



Architectural History at Castletown House

Georgian Architecture Guide

Castletown House was built between 1722 and 1729 in the Palladian style by a man named William Conolly. William was from Co. Donegal. He came from relatively humble beginnings to become the wealthiest and politically most powerful man in Ireland.



Figure 1 William Conolly, portrait by Stephen Catterson Smith the Elder

William trained as a lawyer and acquired significant wealth through landownership. It is estimated that at his death, he had approximately 150,000 acres of land across his estates in Ireland and Wales.

He was also a Lord Justice and was appointed Speaker of the Irish House of Commons in 1715, a post he held until shortly before his death in 1729.

William and his wife, Katherine had a house on Capel Street in Dublin and another close to Kilcock. However, William wanted to build a new house which would exemplify his new wealth and political importance. He was likely influenced in this by Robert Walpole, the English Prime Minister who was building Houghton Hall in Norfolk around the same time.

William employed two architects in the design of his house. The first was Alessandro Galilei, an Italian architect who had been brought to Ireland by Robert Molesworth. Galilei was responsible for the design of the church of San Giovanni in Rome, seen in the background of this painting of him by Giuseppe Berti in Castletown's Entrance Hall.



Figure 2 Alessandro Galilei portrait by Giuseppe Berti

Galilei returned to Italy in 1719 and did not supervise the building of Castletown. The build was taken over by Edward Lovett Pearce on his return from Italy in 1724 and it is believed that he designed the Entrance Hall, colonnades and wings. He also designed the Long Gallery at that time but all that remains of his work there is the ceiling as Lady Louisa redesigned the space in the 1770s.

The house as you see it today follows three distinct design periods: the initial house built in the 1720s, the changes made by Tom and Louisa Conolly in the 1760s and 1770s and some decorative changes made by Tom Conolly II in the 19th century.

William Conolly died in 1729 and Katherine in 1752. When Katherine died, the house was inherited by William's nephew also called William. He died two short years later, in 1754 and the house went to his son Thomas. Thomas married, in 1759 Lady Louisa Lennox and they embarked on the next phase of Castletown's design. Louisa was the great-granddaughter of Charles II of England and had grown up first at Goodwood in Sussex. When her parents died, she and her younger sister Sarah were sent to be raised by their sister Emily, Duchess of Leinster at Carton House.

Louisa and Tom completed the interior works in the house. They created the Dining Room from what had been two rooms of a bedroom apartment by removing the central wall. They redecorated the two drawing rooms at the back of the ground floor and made modifications to the Long Gallery.

The façade:



Figure 3 Castletown House

The house takes the form of a three storey central block, the main block is clad in silver Edenderry limestone flanked by curved Ionic colonnades which lead to service wings. The service wings are clad in a cheaper local stone named kelp. Using these two types of stone indicated the use of the building behind it, the family lived in the main block (expensive limestone) and the service areas were in the wings (cheap kelp). The East wing housed the stables and the West Wing housed the kitchens.



Figure 4 Ionic Colonnades

This visual representation of the buildings use is also evident in the basement level of the main house, another service area, which was also clad in kelp.

The original form of the house was completely symmetrical, the chimneys on the East (stable) wing having been altered in the later 19th century when changes were made to the 1st floor rooms of that wing.

It is 13 bays wide on the main block, with seven on each wing. The windows at the front of the house, originally nine panes over six were identical on the ground and 1st floors until the 1760s, when Lady Louisa lengthened the ground floor windows to nine panes over nine in order to improve the views of the landscape from the house.

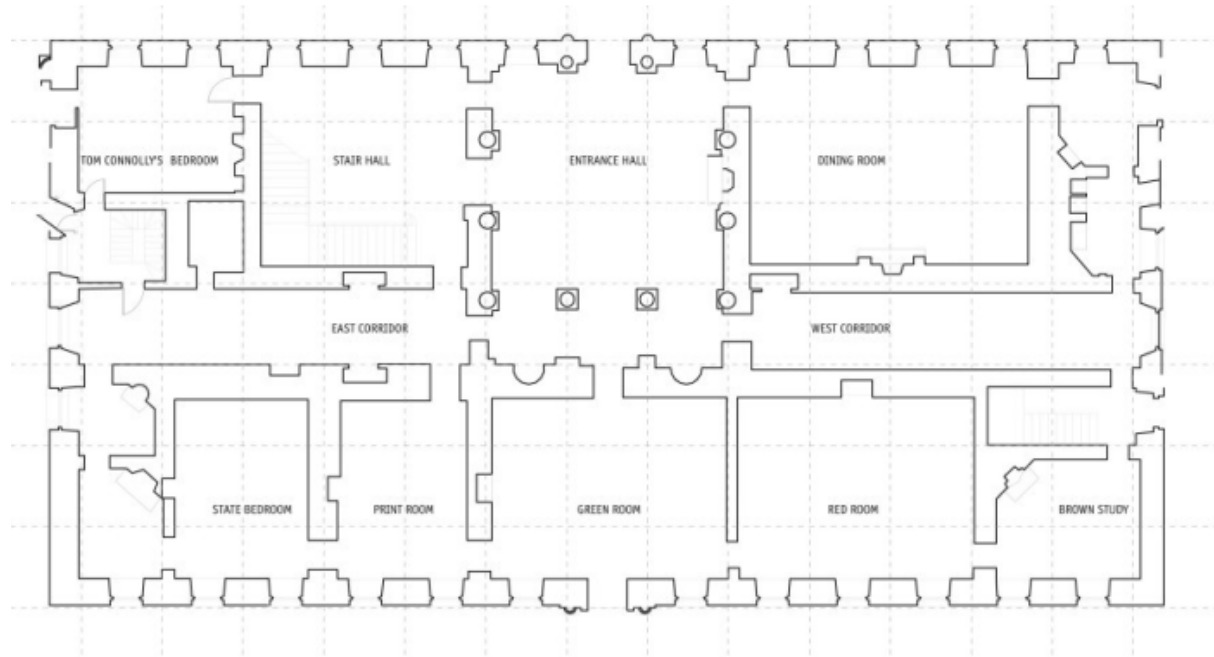


Figure 5 Ground Floor Layout

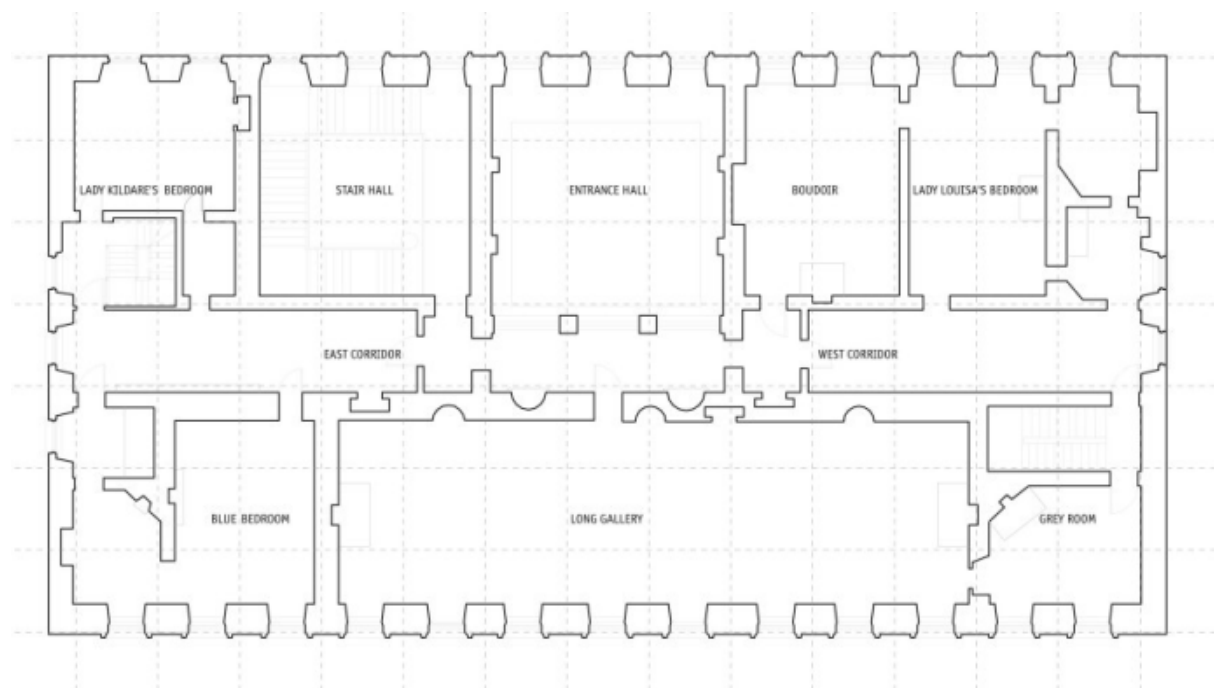


Figure 6 1st Floor Layout

The Entrance Hall:

Believed to have been designed by Edward Lovett Pearce around 1725, the Entrance Hall forms a 30ft (9m) cube, and the lofty, double height space gives visitors an immediate impression of grandeur and wealth. The Ionic columns here match those of the colonnades and draw the eye up to the baskets of fruit and flowers – symbols of prosperity – above the tapering pilasters. The deeply coved ceiling displays a central square moulding incorporating the Greek Key pattern, sometimes considered a symbol of eternity and repeated elsewhere in the house.

Each wall is divided into thirds by the Ionic columns as shown in figure 4.



Figure 7 The South Wall, Entrance Hall, divided in thirds by Ionic columns



Figure 8 Tapering pilasters topped with baskets of fruit and flowers



Figure 9 Entrance Hall Upper Level, 1st floor balcony



Figure 10 Entrance Hall Ceiling



Figure 11 Entrance Hall view from front door, the Staircase Hall visible through the arch

The Staircase Hall



The staircase hall was unfinished when Tom and Louisa arrived at Castletown. They inserted the staircase and had the opulent Rococo decoration done on the walls.

The staircase was installed by Simon Vierpyl, who acted as master builder to architect William Chambers for his projects in Ireland. The brass balustrade is the work of Anthony King, who signed and dated them in three places.



The rococo plasterwork is by Filippo Lafranchini, the Swiss – Italian stuccodore and features portraits of Tom and Louisa above the first flight of stairs.



Figure 12 Stucco portrait of Tom Conolly



Figure 13 Stucco portrait of Louisa Conolly

Also depicted in the stucco work are the four seasons:



Figure 14 Spring



Figure 15 Summer



Figure 16 Autumn



Figure 17 Winter

Also depicted is Vesta, the Ancient Roman goddess of the hearth



Figure 18 Vesta



Figure 19 Staircase Hall Ceiling



Figure 20 Staircase Hall, Upper level

The Dining Room



Figure 21 Dining Room

The Dining Room was created in the 1760s from two rooms which formed part of a bedroom apartment. The design owes much to advice received from the Duke of Leinster who was married to Louisa's sister Emily. The ceiling is very similar to one designed by Isaac Ware for the Duke's townhouse in Dublin, Leinster House.

Symmetry is evident in this room with the creation of two 'false' doors at the back (North Wall) of the room, one leading to a cupboard and the other being entirely false.



Figure 22 Dining Room, Door behind costumes (on the right) false to balance symmetry of door to Butler's Pantry (on left of image)

Print Room

The Print Room is the only surviving example of an eighteenth century Print Room in Ireland. It was created by Lady Louisa in the 1760s. These rooms were popular at the time and provided a hobby for the lady of the House. Prints were collected, often of important art works, and were carefully cut out and pasted onto the walls in what could be called a form of scrapbooking. Castletown's Print Room can be seen as a snapshot of popular culture of the time it was created.

Lady Louisa's chosen images were generally based on seventeenth and eighteenth century etchings, created by designers and print makers such as Francois Vivares, Peter Mazell and Jean Charles Delafosse. She used more than 200 prints in the room, cropping the captions from most of them, and decorated them with swags, garlands and frames cut from books intended for that purpose.

The original room was painted a pale yellow and the prints were pasted onto the walls using a paste made from flour and water. In the 19th century, some of the prints had begun to peel at the corners and were re attached with the walls being painted their current ivory colour at that time.

A Print Room in progress was a social space, the lady of the House would have invited friends and family who visited to participate in the decoration of the room.



Figure 23 Print Room

Long Gallery



Figure 24 Long Gallery

The Long Gallery was built as a picture gallery in the 1720s and may have originally been designed by Edward Lovett Pearce. Lady Louisa converted it into a living room, filling it with furniture.

She closed up a doorway which led to a bedroom (to the left of the fireplace in fig 24), closed two other doorways along the South wall and created a new doorway on the same wall.



Figure 25 Long Gallery doors, the door to the right a false door

The niche between the doors contains a late eighteenth century French statue of Diana the Huntress, which is in keeping with the theme of Diana and her twin Apollo in the room's Pompeian decoration. Later additions to the room are four classical busts representing Apollo Belvedere, Pallas Athena, Alexander and Hector.



Figure 26 Lunette above doorways

Above the two doorways is a painted lunette depicting Aurora and Apollo accompanied by the hours of the day. This painting, by an unidentified artist, is after the famous ceiling fresco at Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi in Rome by Guido Reni.

Six friezes by Charles Reuben Ryley can be seen over the mirrors and portraits depicting mythological subjects and the themes of marriage and childbirth.

She painted Edward Lovett Pearce's ceiling red, blue and gold and had decoration in the Pompeiian style added to the walls. These classically themed paintings took inspiration from the revival of interest in antique art brought on by excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum and depicts the nine muses of Apollo on the North walls. The Long Gallery's 'Pompeian' wall decoration is the most extensive example of this fashionable neoclassical style in Ireland.

For more information on Castletown House, see the website www.castletown.ie and if you have any questions, you can contact us by email: castletown@opw.ie



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