



CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT ACTION PLAN

RUSSBOROUGH

PARKLANDS

Russborough



Opposite: Russborough House from the south, framed by Oak, Ash and Beech trees in Front Lawn, planted in the mid- to late-18th century as part of the original landscape design. To the north, woodland in Upper Wood provides an effective backdrop to the house and links the foreground trees, providing a refined and deceptively simple visual and landscape setting for what has been described by Mark Bence-Jones as: ‘Arguably the most beautiful house in Ireland; described 1748 when it was nearing completion, as “a noble new house forming into perfection”; a perfection which it achieved and keeps to this day, having suffered hardly at all from subsequent alterations or the depredations of time’.

Photo: Christopher Gallagher, 2022.



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The European Agricultural Fund
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Ceiste um Fhorbairt Pobail Áitiúil
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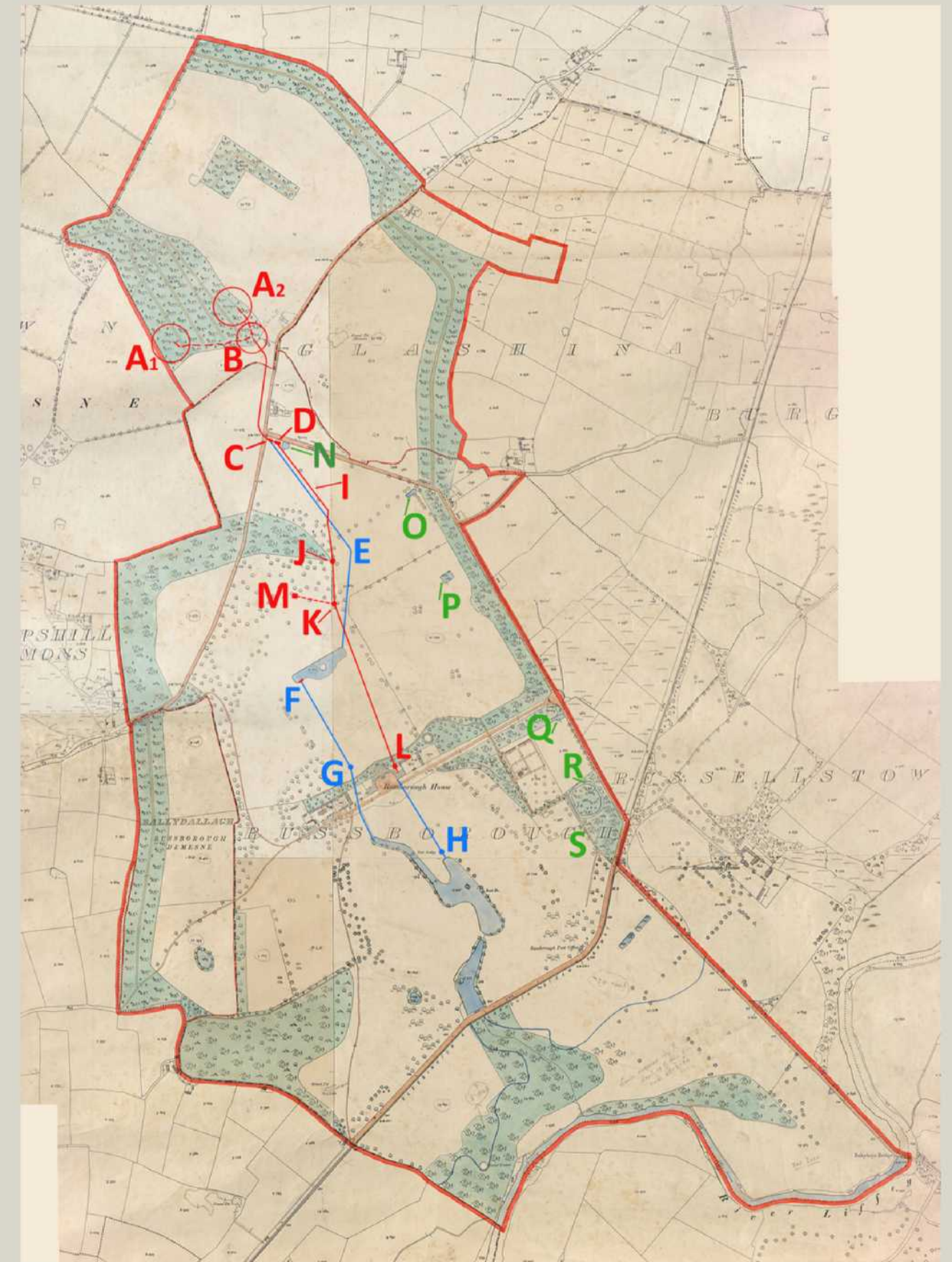
Executive Summary

The Russborough demesne is a unique and beautiful place. Its magnificent house was built in the mid-18th century to designs by Richard Castle (c.1690-1751); then the leading architect of the Palladian style working in Ireland. His client was Joseph Leeson, heir to a brewing and property fortune, Member of Parliament and afterwards 1st Earl of Milltown, whose descendants continued to live at Russborough for nearly two centuries thereafter. Constructed of local brick and stone and faced in a fine grey Wicklow granite obtained from the Golden Hill Quarry near Blessington, the house extends from west to east over seven hundred feet in length and is as elegant and striking without, as it is opulent and splendid within. To the east, a classical arched gateway provides an imposing entrance to the demesne, from which a grand formal avenue of Lime and Beech leads to the principal front of the house. South of this approach lies an impressive walled kitchen garden complex and fruit orchard which also survives, albeit altered somewhat from its previous layout.

This landscape setting, which also seems to have been devised by Castle, was similarly created in the mid-18th century and was formed of the pre-existing agricultural landscape. Castle's design was an inspired response to its elevated location, with an ascending series of formal terraces enclosed by trees and woodland, a grand trefoil lawn and an apsidal canal on rising ground to the north, all overlooking the house and the wider countryside. These are echoed to the south by a formal octagonal lawn with enclosing woodland, surrounding what is now an informal and to some a decidedly 'romantic' landscape, with a pair of serpentine lakes and trees above which the house looks out towards the distant setting of the 'grand and sublime' Wicklow Mountains.

The apparent influence on Richard Castle's design for Russborough, of the celebrated landscaper, nurseryman, writer and designer Stephen Switzer (1682-1745), is evident in Russborough's grassy terraces, its canal and its combination of both rectilinear and serpentine woodland walks, as well as in its formal avenue approach to the house and the radiating avenues which connect the core demesne landscape with its wider setting. This early layout is depicted on a 'Plan...of the County of Dublin..' by John Rocque (c.1760), as well as on a detailed manuscript plan held in the Kilruddery archive, which appears to have been made around the time of 1st Earl's demise in 1783, as evidenced from tree ring data obtained as part of this study.

Further land acquisitions and alterations to the Russborough demesne continued throughout the early- to mid-19th century. These included improvements in lands to the south as far as the river Liffey and west to the Poulaphuca waterfalls, with also the addition of areas to the north and west and to the north east, extending the visual boundaries of the demesne which were afterwards reinforced by new plantations. By the early-20th century, this design was at its greatest extent and included lands to the west in Ballydallagh township, as well as extensive areas to the north in Bishop's Hill and Glashina townships.





Throughout this period, Russborough and the Earls of Milltown were at the heart of the political, social and economic life of the country. Regular sales of timber from the demesne and especially of Oak and Elm, with also the evidence of a frequent restocking of these plantings, attest to the continuing husbandry of its woodland resource, as does an entry in the Minute Book for 1742 held by the Royal Dublin Society, which records the planting of some 22,000 trees across the demesne in the previous year. Visitors commented regularly on its rich and extensive woodlands, including fine timber. A close involvement in horse breeding and racing is also well documented in the newspapers of the time and in the memorials at Russborough to two of the 4th Earl's horses, as well as physically in the extensive stables and in the circular Riding School, erected in the 1820's.

The sixth Earl of Milltown, Edward Nugent, died in 1890, although his wife, the Countess of Milltown, continued thereafter to reside at Russborough. The seventh and last Earl of Milltown, who was not married, died in 1891 at which time Russborough passed to the 6th Earl's nephew, Sir Edmund Russborough Turton of Upsall Castle, Yorkshire. The Dowager Countess Lady Geraldine, remained at Russborough until her death in 1914. In 1931, following Sir Edmund's death, Russborough was sold (for the first time in its history) to Captain Denis Daly of Co. Galway. He married Maeb Lennon of Galway the following year and went on to become one of the leading figures of the Irish turf. Their first daughter Ann was born at Russborough in 1933 and 'Anne's Garden' [sic] was created at Russborough for her and her younger sister Avia, born in 1936. The Dalys were responsible for a number of ornamental tree plantings across the demesne, including the larger conifers on 'Lady's Island' and some fine Red Horse Chestnut. Avia later found fame as breeder of the 1988 Cheltenham Gold Cup winner 'Charter Party', by her own stallion, Document.

In 1952, the Dalys sold Russborough to Sir Alfred and Lady Clementine Beit, who had recently returned to England from South Africa. Sir Alfred Beit's uncle, Alfred Beit Snr., had previously been a diamond magnate and industrialist in South Africa, and in 1930 Sir Alfred inherited from him a very substantial fortune, part of which he invested in a considerable art collection, later given to the Irish people and now housed in the National Gallery of Ireland.

In 1953, the Beits engaged the plantsman and garden designer James Russell of Sunningdale Nurseries, to advise on the creation and development of plans and planting proposals for the gardens and landscape at Russborough. Over the following decade and working intensively with architect Sir Martyn Becket and the Swiss landscape architect Walter Bruggler, James Russell produced designs, detailed plans and planting lists for numerous parts of the Russborough demesne including: herbaceous borders for the House and offices, for 'Anne's Garden', an extensive Rose Garden and other plantings in the Walled Kitchen Gardens, for Lady's Island & Bog Garden, for 'New Wood' (behind the House, now the car park) and 'Top Wood' (now the Woodland Garden), as well as plans and visualisations for woodland and other plantings across the wider demesne.

Almost the complete archive of Russell's correspondence with Sir Alfred and Lady Beit and others survives. This includes some 400 pages of detailed analysis and correspondence, as well as numerous plans and planting lists, all of which have been copied as part of this project, to inform the analysis and future management of this highly significant aspect of the Russborough demesne. This was one of James Russell's earliest garden and landscape design contracts and his first in Ireland; it was also one of his longest-running involvements at a single property, which under the Beits was transformed and became, during the 1960's & 70's, a focus of repeated visits by key members of the Irish and wider European cultural and horticultural society. In 1976, the Alfred Beit Foundation (ABF) was established by Sir Alfred and Lady Beit as a Registered Charity and is entrusted with the development, management and care of Russborough. Its principal purpose is the advancement of education in the fine arts for the benefit of the public, together with the long-term preservation of Russborough, its art collections, gardens and parklands.

Both Russborough House and its demesne landscape, with their essential buildings and structures, survive today largely intact, notwithstanding the depredations of time and the inevitable losses that have taken place from the fabric of the historic designed landscape. This includes areas of the designed landscape within the demesne wall which were sold from the estate in the mid-20th century and which it is recommended herein, be reinstated. In common with the house, Russborough's demesne landscape is approaching the tercentenary of its creation – an extraordinary achievement for any such estate, let alone one which has weathered such a diverse array of physical, political and economic storms. It is timely therefore that this Conservation Management Plan has been commissioned by the Alfred Beit Foundation, specifically to understand and to identify the many and varied significances of Richard Castle's demesne landscape design and thus to propose policies and recommendations which will guide its future care, conservation and management, in tandem with the many similar studies of its built and natural heritage.

Illustrated maps and photographs:

Front Cover: Russborough House from the south, framed by Oak, Ash and Beech trees in Front Lawn, planted in the mid- to late-18th century as part of the original landscape design.

Page 1: Map of the Russborough Demesne in 1929.

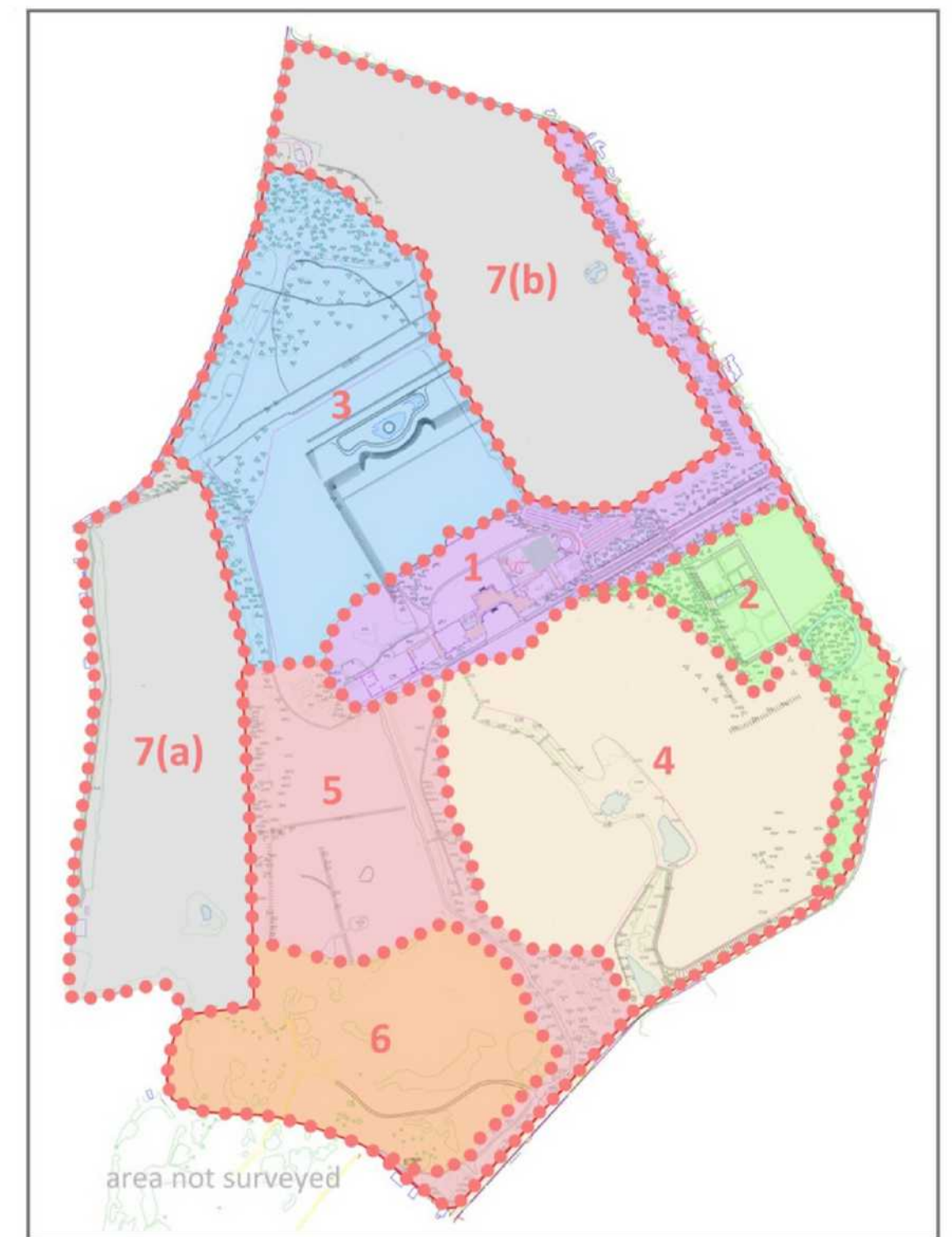
Page 2: Russborough Demesne with existing trees and woodland areas.

Page 3: Principal Character Areas within Russborough demesne.

Page 4: Panorama of the Parklands towards the Blessington lakes and Wicklow Mountains. Photo by Christopher Gallagher, September 2021.

Page 5: The Hippodrome, constructed by the 4th Earl in the 1820s.

Page 6: top - the Bog Garden with gunnera and Scot's Pine, bottom - the Woodland Garden, both planted to designs by James Russell, 1950s - 1980s.



Russborough Demesne: Principal Character Areas

1. Russborough House, eastern approach avenue and woodland belt
2. Walled Kitchen Gardens, Pleasure Grounds, Lady's Island and woodland areas
3. North Lawn, terraces & canal, with Upper Lawn and adjacent woodland areas to the north & west
4. South Lawn, with the lower lakes complex
5. The Western Fields, with the peripheral woodland belts and south-western boundary woodland areas
6. Quarried areas in the former Mulloch's Hill
- 7(a) Privately-owned lands in Ballydallagh, in the west of the demesne
- 7(b) Privately-owned lands in the north and east of the demesne



Russborough, including its demesne landscape and buildings, is of exceptional significance for the following:

- Its grand and imposing Palladian style house, built 1741-8 to designs by Richard Castle (1690-1751), who was then the leading classical architect working in Ireland. The house is included on the Co.Wicklow Record of Protected Structures, as well as in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage where it is pronounced 'Possibly the greatest Palladian mansion in Ireland and one of the best preserved 18th-century buildings in the whole country'. It was similarly described by Mark Bence-Jones as '...Arguably the most beautiful house in Ireland...', both for its perfection of form and the degree to which that perfection was sustained, '...having suffered hardly at all from subsequent alterations or the depredations of time.'. Faced throughout and ornamented with Wicklow granite, the building extends to 700 feet (213 m) including its fully-integrated stables and offices;
- The outstanding quality and decoration of the Russborough house interiors, with the extensive use of Caribbean mahogany throughout for doors, stairwells and floors, plasterwork by the best Irish tradesmen of the time and exuberant rococo stuccowork by the Swiss brothers, Paolo and Filippo Lafranchini, as well as Joseph Leeson II's 1750's 'Grand Tour' acquisitions of furniture, paintings and sculpture from across Europe and especially from Italy;
- Its magnificent classical style gate screen at the principal (eastern) entrance to Russborough demesne, built c.1745 to designs by Richard Castle. The gate screen is included on the Co.Wicklow Record of Protected Structures, as well as in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage and takes the form of a central triumphal arch with flanking pedestrian gates, all constructed in Wicklow granite and topped with pediments and with statuettes of lions.

- The gate screen itself is flanked by quadrant walls which describe a half-circle carriage sweep, continued beyond the public road with an answering semi-circle (formerly) opening onto the adjacent landscape setting;
- The original mid-18th century design for Russborough's demesne parkland landscape, most likely also the work of the architect Richard Castle and seemingly heavily influenced by the English landscaper Stephen Switzer (1682-1745). This design is still clearly recognisable today in the grand eastern avenue approach to the house, as well as the many other surviving trees of that period throughout the Russborough demesne. It is also visible in the unique formal terraced landscape design worked into the hillside north of the house, with the elegant formal reflecting pool as an integral feature at its core and terminated to the north by an open lawn of trefoil outline. Also in the hugely innovative mid-18th informal landscape to its south side, with its graceful serpentine lake and river design;
- The extensive parkland, woodland and garden design layer established across the demesne in the mid-20th century, by the exceptionally talented plantsman, garden designer and nurseryman James Russell (1920-1996), of the Sunningdale Nurseries in Surrey, who advised Sir Alfred and Lady Clementine Beit through an extended and highly creative period at Russborough from 1953 to c.1963, with limited additional advice also thereafter. This was one of Russell's earliest garden and landscape design contracts and his first in Ireland. Working with a network of specialist plantsmen and nurseries, as well as the best designers of his time, including architect Sir Martyn Beckett and the Swiss Landscape Architect Walter Brugger, Russell designed, sourced and established a number of innovative planting schemes throughout Russborough, including herbaceous borders for the house and walled gardens, with an elaborate Rose Garden also, with layouts also for Anne's Garden, Lady's Island and the Bog Garden, New Wood behind the house, 'Top Wood' (Woodland Garden) and in 'The Park', large amounts of which plantings still survive, albeit largely unnoticed hitherto;
- Its extensive and varied setting, including grand and wide-ranging views to and across the Wicklow Mountains, which is a key element within its original design and was described by one visitor as '...sublime and beautiful...[and of]...grand simplicity'.



Russborough is of considerable significance for the following:

- The continuing survival of a number of ancient field boundary Beech trees from the agricultural landscape period predating the creation of the mid-18th century designed landscape, as well as large numbers of trees planted as part of the 18th century demesne landscape design including fine specimens of Lime, Oak & Beech, with other tree species planted in later developmental periods including Scots Pine, Horse Chestnut, Ash, Sycamore and exotic specimens more recently planted such as Cedar of Lebanon, Cappadocian Maple, White Birch and Red Maple, each of which add layers of differing significance to the demesne landscape;
- Its extensive estate archive, containing large numbers of manuscript and published documents, as well as numerous photographs from all periods, which cover a wide range of subjects including the demesne landscape and its buildings, its management and estate staff and the former owners of Russborough up to and including the Beits in the mid-1980s who were the last private owners;
- The James Russell archive held at the Borthwick Institute, University of York, which contains an extensive correspondence between Russell and Lord & Lady Beit, including plant lists, maps & plans and drawings pertaining to his designs for the demesne landscape. These are of primary importance in understanding both the development and the implementation of Russell's proposals as well as the survival of plant materials from his many designs, which might otherwise be overlooked;

Its walled kitchen gardens, which date to the earliest times in the development of the Russborough demesne landscape and contain a number of significant built structures, including a range of peach houses and the remains of a formerly heated curvilinear greenhouse, as well as a range of other secondary horticultural buildings and structures.

Russborough is of significance for the following:

- The circular walled enclosure planted with Irish Yew and Laurel and formerly containing the grave of the fourth Earl of Milltown, overlooking the river Liffey and now just above the edge of the Poulaphuca reservoir, which is listed as a Recorded Monument;
- The positive contribution of the mid-20th century Blessington Lakes (Poulaphuca Reservoir) to the wider setting of the demesne.

The following are or may in the future be damaging to the Significance of Russborough:

- continuing losses of the fabric of the demesne landscape, including of lands formerly within the demesne but now in private hands and its historic boundary structures and walls as well as its gates and gateways;
- inappropriate tree or woodland planting within the demesne landscape;
- the loss of an historically appropriate mix of farming activities within the demesne landscape, including the introduction of areas of arable within the former demesne areas &/or inappropriate stocking densities on grassland areas;
- continuing or accelerated historic tree losses within the demesne;
- non-implementation of key recommendations within this conservation plan, e.g. appropriate tree planting in the correct locations, removal of inappropriate planting, or the reinstatement of historic views;
- the use of inappropriate genetic lines for replanting of key historic tree types;
- tree or other plant diseases;
- infiltration of the demesne &/or of its surrounding countryside by non-native invasive species including Muntjac Deer, Grey Squirrel and Japanese Knotweed, as well as inappropriate stands of *Rhododendron ponticum* & *Cornus sanguinea* (Dogwood);
- the adverse effects of weather or climate change;
- visible car parking in the demesne landscape, particularly in areas of high significance to the historic design;
- an increase of visitor numbers beyond the carrying capacity of the property;
- development within its setting that damages historic views.

Further Information

This document presents the executive summary and the updated Statement of Significance for Russborough, its built environment and historic landscape. The full Conservation Management and Action Plan is organised in four distinct sections comprising:

Part 1 - Evaluation: Introduction; Background; Location, land ownership and physical character of Russborough demesne; Chronology; Tree survey; Views; Russborough demesne landscape: the wider architectural and landscape context; Wildlife & habitats.

Part 2 - Analysis: Statement of Significance; Description of Character Areas I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VIIa & VIIb - a summary of development and present condition.

Part 3 - Identifying a vision and developing management policies: Vision for Russborough Demesne; Objectives, policies & recommendations with issues & constraints, for individual Character Areas and other specific property elements; Replanting, woodland management and other proposals for Russborough; Wider property benefits and strategic links; Maps and Plans.

Part 4 - Appendices: 1 Russborough Demesne Buildings and Structures Gazetteer; 2 Russborough Demesne Tree Index (2021); 3 James Russell's 1950s Planting Scheme for Russborough (c.1953-63) and its context; 4 James Russell Correspondence with Sir Alfred & Lady Beit 1953-1986; 5 James Russell Maps & Plans relating to Russborough 1953-1963; 6 Extract from Wicklow County Development Plan 2016-2022 Chapter 10 - Heritage; 7 Extract from Wicklow County Development Plan 2016-2022 Volume 3: Appendix 5 - Landscape Assessment.

The full Conservation Management Plan can be accessed for research purposes onsite at Russborough House and at Wicklow County Council offices. To organise this access please email info@russborough.ie.

Author Acknowledgements

Our thanks are due first to the Trustees of the Alfred Beit Foundation, especially the Parklands Committee and to the senior management team who commissioned, supervised and contributed to the preparation of this report: Klaus Unger, Judith Woodworth, Robert S. Myerscough, Ian Lumley, Malcolm Alexander, David Horkan, Joe Carthy, Sean Rainbird, Karen Erwin, Consuelo O'Connor, Flor Madden, Peter O'Grady Walsh, Christine Casey, Eric Blatchford, Teresa Crowley, Pauline Swords. Also to Anthony Harney who provided much valuable information and assistance in documenting both the historic and present-day water supplies to the house and to the formal pond and the lakes across the demesne landscape. Our especial thanks go to Natasha Serne, Archivist and Records Manager at the Royal Dublin Society, for extracting and copying the 1742 Minute Book references to tree planting at Russborough and elsewhere in Ireland. Our thanks also to staff at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) We are also indebted to William Alvis Brogden for his invaluable comments and discussion on the possible influence of Stephen Switzer on Richard Castle's design for the Russborough demesne; also to Charles Quest-Ritson for generously sharing his personal knowledge of James Russell and Graham Stuart Thomas.

The Alfred Beit Foundation would like to acknowledge the invaluable support of Wicklow County Council and the LEADER/ Rural Development Programme with particular thanks to Siobhan Mehigan, Karen Windsor and Deirdre Burns, Wicklow Heritage Officer.

