence Reeves-Smyth

NORTHERN IRELAND HERITAGE GARDENS COMMITTEE

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In 1912 Hugh Armytage Moore wrote that 'however lavish nature may have been to Castlewellan in its unrivalled scenic attractions, no one who has seen the place will deny that the hand of man has very materially assisted in the completion of a work of exceptional beauty and interest' and continued 'here on richly wooded slopes bounded by a mile long lake and backed by hills one thousand feet high commanding magnificent view to the south and east of mountain and sea, a rare collection of trees and shrubs has been effectively placed to add a permanent horticultural interest to a scene of great natural beauty' (Irish Gardening, VII:78).

The demesne of Castlewellan occupies over 400 ha and is located north of the foothills of the Mourne Mountains, about four miles from the sea. It has few frosts and facing east and south, it is well sheltered from the prevailing winds by the tree-covered slopes of Slieve na Slat. The average rainfall is 800mm and the soil is a fertile brown earth of 50-100cms depth with an acid gravel (Silurian shale) subsoil.

THE EARLY PERIOD

In the sixteenth century Castlewellan was a stronghold of the Maginnis family, but under James I it was forfeited to the Crown. The location of the old castle is unknown but it probably lay close to the Grange yards in the present demesne. Later Phelim Magennis was granted eleven townlands in the parishes of Kilmegan and Kilcoo, constituting the manor of Castlewellan. In the late seventeenth century the manor was leased by the Hon. Francis Annesley, a son of the first Viscount Valentia, and his son Francis Annesley (1663-1750) acquired the property in 1741. He is known to have resided at Clough, though he also served as M.P. for Middleton in Yorkshire. In 1750 Mr Annesley died leaving his son William Annesley more than £5000 a year. A year later Mrs Delany, wife of the Dean of Down, a tenant of the Annesley's, wrote to her sister informing her that the Annesleys 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'. The building of the town was undertaken during the 1760s and was laid out in two parts, the Old Town (now Upper Square) and the New Town (Lower Square).

William Annesley, created first Viscount Glerawly (1709-1770), made Castlewellan his principal residence in the 1750s, building a house, laying out a formal park and building the town on the demesne perimeter. He built the Grange, a pleasant complex of farm and stable yards, which Mrs Delany described in 1758, when she related that she had 'walked two or three miles before dinner, saw all his farming affairs, which are indeed very fine. Three large courts: round the first, which is arched round a kind of piazza, are houses for all his carriages and over them his granaries; the next court are stables and cow houses, and over them haylofts; the third court two such barns as I never saw, floored with oak and finished in the most convenient manner for all the purposes of winnowing etc and in that court are the stands for hay and corn'. She does not describe the early Annesley house, but it was probably located close to the Grange complex, possibly at one end of the lime avenue, which was also planted at this period. The walled garden to the north, aligned with the main lime avenue axis road, was also built in the 1750s.

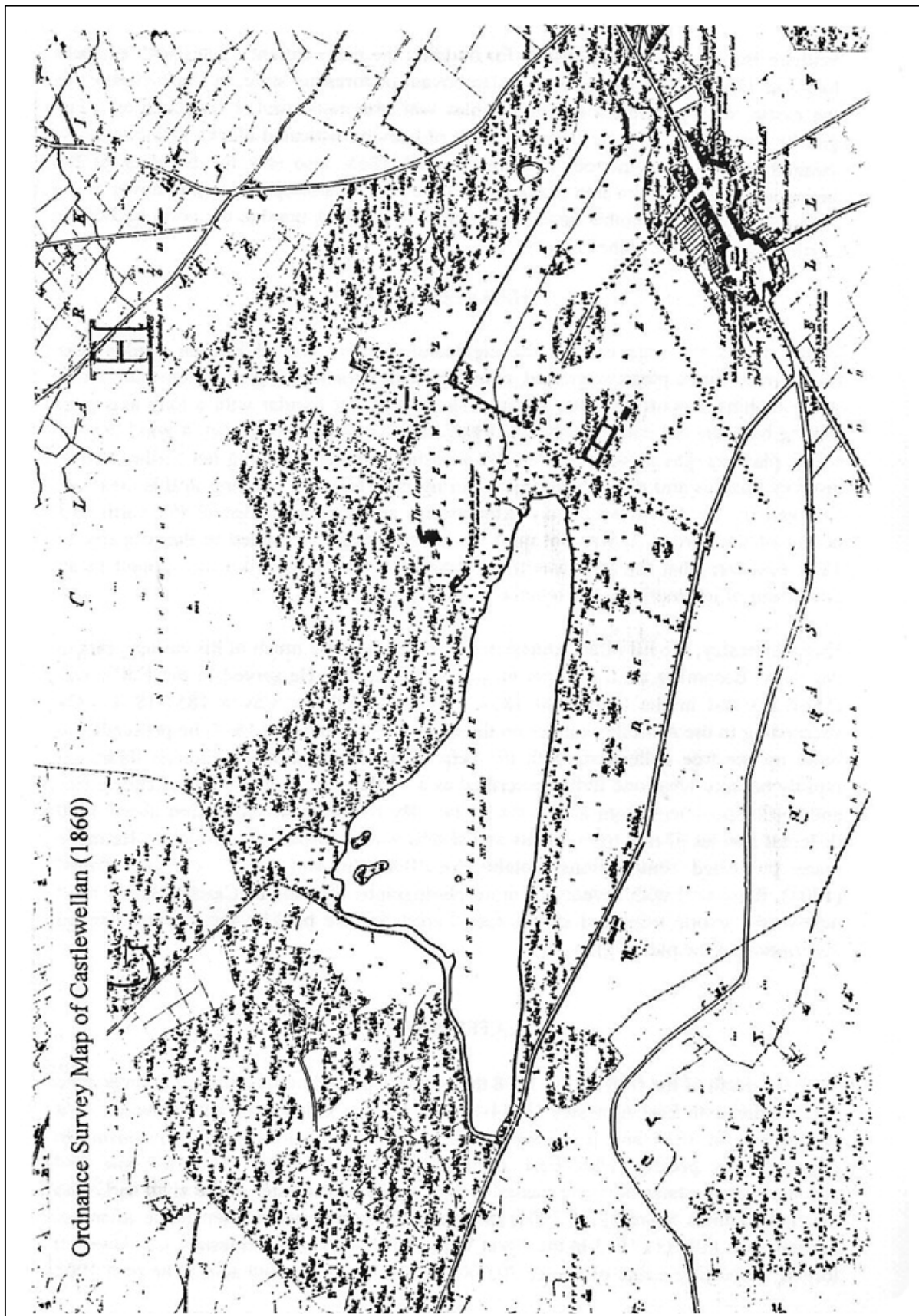
THE REGENCY

On the death of the first Viscount Glerawly in 1770, the family estates were inherited by his eldest son, Francis Charles Annesley (1740-1802), who was created Earl Annesley of Castlewellan in 1789. He was responsible for building a new residence at Castlewellan, a single storey villa on the north shore of the lake, known as Castlewellan Cottage. This was demolished in 1861-62 on the completion of the Victorian castle, but it appears in a number of early photographs. From its appearance it looks to have been built in the Regency period, possibly in the 1790s. It was stuccoed with alternating quoins at the corners, no parapet, graduated slates with a shallow hipped roof and low cut stone chimney stacks. The entrance front faced north-east with a Venetian doorway and flanking wings, each with a niche in a blind arch. The garden front over looking the lake also had five bays, all except that in the centre having tripartite Georgian-glazed windows, the end ones being in very shallow segment bows. The site is now marked out with box hedges. There was a small landing stage on the lake shore in front of the cottage, low ashlar pinnacles serving as bollards. The landscape park was probably created in conjunction with the building of this villa in the 1790s.

The first Earl Annesley died in 1802 without legitimate heirs and the title and property passed to his brother Richard, the second Earl Annesley (1745-1824). Richard was responsible for building a Gothick temple on the land immediately above the villa on the site now occupied by the present Victorian castle. Built sometime around 1820, this folly was built 'for rest and pleasure lifting its spheric cone among the mountains with great grandeur'. Demolished in 1855, but fortunately photographed in the early 1850s, this had Georgian-gothick glazed windows, pointed-headed with Y tracery, castellated parapet and an octagonal ashlar spire on top, each side having a shallow gabled round-headed opening.

THE VICTORIAN ERA

The eldest son of the second earl, William Richard Annesley, succeeded to his father's title and property in 1824, becoming the third Earl Annesley (1772-1838). His son and heir, William Richard Annesley, was only eight year old when he died and became the fourth Earl Annesley. When he came of age he resolved to build a grand new residence at Castlewellan and approached the great Scottish architect William Burn to undertake the task. Work on the new house began in 1856 and was largely completed by 1858, the progress of its construction being captured in a series of fascinating early photographs, mostly taken in 1857 when the shell had been complete. The new castle was built of local granite in a rather austere Scottish baronial style, of three stories plus an attic of dormer gables with a massive four storey tower at one side and at the opposite side a rather slender round tower and turret. In front of the castle there is grass terracing on several level with steps at the corners to the parkland below, bartizan and retaining walls in granite, designed by Burn in 1859; the designs of the garlanded urns were submitted in 1865. There was formerly a conservatory at the north end of the west terrace



William Burn was also responsible for building the main entrance gates with adjacent lodge in 1861. This building is in a flamboyant picturesque style, in sharp contrast to the castle, with prominent fronting gables with decorated timber bargeboards. The granite gate pillars, also by Burn, are built of heavily rusticated blocks surmounted by swaged urns. This period, probably around 1865, also saw the building of the hexagonal gazebo in the area to the west of the lake on a steep slope and known as the 'Moorish Tower'. Another gazebo built close to the duck pond to the north east of the castle was built later in the century.

THE ARBORETUM

In the 1850s the area east of the eighteenth century walled kitchen garden was transformed into a pleasure ground, complete with terracing, flights of steps and pools with dolphins supporting water basins. The layout was regular with a long axis path linking both the old and new enclosed gardens. As one might expect, a good deal of exotic planting was associated with this pleasure ground, including ten wellingtonias, monkey puzzles and rhododendrons. During the 1860s the planting in this area was enlarged by the fourth earl and conservatories and vineries added to the north east corner of the garden. It was not until his brother Hugh succeeded to the property in 1874 however, that the area was transformed from Victorian pleasure ground to an arboretum of international importance.

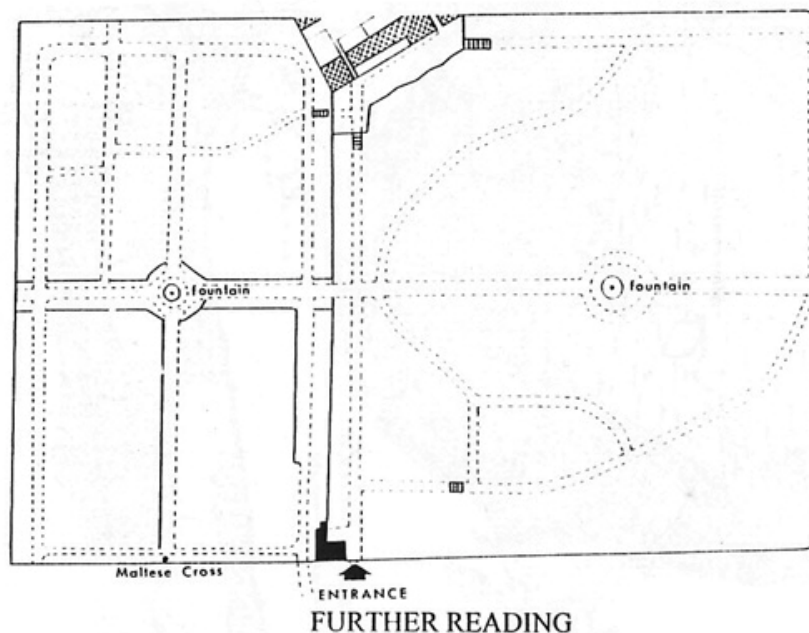
Hugh Annesley, the fifth Earl Annesley (1831-1908), spent much of his earlier years in the army, becoming a Lt. Colonel in the Scots Guards. He served in the Kaffir war (1851-53) and in the Crimea in 1854. He was M.P. for Cavan 1857-1874. On succeeding to the Annesley estates on the death of his brother in 1874, he proceeded to build up the tree collections with the help of his head gardener Thomas Ryan. It rapidly became what one writer described as a 'gallery of exotics', full of choice tree and shrub specimens from across the globe. By his death the collection about 3000 different species of rare trees, plants and shrubs was unsurpassed in Ireland. He made many published contributions, notably his 'Beautiful and Rare Trees and Plants' (1903), illustrated with seventy or more photographs of some of Castlewellan's most noteworthy exotic trees and shrubs (see Forest Service booklet for a more detailed description of the planting).

LATER YEARS

With the death of the fifth earl in 1908 the property passed to his only son Francis, who became the sixth Earl Annesley (1884-1914). He was killed in an aeroplane accident in Belgium in 1914 and being without heirs the family titles passed to cousins in England (the present 10th Earl Annesley lives in Kent). The demesne and accompanying estates however passed to Mabel, the eldest sister of the sixth earl, who married Thomas Sowerby in 1904, though she resumed her maiden name after her husband was killed in 1913 in the Great War. Like other Irish demesnes, Castlewellan lost its supporting estate of nearly 70,000 acres through the land acts. The post 1908

era was therefore a difficult time for the demesne, but was kept going by Lady Isabel Annesley, who passed the property onto to her son Gerald Sowerby in 1940, who assumed the name Annesley. He took a considerable interest in the gardens and arboretum and started to build up the collections again.

In 1967 the demesne, still covering about 1,200 acres, was purchased from Gerald Annesley by the Forest Service of the Department of Agriculture. It was opened as a Forest park in 1969 and since then the arboretum has been extended to cover an area of over 40 hectares - a huge expansion from the original six hectares. The walled garden is now known as the Annesley Garden in tribute to its former owners. The castle itself has been leased out to a Christian sect as a conference centre.



FURTHER READING

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