

The secret gardens

ANY serious Irish gardener should have visited the renowned gardens at Fota House. Many an intrepid plant fiend has whiled away hours among the fine collection of rare and exotic trees and shrubs, marvelling at the sensitivity and foresight of the exquisite landscaping.

Yet few would have suspected what lay behind a nondescript door in the walled garden to the rear of the main house. Inside yet another walled garden was a complex of glasshouses, a classic example of an Edwardian frameyard.

With heated hothouses alongside cold 'frames', many of the more exotic plants in Fota would have begun there as seedlings or cuttings. Until recently, access to that inner sanctum would have revealed an impenetrable tangle of brambles, climbers and creepers, snaking around the timber frames preventing their collapse.

Restoration began a year ago, but the transformation has been remarkable. Many of the original timbers were salvaged after being dried in an onsite kiln; the restoration, carried out by specialists, Cornerstone Construction, overseen by conservation architect, John O'Connell, endeavoured to recycle and reuse every item worth saving. The bothy (worksheds) in one corner have been spruced up and the glasshouses re-glassed and repainted. But along with the reconstruction, the 'ghosts' of Fota past have also been resurrected, in particular that of a young man killed in the 'Great War,' in 1917, John Charles 'Charlie' Beswick, son of the head gardener, William Beswick.

This phase of the restoration — not just the frameyard but a huge makeover for the big house itself — was carried out under the auspices of the Irish Heritage Trust, who acquired Fota in 2007. Kevin Baird, a former conservation architect, is CEO of the IHT.

He cheerfully admits to having surrendered financial security to take the job but his reward is obvious: during a tour of the frameyard and the main house, itemising improvements or pointing out attractive features, such is his pleasure it

Can't make it to Dublin for Bloom? Then take a tour of Fota's renovated gardens, says **Joe McNamee**

might well be his own home.

But the IHT are not simply in the museum business — Baird says if the IHT assumed responsibility for the rest of the main gardens, currently under the charge of the Office of Public Works, he would change 'don't walk on the grass' signs to open invitations to amble all day across the great, rolling lawns.

The innovative Fota Learning Zone, a digital resource hosting a curriculum-linked programme for transition-year and Leaving Certificate students, will incorporate the renovated frameyards and a plant-hunter trail featuring the great 19th century botanical explorers who brought back rare trees to Fota's arboretum.

The glasshouses were replanted by volunteers initially under the watchful eye of historical-restoration gardener Finola Reid; on the day we first visited, she was establishing a plan of planting as it would have been in Beswick's day, and that is now well under way.

Englishman Keith Hendon's mother had been the Beswick's housekeeper for many years after they returned to England, upon



Left, Kevin Baird, CEO of the Irish Heritage Trust at the glasshouses at Fota during their renovation; above, Charlie Beswick, son of Fota head gardener William Beswick, was killed in the First World War; below, the glasshouses in full bloom. Pictures: Dan Linnhan, Denis Minihane



William's retirement. After her death, Hendon found among her papers a box marked 'Fota'. The Englishman had never visited Ire-

land and had no Irish relatives, but alone heard of Fota, but an Irish acquaintance apprised him of Fota's historical significance.

Plant yourself down for the weekend

Last year, 90,000 people visited the Phoenix Park for Ireland's premier garden show. This year, it runs for five days around the June bank holiday weekend (Thursday, May 31 to Monday, Jun 4). For Irish gardeners, this is the event of the year.

The organisers realise that gardening is hugely popular but might not be for the whole family, so there are alternatives on the 70-acre site, including live entertainment and a kids' zone (kids get into Bloom free!) and cookery and craft demos, a huge market of Ireland's top producers and cooked food.

The Federation of Irish Beekeepers, Tree Council of Ireland, Birdwatch Ireland and the Irish Wildlife Trust have stands and Ireland's first competition for professional tree climbers will be held.

But it's ultimately about the gar-

dens: alongside 40 of the country's top nurseries retailing a huge array of prize-winning plants (including the rare, unusual and exotic) there are demos and information stands. There's a 'plant creche' where you can deposit your purchases for later collection.

Most popular are the display gardens, commissioned for the week. There are too many to list but look out for Ronan Mac Diarmada's Starberry Paradise, where the blueberry bush is central to a concept of edible garden architecture; and Fiann Ó Nualláin's Stream of Consciousness, which reimagines the story of Fionn mac Cumhaill and the salmon of knowledge. The NCBI Sensory Garden is a sensory paradise, in particular for those who are blind or vision-impaired.

■ bloominthepark.com

A photo album, containing many pictures of rare plants in Fota, is believed to have been photographed and mounted by Charlie Beswick. Hendon donated the album, along with Charlie's schoolbooks and some cards and letters, building gradually on the initial, sketchy picture of the Beswicks.

"There would have been fierce competition amongst the wealthy landowners to have the best gardens, the finest, most exotic plants," says Baird. "And a frameyard would have been a great source of competition, the equivalent of a Ferrari or a Porsche. And when they visited each other, they wouldn't have been above a quiet word in the ear of a rival's head gardener, trying to poach him, as it were."

Among the enticements would have been accommodation; the head gardener's house at Fota is a fine house, big enough for Dorothy Bell (last in line of the Smith-Barry family, Fota's owners) to move into when the main house became too damp and cold.

Beswick may have worked elsewhere in Cork before coming to Fota; certainly, Charlie, his youngest son, was born and raised in Cork, attending St Luke's school in the city, eventually becoming head boy.

He studied botany in Kew Gardens in London before enlisting with the King's Own Lancashire Regiment, his two older brothers, William Jr and Arthur, already in service.

Among the letters home from the front is the last one Charlie sent as he was about to lead his platoon into action. "With God's help [I] shall return safely," he wrote, in a more hurried version of the script of his childhood schoolbooks. "... if not, I shall do my duty to the best of my ability."

Trying to drag a wounded comrade to safety, he was shot and died in a German field hospital in 1917. "Charlie's story brings home the human element to the 'big house' story," says Evelyn Byrne of the IHT.

"People assume all these people would have been utterly disconnected from the lives of the Irish, but Charlie was probably born in Cork, spent most of his life there. He seemed a gentle, artistic type and he would have definitely have spoken with a Cork 'twang'."

■ *Aspects of Fota: Stories from the Garden*, by Jennifer McCrea and Laura Murtagh, are available from Fota House