

## The History Of Ashtown Demesne and its Restoration

In the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, the lands of Ashtown were granted to the Hospital of St John the Baptist, Dublin by Hugh Tyrrell, first Baron of Castleknock. The Hospital, belonging to the order known as the 'Crutched' Friars (Brothers of the Ross), was one of the earliest city charities.



John Connell, known as John of Ashtown, a distant ancestor of the Liberator, Daniel O'Connell, owned the castle in 1641. At that date the estate consisted of 200 acres. Records show that there were also two thatched cottages and a small orchard on the estate.

James Butler, 12<sup>th</sup> Earl of Ormond was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1662. He developed a Royal Deer Park including Ashtown Castle and its lands. In all, over 800 hectares were originally enclosed which included lands on the southern bank of the river Liffey. With the building of the Royal Hospital at Kilmainham in 1680, lands south of the river were excluded from the deer park, as well as the narrow strip of the parkland next to the river, through which the Chapelizod Road ran.

In 1668 Marcus Trevor Viscount Dungannon, was appointed Ranger to the Phoenix Park. Along with two Keepers, he was responsible for overseeing the Fallow deer imported from England. Ashtown Castle became the residence of one of the Keepers whose duties included preventing the '*spoil and embezzlement of the vert and venison.*'

In the later years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Ashtown Castle was modernised and incorporated into a new building, called Ashtown Lodge. In 1782 this became the first residence to the Under Secretary of Ireland. In 1922, Ashtown Lodge became the first residence to the U.S ambassador. In the early 1930s Ashtown Lodge became the residence of the Papal Nuncio until he vacated in 1978. Extensive restoration works were carried out in early 1990s and it now hosts the Phoenix Park Visitor Centre and the renowned Phoenix Park Café.

### **Restoration of the grounds of Ashtown Demesne**

*'A historic garden is an architectural and horticultural composition of interest of the public from historical or artistic point of view'*

Florence Charter on Historic Gardens

The grounds associated with the demesne include a two and a half acre Victorian Walled Kitchen Garden, Arboretum and parkland all enclosed by a 'Ha-Ha', i.e. a sunken fence which prevented cattle from gaining entry into the demesne but allowed uninterrupted views of the Phoenix Park. Over the winter of 2006/7 dredging and the removal of scrub was undertaken around the 'Ha-Ha' by the Historic Parks & Gardens staff of the OPW.

### **Tree Planting**

Following this work the Arboricultural Unit removed the poor trees on the perimeter plantation around the demesne. During 2008 over 270 new trees were planted throughout the perimeter including Oak, Beech and Evergreen Oak. It is proposed that the understory will be allowed to naturally regenerate and supplemented with planting where necessary. This multi-storey canopy will provide a habitat for numerous mammals and birds. All trees are now inspected for presence of bats prior to any tree surgery works being undertaken.

### **Victorian Walled Kitchen Garden**

The Victorian Walled Kitchen Garden was part of the Demesne of the Under Secretary of Ireland and can be seen in maps from 1838 onwards. The main purpose of the two and a half acre garden was to provide the adjoining Lodge with fresh fruit, vegetables and flowers. In 1854, a Jacob Owen designed glasshouse was added on the northern wall.

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Restoration of the kitchen garden commenced in 2006 and it is hoped to complete the restoration by 2011. The original layout has been restored with a central axis path framed by a double herbaceous border running its entire length. Many traditional and ornamental varieties of vegetables and fruit are planted within the various plots.



There are many features to be seen in the kitchen garden during the year. An array of colour in the herbaceous border sweeps up the central axis changing from cool white, blues and purples into hot reds, yellows and oranges and garden structures such as willow panels, rows of apple espaliers and sweet-pea covered wigwams can be seen when in season.

A rotational system is in place here where the crops are divided into different family groups and each group is rotated on a four year cycle within the garden each year. A wide range of vegetables crops are grown including pumpkins, sugarsnap peas, kale, sweet corn, peas, turnips, swedes, beetroot, lettuce, endives, cabbage, carrots, and courgettes, Fruits such as strawberries, blackcurrants, raspberries, rhubarb, tomatoes, apples, and pears, are cultivated in the garden as well as herbs and flowers like lavender, chives, poppies, irises and carnations.

The original panels have been planted in the style of a Victorian kitchen garden appropriate to the period, including soft fruit, espaliers, vegetables and cut flowers etc. It is hoped that the garden will inspire and educate the public on the horticultural skill involved in the growing of fruit, vegetables and flowers in a sustainable manner and will also be used as an opportunity to demonstrate the growing of crops to school children.

### **Education & Interpretation**

A Lively and entertaining exhibition on the history and wildlife of the Phoenix Park is on display in the Visitor Centre. Here the visitor can enjoy a historical interpretation of the Park from 3,500 B.C. to the present day and also an audio-visual on the Phoenix Park throughout the ages or the history of Áras an Uachtaráin. The staff at the Visitor Centre provide an extensive programme of events throughout the year including an ecology summer camp for five to twelve year olds. The new children's playground beside the walled garden is a must for all parents and kids alike.

### **Meet the Gardeners**

The Gardens are managed by the Historic Parks & Gardens Staff of the **Office of Public Works**. Gardening workshops and talks take place on a regular basis where the public can learn all about the horticultural skills involved in growing fruit, vegetables and herbaceous plants in a sustainable manner, such as '**Meet the Gardeners**' on the second Saturday of each month at 10.30 a.m and learn more about growing your own fruits, vegetables and flowers. Check out [Home - Phoenix Park.ie](http://www.phoenixpark.ie) for further details.

[www.phoenixpark.ie](http://www.phoenixpark.ie)

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