



THE AUSTERE DELIRIUM OF HEATHFIELD HALL

TEXT & PHOTO ANDREW MOLLOY

Near the town of Hillsborough, on the outskirts of the village of Anahilt, Co. Down lies a curiosity, or rather, a collection of curiosities. Rounding the corner of a remote country road, one is struck by an array of ornate chimney pots counterpointed by a host of carved gargoyles and pious stony faces. After the initial assault on the senses, descending a swooping driveway, a collection of conjoined buildings is discerned, the appearance of which lies somewhere between high Victorian austerity and the delirium of a Tim Burton themed fairground ride. This is Heathfield Hall.

Starting off in 1999 as the unloved and neglected 200 year old Cluntyagh Old School House, Heathfield Hall germinated into the intricately exquisite monster, brimming with brutish elegance, which won the Individual Merit Award in 2011's BBCNI House of the Year. The architectural complex has been a decade long labour-of-love for owners and creators Brian and Elizabeth Bleakley who took their interest in gothic castles and architectural salvage yards, combined them with fertile imaginations and a tenacious fearlessness rendering it all in the flesh and stone described by Lawrence Llewelyn Bowen as "a gothic fairytale fantasy."

The Hall appears from the outside as a collection of discrete buildings; from the old schoolhouse facing the road to the giddily ecclesiastical oversized dog-



house (yes, really!) facing the fields beyond. This, however, belies the smooth flow of internal spaces which, on paper, should not work (a living room, gives way to a bedroom, followed by a kitchenette), yet flow it does. The sequence of spaces really is a delight, and there are surprises in the form of astonishing architectural 'events' at every turn.

I began my tour in an opulent living-cum-dining room which, as the first room I entered, was the architectural equivalent of a finger in a live plug socket, but proved to be relatively subtle in comparison with other spaces in the house. Pushing a heavy door open, one finds oneself in a darkly glamorous bedroom complete with an enormous four poster bed, a hand carved brute which, Brian informs me, was produced for the BBC's 'The Tudors.' Later, Brian indicates that through a door is a bathroom. I push the door open and receive yet another architectural zap. The tiny room is dominated by two stone window frames taken from the old Mater hospital in north Belfast, with an oversized carved stone face leering down at you. It is through these empty frames you step to take a shower, adding a distinct air of brooding drama to an otherwise mundane everyday task.

The jewel of this Byzantine crown is, fittingly, the old schoolhouse itself. Laid out as a medieval banqueting hall, the room is dominated by a long table replete with intricate carvings which leads the eye to the astonishing fireplace which looks like one of the spires of Westminster palace has come crashing through the wall. One gets the feeling when trying to take in this room that the more you look the more you see, acting as a synecdoche for the rest of the house. I have described several of the stand out moments, but this really does the house a disservice. There are no blank walls or forgotten about corners, everywhere you look there are surprises and flourishes; be it a finely produced piece of antique furniture, a piece of Victorian taxidermy, a heavy granite gargoyle, intricately carved brickwork or delicate hand

painted stained glass.

Talking to Brian about the construction of the Hall it becomes clear that this is not a Disneyfied version of a gothic hall, themed for your amusement, but that the essence and spirit of medieval gothicism, complete with long-forgotten construction techniques, is alive and kicking within the very fabric of the building. Brian relates, sometimes through gritted teeth, tales of tradesmen getting it wrong or trying it on, perhaps thinking their client more deluded madman than inspired auteur. The building process seemed to expose the modern construction industry's reliance on the quick, cheap automated techniques of modernism. As he walks from room to room, Brian lists difficulties with contractors and suppliers, pointing out details and finishes which caused problems or had to be redone. It is here one sees the dedication and exhaustive passion behind Heathfield Hall, and the strict adherence to a personal vision which simply could not be trusted to 'professionals' whose rules and techniques appear to fall considerably short in this instance. Astonishingly despite the blood sweat and tears, Brian and Elizabeth say they would gladly sell the Hall if offered, enabling them to build another equally eccentric fairytale home.

I'll be honest in saying that I did not expect to like Heathfield Hall. The idea of a new-build posing as a medieval gothic mansion goes against a lot of what I learned in architecture school. This fear dissolved the moment I stepped through the front door. Simply walking about the Hall is exhilarating, and there are so many sinisterly plush rooms and finely detailed corners where I would love to simply sit and drink in my surroundings (perhaps with a goblet of mead).

Heathfield Hall shows that there is a big difference between Disney-esque theming and the realisation of a vision in the creation of a place with a true heart and soul. There's a lesson for architect's here, perhaps 'the rules' just don't cut it.