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State Must play to Crowd on Renting or Face the Consequences

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JANE POWERS GARDENS



An avenue of towering redwoods dwarfs the squat neoclassical Emo Court in Co Laois, where more spectacular trees can be found in its parkland

The house at Emo Court, in Co Laois, is not a thing of beauty. The neoclassical building squats like a heavy grey bulldog, all low-slung brawn and self-importance. It is one of the few private residences designed by James Gandon, better known for his Dublin landmarks, including the Custom House, the Four Courts and the King's Inns. It was commissioned in 1790 by John Dawson, the 1st Earl of Portarlington, but he never saw it completed. He died of pneumonia after serving in Mayo during the 1798 rebellion. The house was not finished until 80 years later, during the time of the 3rd Earl.

The awkwardness of the building is emphasised by the route from which the visitor approaches today. You see it first as you drive towards the car park. It is side-ways-on — a solid grey mass sitting sulkily on an apron of gravel and surrounded by lawns. There is nothing to frame its lofty pillars and broad dome, or to give context to its weighty superiority.

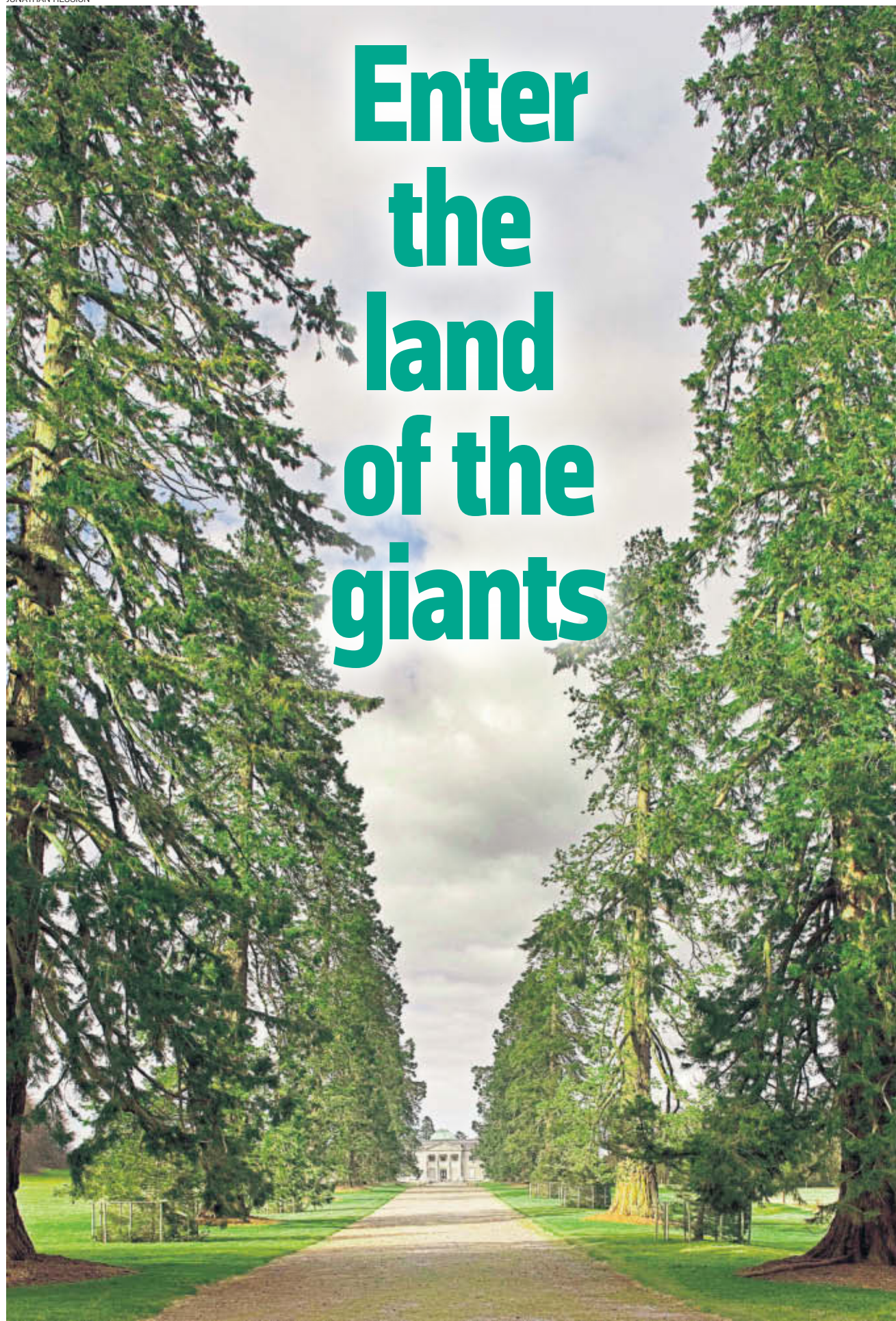
Yet, its original approach could not have been grander or more appropriate. Visitors entered Emo's demesne via a mile-long avenue of giant redwoods (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*), planted in the middle of the 19th century by the 3rd Earl. The way curves through the landscape so that glimpses of the monumental building appear repeatedly through the trees, becoming ever closer and more consequential with each sighting. This arrival is an event in itself, a dramatic piece of landscape theatre. The final act is where the avenue straightens and shoots true as an arrow to the porticoed front.

You see its ostentatious and majestic form flanked by redwoods, the largest living species on Earth. That is the way this house was meant to be revealed. Today's entrance robs it of its dignity: you suddenly ambush it from the side, which feels a bit like surprising the Pope in his underpants.

You can still experience the thrill of the old entrance if you make a right-hand turn through the woods on your way to the public car park. This will eventually take you to the remnants of the avenue of giant trees. Drive (or walk) away from the house as far as you can, and you will see the building on its gentle rise, framed between sequoias and massive lime trees. It's worth the detour.

Before we leave the avenue, the longest run of giant sequoias in Ireland, it is worth considering their provenance. The first seeds and seedlings of the species were sent back to Britain and Ireland in 1853 by plant hunter William Lobb, who worked for the celebrated British nursery, Veitch. He made his collections in the Sierra Nevada, in California, where the grove of recently discovered mammoth conifers was a sensation. Lobb reported that one tree, that had been recently felled, was more than 3,000 years old, and was 300ft tall with a 29ft girth. A cross-section of "this vegetable monster" was on show in

JONATHAN HESSION



Enter the land of the giants

San Francisco, and was so spacious that there was room inside it for a piano and an audience of 40 people.

This heretofore unknown species required a name, and John Lindley, of the then Horticultural Society in London, rushed to register it as *Wellingtonia gigantea*, after the 1st Duke of Wellington, who had died the previous year. This was much to the annoyance of American scientists, who had planned to name it *Washingtonia*, after their first president. In fact, it transpired in time that the epithet *Wellingtonia* already belonged to another genus, so it became *Sequoiadendron*. The name *Wellingtonia*, however, is still often used on this side of the Atlantic.

The big tree was an instant hit among landowners in Britain and Ireland, and thousands were planted in the decade after its introduction. Emo Court's avenue, which has been restored near the house, but which is in dire need of care for the rest of its length, is a poignant reminder of this period.

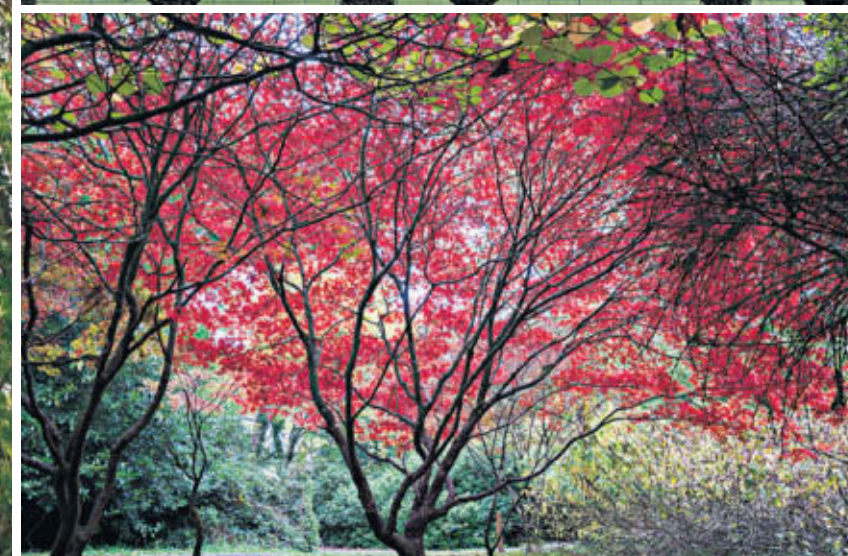
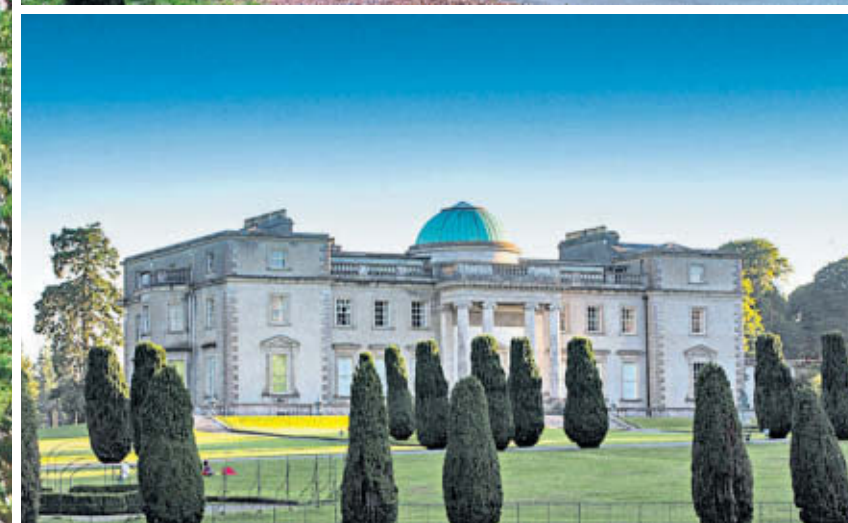
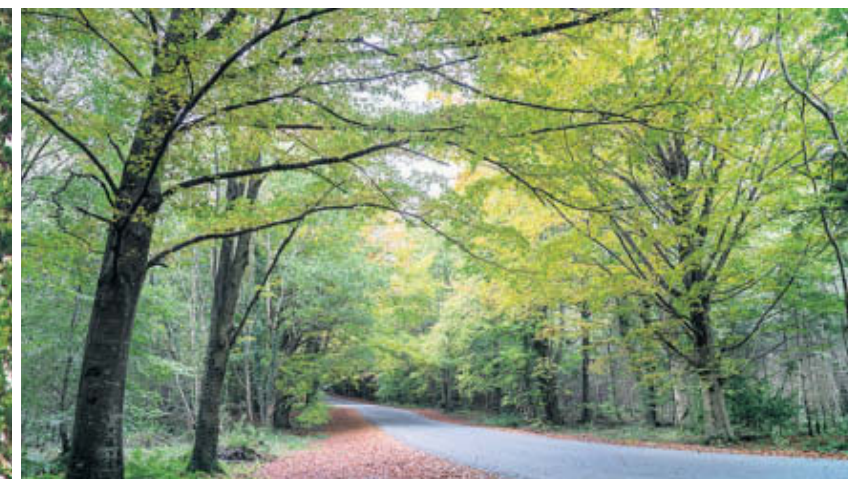
After the First World War, the earls of Portarlington left Emo; by 1920 the contents had been auctioned off and the house closed up. The Land Commission acquired the vast property, distributing most of the land to local farmers. In 1930, it sold the house and the remaining land (about 250 acres) to the Jesuit order. The Dublin architect Michael Scott, who had been retained by the Jesuits, recommended

pulling down the building, which was infected with dry rot. Fortunately, they ignored his advice.

The next owner was Major Cholmeley Dering Cholmeley-Harrison, a London stockbroker, who bought the property in 1969 for IRE42,000 (€53,000). He spared no expense in restoring the building and in refurbishing the demesne. He donated Emo Court to the Irish state in 1994, staying on in private apartments in the house until his death in 2008. Now, Emo is run by a small but dedicated band of Office

of Public Works staff — and the interior of the house is a splendid tribute to Cholmeley-Harrison. Father Frank Browne, the Jesuit photographer, was a former resident, and there is a permanent exhibition of his work and effects.

This Co Laois estate is well used by locals, but is not much visited by those from further afield, which is a pity. There is not much garden to speak of, but the trees that inhabit the parkland are spectacular. Besides the stately procession of *Wellingtonias*, there are ancient limes,



Remnants of the redwood avenue, left; from top, a beech wood, the neoclassical building, a fiery Japanese maple, the camera of Father Browne, and a statue representing autumn

oaks, English yews and Spanish chestnuts. Later additions include fiery Japanese maples; melancholy, droopy Kashmir cypress; shiny-barked Tibetan cherry; and many other beautiful specimens. A sextet of shapely deodar cedars is gathered behind the house, while the whole lot is guarded by parades of slightly bloated but soldierly Irish yews. Now is the time to visit, during the best Irish autumn in decades.

The gardens at Emo are open from 8.30am to 4.30pm at present.

heritageireland.ie

Grow for it

Watch the birdie

Last winter's Garden Bird Survey (December to February), run by BirdWatch Ireland, found the robin was Ireland's most widespread garden bird, appearing in 99.8% of gardens surveyed. The other top 10 birds were (in order) blackbird, blue tit, chaffinch, great tit, coal tit, magpie, goldfinch, greenfinch and house sparrow. Ireland's most successful avian predator, the sparrowhawk, was seen in 40% of gardens, while the red kite, reintroduced here in 2007, was recorded in 2%. To take part in this year's survey (starting next month), register at birdwatchireland.ie.



Jane digs . . .

1001 Plants You Must Grow Before You Die, edited by Liz Dobbs (Cassell Illustrated, €22.40) — 39 inveterate plant lovers choose their must-have plants for every situation.

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State must play to crowd on renting or face the consequences

In 1895, the French polymath Gustave Le Bon published his seminal work, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, on the behaviour and danger of crowds. For decades after, Le Bon's theories influenced generations of politicians and their policies.

Le Bon was influential at a time of rapid urbanisation, social upheaval and worker organisation. Social order was under threat and it was feared that "the masses" might break with patriarchy, social order and religion.

Housing quality became an issue around which renting workers gathered and protested in such crowds. In Ireland, the fear caused among politicians, and the church in particular, and by workers striking for better pay and protesting about housing conditions eventually led to the development of home-ownership as the dominant tenure.

Home-ownership was a means of breeding social conservatism, and quelling collectivism and quasi-socialist dissent.

Officials are on record as believing that only lower-density housing allowed for a more Christian lifestyle and, in the 1920s, Irish Building Engineer magazine warned of the "moral dangers of the common staircase". Apartments were seen as "communist". Crowds are only effective, however, when there is a common cause, otherwise it is just a mass of people. Until recently, renters in

LORCAN SIRR ON THE HOME FRONT



Ireland were a disparate group — a mixture of incomes, ethnic backgrounds and employment statuses — who had little common cause. That is changing. The formation of groups like the Dublin Tenants' Association and campaigns by them and the likes of Impact, the trade union, are beginning to show the cohesiveness around a common cause necessary to effect change. The tenants' advocacy groups

and unions are also finding a common cause in more surprising quarters. Louise Phelan, the head of PayPal in Ireland and former American Chamber of Commerce president, has also commented on the negative impact that, for example, high rents are having on Ireland's economic competitiveness.

Obviously, PayPal and Impact are approaching the same issue from different angles: one wants rents managed in order to control employee pay claims and profits while the other wants rents managed to protect its members' monthly outgoings. It does not matter. The important point here is that the issue of the dysfunctional rental sector is no longer a niche problem for poor people, immigrants and separated fathers; it is increasingly one of national importance.

A lack of organisation among tenants has also meant that they have often lost the chance to articulate their arguments in the media. Landlords' groups — the two of them that I can think of — are better organised and



Tenants groups are beginning to unite in their opposition to high rents

experienced, and get considerably more airtime.

However, it is important to put their presence in context. The larger of the two representative bodies, the Irish Property Owners' Association, represents 5,000 landlords. This is an impressive number, until you measure it against the 172,000

registered landlords in the country. The association speaks for less than 3% of all landlords. There are margins of error greater than 3%.

True, tenants' bodies such as the Dublin Tenants Association have far fewer members. There are, however, between 720,000 and 850,000 renters (we will not

know the official figure until spring 2017), far more than the 172,000 landlords.

Even if only one third of tenants bothers to vote, using the lowest figure for tenants, they still constitute 40% more votes than the number of landlords in the country. At the higher number of tenants, it's about 65% more.

The government's rental strategy is due out before Christmas. We will know how seriously it regards renting as a legitimate tenure by this document. If it persists with limiting eviction of a tenant when a home is for sale to landlords with 20 or more properties, affecting just 924 landlords or 0.54% of landlords (thus leaving the other 99.46% of landlords' tenants unprotected), then that will send a poor signal to renters.

Fundamental change is needed around security of tenure, and certainty for institutions, landlords and especially tenants. If there is no big improvement, the power of a crowd might just be seen squeezed into voting booths come the next election.