

Press Information

ROOMS WITH A VIEW...

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THE GARDENS AT THE MERRION

The Merrion, Dublin's most luxurious 5-Star hotel opened in October 1997 and features two private, landscaped period gardens, perhaps the hotel's most unusual and distinctive features. They were created by Jim Reynolds, whose own four-acre garden, Butterstream is located 26 miles north west of Dublin in the village of Trim in County Meath. Butterstream, described as "the Hidecote or Sissinghurst of Ireland" was recently visited by HRH The Prince of Wales, following The Prince's special request to see it during an official trip to Ireland.

Jim Reynolds is largely self-taught, through working on Butterstream over the past 25 years. He trained, not in landscape, but as an archaeologist. With a passionate interest in the medieval period, the 17th and 18th centuries, social history and the origins of garden design, Jim brings very pertinent knowledge and individual talent to The Merrion.

The gardens lie at the heart of the hotel, which is made up of four magnificent Georgian townhouses, known as the Main House. A specially commissioned L-shaped Garden Wing meets the existing building and completes the enclosure for the two gardens.

The houses, located in the centre of Dublin, opposite Government Buildings, date from the 1760's and are fine examples of the Irish Georgian architecture for which Dublin is so famous. Jim Reynolds has taken this architecture and the very distinct flavour of fashion and society of Georgian Dublin as his inspiration for the romantic, yet classical gardens.

While the fashion for strict formality in Irish gardens prevailed until the middle of the 18th century, it was gradually replaced in larger gardens, by more informal landscapes in the style of Capability Brown. This new "landskip" style was not at all suited to small enclosed gardens, so the formal layout which had been in vogue continued right into the 19th century as Ordnance Survey maps of the period clearly show.

Sadly no such town gardens exist today in either Ireland or Britain. So, to reconstruct a period garden for The Merrion, Jim Reynolds has relied on evidence supplied by occasional archaeological excavations, as well as references in letters, diaries and contemporary documents.

One of the houses, 24 Upper Merrion Street, which is part of the Main House of the hotel was the home of Lord Mornington, father of the 1st Duke of Wellington. His wife, Lady Mornington, was a keen gardener, and the smaller of the two gardens has been named after her.

“LADY MORNINGTON’S GARDEN”

Lady Mornington’s Garden is purely decorative and not accessible to guests. As such it will always be viewed as an undisturbed space - seen from the walkway linking the Main House to the Garden Wing and from the windows of the former Mornington House.

The garden is treated as a parterre, divided into two parts, with the larger section featuring a small pool and fountain, with a series of geometric beds outlined with box hedges. The fashion for box reached Ireland in the 17th century and prevailed throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly in enclosed spaces such as walled and town gardens.

The box hedge has been planted and clipped to reflect the Vitruvian scroll in stucco which forms a prominent feature in the decoration of the staircase in the house. In the 18th century, the transfer of patterns from the interior of the house to the garden, and especially to box work parterres, was commonplace.

At the end of Lady Mornington’s Garden, opposite the bow window on the ground floor, an 18th century statue forms a focus and creates another dimension of interest.

Along the sides of the two parterres height has been added by planting Fastigiata Irish, or Florence Court Yews - upright evergreens which will be maintained as slender pillars about 10ft high and 2-3ft in diameter. The Irish yew was found in about 1760, just before the four houses forming the Main House of The Merrion were built. The tree became immensely fashionable, reminding those who had taken the Grand Tour of the cypress trees seen in the Renaissance gardens of Italy.

Two fine examples of the common yew have been clipped to an obelisk shape within a wooden trellis. These evergreen obelisks, together with a water feature and classical statuary hark back to Lord Mornington’s garden at Dangan Castle in County Meath, and provide a tangible historic connection in this re-created garden. The Dangan garden, which is well documented, was an absorbing passion for two generations of Lord Mornington’s family, until they moved to England.

“THE GARDEN”

The main garden at The Merrion is known simply as “The Garden.” It is designed to be a haven for guests in every season of the year. Overlooked by Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud it is accessible from the beautiful ground floor Drawing Rooms of the Main House, through French windows onto a large terrace of natural stone. From the outset, Jim Reynolds knew that the design and colour of this half-acre garden must be sympathetic to these magnificent rooms. In keeping with the architecture, The Garden has a formal plan and strict geometric layout of paths and beds - but nonetheless provides a highly scented and profusely colourful oasis.

The terrace is surrounded by large planted beds edged with box hedges, creating a green framework throughout the year. A pathway from the terrace leads under a series of arches supporting roses, honeysuckle and clematis into a larger garden. This is separated from the terrace by low natural stone walls and hidden from it by planting in the terrace beds.

Standing on this pathway, the eye is drawn to the focal point of The Garden, a long central pool or canal, aligned with the arches and the pathway and running away from the Main House.

At the far end of the pool an antique figure spouts water. The floor of the pool is covered with washed stones over which shallow, clear water will be permanently circulated. The sound and

movement of falling water, and the reflection of light on the pebbles, together create a calm and restful atmosphere.

A box-edged, paved path surrounds the pool. A series of semi-circular recesses in the hedge house tables and chairs for guests. A similar set of niches are slightly hidden from view on the other side of the pool, providing a dozen or so enticing, private seating areas. In good weather there will be waiter service in the garden.

Here, as in the terrace area, the paths are edged formally with box, creating a classical and regular appearance. In contrast, the beds are filled with an exuberance of informally arranged herbaceous plants. The aim is to create the impression of being in a rather special private garden, where visitors can stroll around and admire the wide range of plants - from Spring bulbs and mimosa, to lilac, orange blossom and philadelphus later on in the year.

In selecting plants for The Garden, Jim Reynolds has tried to include local species, as well as plants originally raised by Irish nurserymen in the 18th century, or those named after Irish plantsmen. The significant role of Irish gardeners in garden history is also reflected. *Romneya coulteri* - the Californian tree poppy, recalls the Dundalk plant collector who first encountered this plant in the late 1840's. *Acanthus spinosus* 'Lady Moore', a variegated acanthus, is named for the noted gardener Phyllis Moore, wife of a director of the National Botanical Gardens at Glasnevin.

The scheme uses architectural plants, and classical colours such as white, grey and green, as well as subtle blues, pinks and pale yellows. Fragrance is also important in a garden designed to be enjoyed throughout the day. With this in mind, Jim Reynolds has chosen highly scented plants such as nicotiana, mock orange, viburnum, lilac and osmanthus.

In his designs for The Merrion, Jim Reynolds has created a peaceful refuge for guests of the hotel, with the elegance, grace and romance of a classical 18th century garden.

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