

PLAUDITS for IRISH FLY-FISHING & GAME SHOOTING MUSEUM

By John Bourke

To many it comes as no surprise, but to those who have been fortunate enough to visit the 'Irish Fly-Fishing & Game Shooting Museum in Attanagh in Co. Laois, the latest in a long line of accolades is welcome recognition for a thoroughly deserving and exceptional project. But in case you may not be fully aware, this unique venture, the brainchild of Mr. Walter Phelan, has recently been lauded in no less hallowed establishment than the House of Lords in London.

More about awards anon, but when it comes to the Irish Fly-Fishing & Game Shooting Museum one hardly knows where to start. For those with an interest in the many aspects of country sports in Ireland, and throughout the British Isles however, this museum is simply a must see and my advice is, if you have not already done so, get down there as soon as possible. Nestling in a distinctly rural setting two miles off the Durrow/Kilkenny road, one finds the quaint little hamlet of Attanagh.



Here, unbeknownst to the casual observer, is housed one of the most important collections of country sports memorabilia in the whole of Europe if not the entire world. Paris may have its Museums, Milan its Art Galleries, Venice its canals but what the prospective visitor to this museum finds, is page upon page of a proud history and identity from an age long gone in Ireland.



To begin with, this museum houses ten rooms of predominantly Irish exhibits from the arena of shooting, fishing and trapping. *But what makes Irish field sports memorabilia so special you may well ask?*

Well for starters, in global terms, Ireland has always been a relatively small market place for the shooting and fishing trade. However, most of the goods produced here in times gone by were not destined for use in Irish hands but those of the aristocracy and well to do.

For example, guns made by John Rigby of Dublin were used by the Shah of Persia and Tsar Nicholas II. Rods by Enright of Castleconnell in Limerick were also used by the aforementioned as well as by members of the British Royal family. Don't forget too, that at that time Ireland was part of a vast British Empire of which Dublin was considered 'the second city'.

But everything they say goes in cycles and consequently, firms and individuals who turned out world class hand-made goods during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, found it increasingly difficult to survive as the era of industrial mass production kicked in...

The result of this was that many of the products so lovingly created during this period became obsolete as newer and more technologically advanced items came on stream. Less fashionable items of tackle were then unceremoniously discarded in favour of more up to date versions and sadly, they were destined never to be used again. For years, valuable items lay dormant in attics, lofts and drawers, until a twentieth - century fuelled upsurge in interest and activity rekindled demand once more.



Suddenly, it seemed, everyone wanted a piece of the action as Irish sporting antiquity became flavour of the month which of course brought a corresponding escalation in price. Many items were sold in auction houses all over the country and simply disappeared forever from their land of origin. Today, thanks to the internet, the problem has been exacerbated even more and if anything, has led to an escalation of activity. Something needed to be done if all was not to be lost.

Into the breach over thirty years ago, stepped a visionary young man named Walter Phelan who decided to stem the flow. At his own expense, he decided to compete with the moguls of the antiques world and go it alone. To achieve this was never going to be easy but then again, as he himself says "if it was easy everyone would be doing it". He began by sourcing material from auction houses, car boot sales and the like, and by degrees, he built up a small collection which grew slowly but surely as the first few years progressed. In addition to this, he was also able to call upon a host of valuable contacts built over the years from both inside and outside the trade who notified him if something interesting came along. Soon, Walter was alerted when one of these spotters unearthed something suitable or special. Needless to state, nothing of any consequence ever came cheap but such was Walter's passion and enthusiasm that rarely if ever, was an opportunity spurned if at all possible. As the word spread, he also began to receive many donations from various concerned individuals anxious that their precious artefacts, sometimes passed down through the generations, might be preserved for posterity



Mr. Walter Phelan

What started as a mere trickle soon became a steady stream as the collection grew and grew...

Such has been the success of the project that today, as already stated, the museum encompasses ten rooms of absolutely absorbing exhibits and material.

Early this year Walter was approached by Countryside Alliance Ireland who were who were anxious that the museum be nominated in the 'Rural Enterprise' category to represent Ireland for the 2012 awards.

This year, for the very first time, these awards were opened to entrants from the Republic of Ireland. Following a successful passage through the Irish heats, where the museum emerged as winner, having been chosen by UK based C.A. Judges; the scene was set for the very prestigious finals held annually in the House of Lords. On March 7th all roads led to London where the winners were set to be announced at a prestigious function hosted by Baroness Goulding in the Cholmondeley Room in the House of Lords. Although very highly commended by the final judging panel, on this occasion, the Irish fly Fishing & Game shooting Museum had to settle for the minor place. As the curtain came down on what was a delightful odyssey and a very creditable performance, for another while at least, time to ponder just what might have been.