

Roundwood House

An Architectural History



“I think this house has a marvellous doll’s house-like quality, in that it’s not a ‘great house’ but it’s very well-designed and very cleverly laid-out, and it’s got all its original fittings which is quite something”.¹

Hon. Desmond Guinness

Co-founder and former President, the Irish Georgian Society

Roundwood is one of Ireland’s finest mid-size houses of the Georgian period.

It was built by Anthony Sharp, scion of a prosperous family of cloth makers. Research by Brian de Breffny revealed that Sharp’s Quaker grandfather amassed a fortune in the late 17th century, running large flocks of sheep on his 2,000 acre holdings in County Leix to supply his Dublin clothing business.²

The house probably dates from 1741, when the name Roundwood appears in registered deeds. Its architect is unknown, and Dr Maurice Craig judiciously suggests; ‘I prefer to believe that it was just put together by somebody: master-builder or even owner’.³

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The dwelling that Sharp's grandfather purchased at the end of the 17th century probably still stands: Brian de Breffny identifies it as 'the two-storey building, 47 feet long by 17 feet deep with a massive central chimney, standing at the back of the yard behind the present house... essentially it retains the characteristics of the long, low settlers' houses of 17th century Ireland'.⁴

It may have been this older house that Anthony Sharp inherited in 1735, with the lands of Killinure. In 1739 his name appears in a list of magistrates for Queen's County (Leix). Brian de Breffny offers a perceptive interpretation of Sharp's goals at this time, a son of wealth taking up residence at Killinure 'to lead the life of a country gentleman . . . Clearly he found the old "mansion" there too small, too antiquated and too lowly for his taste and requirements. He was a man of means, recently married and raising a family'.⁵

The façade of Roundwood is gracefully proportioned, yet robustly masculine. Coigns give strong vertical accents to the breakfront that carries the central pediment, and also emphasise the outer angles. Maurice Craig comments on the pleasing diminution of features as the eye travels upwards, from the front door with its side lights to the Venetian window above, to the six-pane window at the top.⁶

The central front door and Venetian window are given authority by weighty rustication. This device reflects the influence of the British architect James Gibbs whose splendid *Book of Architecture*, published in 1728 with a second edition in 1739, became an inspiration and touchstone for architects and builders, masons and joiners, across the English-speaking world.



Front door with 'Gibbsian Surround'



Double-height entrance hall

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The Roundwood front door surround is a classic example of the 'Gibbsian' type, having a triple keystone surmounted by a pediment with stone blocks punctuating the jambs. The masonry is of outstanding quality, of razor-sharp limestone from the quarry at Ardraccan, Co. Meath. In contrast – as Maurice Craig observes – the façade is faced in sandstone, including the window surrounds with their moulded sills and fluted keystones.



Detail of entrance hall, door with shouldered architrave



First-floor landing, view back to arched window on rear wall

The great excitement of Roundwood's interior is the double-height entrance hall. This striking space reveals a baroque exuberance behind the sober façade. As Maurice Craig points out, two-storey halls are rare among mid-size houses in Ireland⁷, and the entrance hall at Roundwood echoes double-height halls at several larger country houses built during the previous 20 years – Seafield, Co. Dublin, Gloster Co. Offaly and, most memorably, Castletown, Co. Kildare.

Roundwood's hall, with symmetrical doorcases flanking the lower flight of stairs, artfully implies that the staircase is a 'double-return' which rises to the pair of curved balconies at first-floor level. In fact the staircase is only a 'single-return', but that is more than compensated for by the unique fretwork balustrade of the balcony and landing, its festive geometry anticipating the later rococo enthusiasm for stair balustrades in 'Chinese Chippendale' style.

As the Hon. Desmond Guinness observes, Roundwood retains most of its original decorative features, and they repay examination. The house contains excellent joinery

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Entrance hall, curved balconies at first-floor level



Staircase, frieze with Vitruvian scroll at first-floor level



Ground-floor parlour, early rococo ceiling

in the Gibbs style, whose mouldings catch the light wonderfully. There are boldly-shouldered architraves and doors, each with six raised-and-fielded panels, and the matching window-cases are similarly masterful in design and detail.

Several rooms contain fine original chimneypieces of black Kilkenny marble, the preferred material for fine Irish mantels in this period. Treated as flat panels in the manner of the 1720s and 1730s, they feature attractively naïve shell carvings at the centre.

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Ground-floor parlour, chimneypiece of black Kilkenny marble, shell centrepiece

There is also original plasterwork. Throughout the house there are fine architectural cornices which display a confident classical grammar. The hall and staircase hall are girded by a frieze carrying a bold Vitruvian scroll. The ground-floor parlour contains an attractive early rococo ceiling which appears contemporary with the house. Arranged in a star pattern, it combines chinoiserie interlace strapwork in the manner of Jean Bérain with naturalistic leaf forms which are hand-modelled and evidently influenced by the contemporary stuccowork of the Lafranchini Brothers in Ireland.

That Roundwood has survived in such a remarkably intact state is due to the Irish Georgian Society. In 1968, the house and demesne had been sold to the Irish Land Commission, who planned to develop a farm in the grounds and began selling mature beech trees from the demesne for their timber value to the sawmills at Abbeylax.

The Hon. Desmond Guinness – who co-founded the Irish Georgian Society with his first wife Mariga in 1958 – was contacted by Mrs Cosby of Stradbally, who had lived at Roundwood for a time and was alarmed to see the house boarded up and unoccupied. In the summer of 1970, the Irish Georgian Society negotiated to buy the house and the surrounding ten acres, followed later by a further four acres.

The semi-derelict Roundwood house was pulled back from the brink through the dedication and energy of Brian Molloy (1945-78). A passionate conservationist and inspirational leader of volunteer teams, Brian Molloy directed the refurbishment of Roundwood for the Irish Georgian Society. Upstairs, bathrooms were installed in the former closets to make the interior viable as modern guest accommodation. The building was officially opened on 6th June 1971.

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In 1974, the Irish Georgian Society sold Roundwood to an enthusiastic American supporter, John L. Tormey of Akron Ohio. Mr Tormey and his wife Nell were happy that Brian Molloy should continue living at the house, managing it on their behalf.

The Tormeys generously allowed Roundwood to be used as a centre for Irish Georgian Society volunteers who were working on the restoration of the Damer House, Roscrea, Co. Tipperary. After Brian Molloy died, John Tormey donated Roundwood back to the Society, and it was leased to two couples who ran it as a country house hotel.

In 1988, one of the couples, Frank and Rosemary Kennan, bought the property from the Irish Georgian Society, and ran Roundwood as a hotel. Today the tradition is being carried on by their daughter Hannah, and her husband Paddy.

This account of the architectural history of Roundwood was compiled by Nick Sheaff, former Director of the Irish Georgian Society 2005-07.

Endnotes

1. Hon. Desmond Guinness, commentary on Roundwood House in *Saving Our Heritage: The Irish Georgian Society*, DVD documentary 2008, produced & directed by Joe Mulholland. Copyright M. Cashman & A. Masterson.
2. Brian de Breffny, *Roundwood and the Sharps*; Irish Ancestor, vol 9, No.2, 1977, pp 59-67
3. Maurice Craig, *Classic Irish Houses of the Middle Size*; The Architectural Press, London 1976, p.110
4. de Breffny *loc cit*, p.61
5. de Breffny *loc cit*, p.62
6. Craig *op cit*, p.23
7. Craig *op cit*, p.10

All Photographs: Nick Sheaff