

The Evolving Life of Country House Display

A Special day to mark
the Return of Murillo's
Prodigal Son Series to
Russborough

10 APRIL 2025



Russborough

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To celebrate the unique history of Russborough, on the occasion of the 'return home' of the *Prodigal Son* series by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617 – 1682), this study day explores the interplay among houses, collections, and collectors, in a cross-disciplinary attempt to celebrate the richness and diversity of Irish and British country houses.

The historic houses ICOM's sub-committee (DEMHIST) has identified three main elements that characterise historic houses that are open to the public, and that were formerly owned by collectors – as in the case of Russborough. These are: the container (the house), the content (the collection), and the creator (the collector). All three elements are profoundly intertwined; however, over time, their relationship can evolve, interrupt, or re-bond, thus altering and creating new narratives of collecting, display, and afterlife, often at the intersection of the private and the public.

This is certainly the case for Russborough, where two families and their collections in particular, the Milltowns and the Beits, and two important donations to the National Gallery of Ireland at both ends of the 20th century, have impacted the present history of Russborough and shaped the nature of Ireland's national collections. The legacy of these donations is commemorated through the naming of the Milltown and Beit wings at the National Gallery of Ireland, and that of the Alfred Beit Foundation at Russborough.



While Russborough offers a significant case study, country houses across Ireland and Britain equally illustrate the evolving nature of historic interiors and display. The architectural design of these properties, their decorative schemes, and the methodologies used to interpret their contents have developed significantly over time, with ongoing research shedding new light on these complex histories.

Drawing on Anne Higonnet's concept of the 'collection museum', one may view the relationship between houses, their collections, and their former owners as one that transcends the physical displacement of objects. Despite relocation, such collections often continue to evoke the memory of their original settings and custodians, commemorated through names, foundations, or reimagined displays.

This study day will examine continuities and changes in historic display practices and architectural design, with insights drawn from country houses across Ireland and Britain. Speakers will consider the methodologies and sources that inform such research. The day will also offer participants the opportunity to reflect on Russborough itself, the Beits' collecting activities, and their connection to Murillo's Prodigal Son series, which participants will have the opportunity to view in its historic setting.

The Return of the Prodigal Son exhibition, presented in partnership with the National Gallery of Ireland, runs until May 31st.

Study Day Tickets: €60 including lunch and refreshments.
[Click here to book online.](#)

PROGRAMME

09:45–10:15 Registration – Tea/Coffee

10:15–10:30 Welcome & Intro

10:30–11:10 John Goodall (Country Life) – Keynote speech

11:10–11:20 Discussion

Session 1: The Architecture of Display

Chair: Mary Heffernan (Office of Public Works)

11:20–11:40 Alec Cobbe (Alec Cobbe Design)

Inside Matters

11:40–12:00 Frances Bailey (National Trust NI)

Bringing Mount Stewart Back to Life

12:00–12:20 James Rothwell (FSA, National Trust)

Restoring Baroque Pomp and Circumstance: The Beauty Room at Petworth, Sussex

12:20–12:30 Discussion

12:30–13:30 LUNCH & Free Flow Tour of Murillo Display

Session 2: Sources for Studying Collecting & Display

Chair: Dr Audrey Whitty (National Library of Ireland)

13:30–13:50 David Sheehan (Castletown Foundation)

Castletown: 'The Epitome of the Kingdom, and All the Rarities She Can Afford'

13:50–14:10 Prof Adrian Tinniswood (University of Buckingham)

A Madness to Gaze at Trifles

14:10–14:30 Dr Seán O'Reilly (Institute of Historic Building Conservation)

Sociological and Psychological, Artistic and Architectural Aspects of Country House Display and Prospective Impacts for Management

14:30–14:40 Discussion

14:40–15:00 Comfort Break & Free Flow Tour of Murillo Display





**Session 3: Russborough, The Beits, Murillo's Return of the Prodigal Son
Chair: Fionnuala Croke (Chester Beatty)**

15:00–15:20: Dr Aidan O'Boyle (Office of Public Works)

The Reconstruction of an Eighteenth-Century Picture-hang at Russborough

15:20–15:40 Prof John Hilary (University of Nottingham)

The Beit Collection: Murillo's *Prodigal Son* Series in Context

15:40–16:00 Leah Benson and Muirne Lydon (National Gallery of Ireland)

From Russborough to the National Gallery: The Beit Gift and the Conservation of Murillo's *Prodigal Son* Series

16:00–16:20 Discussion & Closing Remarks

16:20 – 17:30 Drinks reception

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES & ABSTRACTS

John Goodall - Keynote Speaker

John Goodall is an award-winning author and Architectural Editor of *Country Life*, responsible for the celebrated articles on country houses that feature in the magazine each week. Previously a researcher and historian at English Heritage (where he was involved in the re-launch of their guidebook series and worked on several flagship exhibitions), he has been involved in various television series on history and architecture.

Alec Cobbe

Alec Cobbe, born in Dublin, studied medicine at Oxford University, where he won a prize for anatomical drawing. After six months of clinical training in London, he chose to pursue a career as an artist. He also trained as a picture restorer at the Tate Gallery and Courtauld Institute of Art. From 1972 to 1981, he worked as a picture restorer at the Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery and the Hamilton Kerr Institute at Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum. Later, he established his own practice. As an artist and designer, Cobbe specialized in historic interiors and picture-hanging schemes for public and private collections. His works have been exhibited internationally, with notable retrospectives at the Victoria and Albert Museum (2013-14) and Dublin Castle (2014-15). His design archive is now held by the Victoria and Albert Museum. His work on interior design and picture hangs includes numerous country houses, such as Dublin Castle, Harewood House, Hatfield House, Hillsborough Castle, Knole, and Petworth House.

Inside Matters

Alec Cobbe will explore his lifetime interest in the dynamic relationship between country house interiors and the paintings they contain. Drawing on his experience as a historic interiors designer, he will focus on four contrasting cases, Petworth House, Harewood House, a privately owned Palladian House, and the Vernet Drawing Room at Russborough.

Frances Bailey

Frances Bailey is Senior National Curator at the National Trust Northern Ireland. She has worked for over 35 years for the National Trust, during which time she has worked on a number of complex conservation and restoration projects, working collaboratively with specialists within the National Trust and external advisers, consultants and conservators. Prior to the National Trust, she worked at the National Gallery of Ireland and then at the Glebe Gallery, Co Donegal, where she had her first experience of re-presenting a historic house and collection for public access. From 2011 to 2015 Bailey was Project Curator for the restoration of Mount Stewart, Co Down.

Mount Stewart: Bringing Mount Stewart Back to Life

In 2009 Mount Stewart was in a bad state. In need of structural repairs, complete re-servicing, with a leaking roof, tired interiors and a generally shabby feel, it did not inspire people to visit and certainly not to return. Added to that, the death of the resident donor, Lady Mairi Bury, triggered the settlement of her estate, which included the majority of the contents of Mount Stewart house. What might be the outcome? What would the future hold? The following years saw the transformation of Mount Stewart through extensive redecoration and re-presentation, acquisitions and loans-in. Frances Bailey's talk will explain the context, the research, the challenges, and the philosophy applied to the restoration of this great house.

David Sheehan

David Sheehan is Chair of the Castletown Foundation, a leading conservation architect, and a partner in Sheehan & Barry Architects. His architectural knowledge, practical experience and aesthetic sensibilities have benefited many of Ireland's private and public Country Houses, including Castletown, Russborough, and Newman House.

Castletown: 'The Epitome of the Kingdom, and All the Rarities She Can Afford'

David Sheehan's paper will examine the valuable role of archival sources in informing decisions about Castletown's interiors and collections. Drawing on a range of historical materials—including inventories, sales catalogues, period photographs, and correspondence—he will explore how these sources provide insights into Castletown's original decorative schemes and furnishings. David's presentation will also consider how this archival research informs acquisition decisions, ensuring that additions to the collection align with Castletown's historical character and decorative traditions. This presentation will emphasise the significance of archival research in enhancing our understanding of historic interiors, reinforcing their authenticity, and guiding their ongoing preservation.

Prof Adrian Tinniswood

Adrian Tinniswood, OBE, FSA, is Professor of British Cultural History at the University of Buckingham. He has worked with British heritage organisations including the National Trust and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and has lectured extensively in Britain and America. He is the author of nineteen books on social and architectural history, including *The Power and the Glory: The Country House Before the Great War*; *The Long Weekend: Life in the English Country House Between the Wars*, a *New York Times* and *Sunday Times* bestseller; *Noble Ambitions: The Fall and Rise of the Post-War Country House*; and *His Invention So Fertile: A Life of Christopher Wren*. His first book was *A History of Country House Visiting*. Tinniswood is also Adjunct Professor of History at Maynooth University. He and his wife Helen live in the west of Ireland.

A Madness to Gaze at Trifles

At several points over the past 500 years a distinct branch of travel writing rose to prominence. At the end of the 16th century, there was a fashion among aristocratic visitors from the protestant states of northern Europe to conduct a grand tour of England – and to record their impressions of the royal palaces and prodigy houses they visited on their travels. And again in the later 18th century, as a vogue for making summer excursions gained ground and the polite tourist saw country house visiting as a way of honing his or her aesthetic judgements, dozens of published and unpublished accounts of visits to country houses appeared. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the notion that the country house represented stability and continuity in a rapidly changing world gave added impetus to country house tourism while helping to perpetuate a comforting yet fictitious image of the past. These first-hand accounts of country house visiting have an obvious value for historians today, in that they can shed light on picture hangs and provenance, on attributions and mis-attributions. They also provide insights into the practical side of country house visiting, as a largely informal host-guest relationship gave way to the formal mechanisms of tickets and guidebooks and fixed opening times. But in this paper, Adrian Tinniswood will argue that by far the greater value of this sub-genre of travel writing is in what it reveals about the knowledge, tastes, and prejudice of polite tourists and, perhaps most importantly of all, in the way those tourists helped to establish the idea of heritage as something belonging to all of us.

Dr Sean O'Reilly

Seán O'Reilly is Director of The Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC: www.ihbc.org.uk), the UK's professional body for built and historic environment conservation practitioners, where he helps shape professional conservation practice and standards, training, and services in the UK and beyond. He also writes extensively on conservation, heritage, and planning. An architectural historian with a Masters in Urban and Regional Planning, he has worked in private and NGO sectors and at universities and holds Fellowships with the Institute of Leadership and the Royal Society of Arts. Previous roles include Director at The Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland (AHSS) and, as a volunteer, co-founder, and first treasurer at Built Environment Forum Scotland (BEFS). As first editor, he helped lead the renewed Irish Georgian Society Journal, Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies and has held various roles at the Irish Architectural Archive. Recent voluntary roles included those with the Crafts Study Center and ICOMOS-UK.

Sociological and Psychological, Artistic and Architectural Aspects of Country House Display and Prospective Impacts for Management

A select and summary review of estate history, development, management, and conservation suggests that there may be new dimensions, opportunities, and challenges to add to the curatorial considerations in the care, display, interpretation, and development of house collections. If so, Seán O'Reilly's paper will explore how the skills that the curatorial role and practice entail might be usefully reviewed.

Dr Aidan O'Boyle

Aidan O'Boyle works for the National Historic Properties section of the Office of Public Works. He completed his PhD thesis on the history of art collections in Ireland at Trinity College Dublin in 2011, and he intends to publish his work on the subject in the future. He is currently researching the art collection of the Earls of Portarlington at Emo Court, Co Laois.

The Reconstruction of an Eighteenth-Century Picture-hang at Russborough.

The Milltown Collection holds a unique place in the history of Irish art collections. Prior to its donation to the National Gallery of Ireland in 1902, the collection was displayed at Russborough when it was home to the Milltown family. Aidan O'Boyle's paper will explore the original display at Russborough, shedding light on how the Milltown family presented their collection as a reflection of their cultural sophistication, social standing, and aesthetic preferences. To provide a broader context, he will compare the display of the Milltown Collection at Russborough with presentation of the Wicklow Collection at Shelton Abbey. This comparative approach will highlight the shared strategies and distinctive elements that defined domestic art displays in Ireland's grand residences during the period.

He will also discuss the motivations and circumstances behind the donation of the collection by Lady Geraldine Milltown to the National Gallery of Ireland, reflecting on how this act of philanthropy uniquely safeguarded an Irish Grand Tour collection.

Prof John Hilary

John Hilary is an Honorary Professor in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham, and the author of *From Refugees to Royalty: The Remarkable Story of the Messel Family of Nymans* (Peter Owen, 2021). The history of the Beit collection forms a dedicated chapter in his forthcoming book, *Magnates and Masterpieces: The German-Jewish Collectors of Edwardian Britain* (Yale University Press, 2025).

The Beit Collection: Murillo's Prodigal Son Series in Context

The Beit collection of fine and decorative art was hailed as one of the premier private collections of Edwardian Britain. Originally formed by the German-Jewish mining magnate Alfred Beit with support from Wilhelm Bode and other museum directors, the wide-ranging collection was subsequently inherited by Alfred's brother Otto, who not only expanded its holdings with major new acquisitions but also recorded its full extent in a set of scholarly catalogues commissioned from leading experts in each field. Much of the collection was passed down to Otto's son Sir Alfred Beit, who sold off numerous pieces at auction before bringing the remaining treasures to Russborough when he and Lady Beit purchased the house in 1952. The six paintings that make up Murillo's *Prodigal Son* cycle had been emblematic of the Beit collection ever since they were bought from the Earl of Dudley in 1896. The canvases were always understood as a unitary sequence, and their importance was reaffirmed in each generation by the special attention given to their display. More than this, the presence of such a powerful group of works influenced the development of the broader Beit collection, so that several subsequent acquisitions can be understood through their relationship with the Murillo series. The religious content and sentimental style of the *Prodigal Son* cycle did not appeal to every critic; yet the significance of the paintings for the appreciation of Spanish art in Britain and Ireland has never been doubted.

Leah Benson /Muirne Lydon

Leah Benson is the National Gallery of Ireland's Archivist. Educated in University College Dublin, she has over 20 years of experience as a professional archivist working in the museum and cultural sector. As the Archivist for the National Gallery of Ireland she works to ensure that all holdings of the archive collections throughout the Gallery are preserved, protected, and accessible, as well as accurately reflecting the institution and the gallery's own art collection. She has a particular interest in archives relating to both Irish and Italian art as well as the utilisation of technology to assist with making the collections accessible. She lectures on these areas as part of the gallery's public programmes as well as at national and international conferences and events.

Muirne Lydon is a conservator at the National Gallery of Ireland. She joined the Paintings conservation team at the gallery in 2008 and has been an accredited member of the Irish Conservators and Restorers Association since 2010. An alumnus of TU Dublin and Northumbria University, Lydon has held positions at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, University of Cambridge, Tate Britain, and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Lydon's role at NGI combines a strong and vital presence in the conservation studio with strategic input at collection division level. This includes extensive collaborations across all conservation specialisms and working closely with colleagues in the curatorial, exhibition, education, and library and archive departments.

From Russborough to the National Gallery: The Beit Gift and the Conservation of Murillo's Prodigal Son Series

The Beit Gift to the National Gallery of Ireland, donated in 1987 by Sir Alfred and Clementine Beit, stands as one of the most significant contributions to the institution's collection. This landmark gift of 17 masterpieces significantly enriched the Gallery's holdings, both in terms of artistic merit and historical importance. Among the works included in the Beit Gift was Murillo's *Prodigal Son* series, which maintained an enduring connection to Russborough, where it was displayed for six months each year until this tradition was discontinued in 2002.

Leah Benson will explore the broader context of the Beit Gift, examining its origins, the motivations behind this remarkable donation, and its impact on the National Gallery of Ireland's collection. Her presentation will also address the Murillo series within this framework, considering the significance of its annual return to Russborough in reinforcing the Beit family's legacy and the continuing cultural relationship between the Gallery and the Alfred Beit Foundation.

Muirne Lydon will discuss the conservation of the *Prodigal Son* series, including the findings of the research and technical analysis undertaken, along with treatments to ensure their long-term preservation. This dual perspective offers insights into the Beit Gift's lasting influence on Irish cultural heritage, the stewardship of its treasures, and the ongoing care necessary to safeguard these works for future generations.

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