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Beware Profit-Driven Lobbyists When it Comes to Housing Policy

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JANE POWERS GARDENS



JONATHAN HESSON/ JANE POWERS

Talented plantsman Darren Topps is a towering presence at the Lismore estate's revitalised gardens

Few things cheer me more than seeing an old garden coming back to life – and the garden at Lismore Castle, in Co Waterford, is very, very old. The upper part of the seven-acre patch dates from the 1620s and was laid out by Richard Boyle, the 1st Earl of Cork, who had bought Lismore and other lands from Sir Walter Raleigh at a knock-down price in 1602. The estate is now owned by the Duke of Devonshire, whose family acquired it in 1753 when Lady Charlotte Boyle, the 4th Earl of Cork's daughter, married William Cavendish, the 4th Duke of Devonshire.

Boyle's sturdy 17th-century walls and formal terraces are still intact, giving a strong and pleasing structure to the steeply raked site. This enclosure is reputed to be the longest continuously cultivated garden in Ireland. The lower garden, created by the 6th Duke of Devonshire in the 19th century, is an informal space, known for its spring-flowering rhododendrons and magnolias. Its late summer-blooming, evergreen *Magnolia delavayi*, which snuggles up against the castle walls, is an Irish champion.

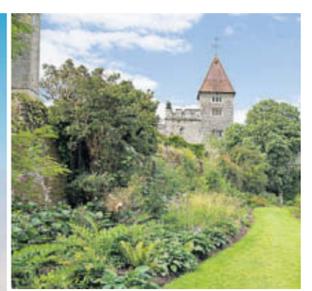
Each time I visited Lismore in recent years, however, parts of the garden looked tired, while others were running away too fast. I found this discouraging, especially since the garden at Chatsworth House, in Derbyshire, the Duke of Devonshire's main residence, is constantly being regenerated. Lismore has become an important art hub in recent decades, with a new gallery and the acquisition of several fine sculptures for the grounds, but the garden needed a boost.

Now – hurrah – it has received one. A few years ago the Duke gave the running of the place to his son and daughter-in-law, Bill and Laura Burlington, while a new head gardener, Darren Topps, was appointed three years ago. It looks also as though funding has been found to help pay for various resuscitation projects.

Topps, who spent 12 years at the Eden Project in Cornwall, is a fine plantsman and horticulturist. He also has a degree in ecology, and has overseen a switch to more sustainable practices in the gardens. Grass in the orchard, which had been maintained as a lawn, is now treated as a hay meadow and is hand-scythed rather than strimmed. Its knapweed and daisies are

abuzz with bees and hoverflies, which are thriving in the pesticide-free environment. Herbicide use is minimal (occasionally on paths and on some of the pernicious weeds), and composting and mulching are paramount.

Many of the plants are grown from seed, says Topps, and those that must be bought "are sourced as locally as we can. We're not going out and buying masses of plants and shipping them from Holland or Italy, or where"



Topps, left, has turned to more sustainable practices, creating a pesticide-free meadow in the orchard; above, the lower garden; from below, vibrant planting in the upper garden and the 1630s Riding House



King of the castle and his colourful subjects

difference, though, is the abundance of flower. Suddenly, the romantic castle – all turrets and ramparts and towers – has been given the dreamy garden setting it deserves.

Much of the extravagant floral display is thanks to annuals and biennials. One area, previously laid out in staid box-edged beds and lawn, is now a bonkers and bouncing pictorial meadow. Shirley poppies in tissue-papery pink and white mingle with purple larkspur, mauve phacelia, blue and

white cornflowers, and lacy umbellifers. The planting is temporary and will be redone this winter with more permanent varieties, but the theme of prolific floweriness will prevail.

A warm bed by a south-facing wall is now home to tender plants including ebony-toned and shiny *Aeonium 'Zwartkop'*, and immensely tall echiums. The double herbaceous border, which is aligned with the spire of St Carthage's

Cathedral in the town, has been cleared of weeds and replanted. With its backing hedge of yew at a more reasonable height and width, it is once again breathing and singing. Next door to it, and on the terrace above, healthy vegetables luxuriate in the good soil, a silty loam augmented with compost and chicken manure.

One of the gardens' better-known features is the 1850s vine house, a ridge-and-furrow structure designed by Joseph Paxton, creator of London's Crystal Palace. Paxton, as well as being the 6th Duke's head gardener at Chatsworth, was a talented architect. His Lismore glasshouse is a bit dilapidated, but will be repaired in time, when replacement teak timbers can be found. "It is essential that we get it back to its former glory," says Topps.

Paxton was largely responsible for a complete makeover of Lismore's castle and gardens in the mid-19th century. His interventions included bringing in tons of peat soil from the Knockmealdown Mountains to the lower garden (reached through the 1630s Riding House). The peat provided the correct pH for growing the rhododendrons and other acid-lovers that were being introduced by contemporary plant hunters.

Among the many elements in the five-year plan developed by Topps and the Burlingtons is to turn part of the lower garden into a reflecting pool. It is already waterlogged in winter, so this makes sense.

Other items on the list include many more planting beds to extend right throughout the year, a stumpery, a garden along the Blackwater River and a rill that will flow from the upper garden to the lower (and into that reflecting pool).

Exciting times are ahead for Lismore. I can't wait to return.

Grow for it

Let's go to Lismore

The gardens at Lismore are open daily from 10.30am until 5.30pm until September 30. Last admission is at 4.30pm. lismorecastlegardens.com



Growing together

Community Gardens Network, the organisation for community gardeners and allotmenters, is changing its name to Community Gardens Ireland and moving to a new website (cgireland.org). If you're at the Electric Picnic (September 2-4) be sure to visit its stand.



Jane digs . . .

An evening with Matthew Jebb, right, director of the National Botanic Gardens, which takes place at Salterbridge House, in Cappoquin, in Co Waterford, on August 20. Booking is essential, and tickets cost €12.50. Contact susiewingfield@hotmail.com.



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Beware profit-driven lobbyists when it comes to housing policy

Lobbying involves trying to influence political decisions using various forms of advocacy that is targeted at policymakers, usually on behalf of a members' interest group, organisation or professional body. At its most benign, lobbying merely provides policymakers with information and legislative support; at its worst, it is self-serving and is self-promotion of often lucrative vested interests.

It is, however, an important part of the democratic process, ensuring that those in charge of making policies can hear the voices of those representing industry, the vulnerable and other groups. Indeed, there would be a significant democratic deficit if only those with political or other insider connections were able to access the state centres of power.

There would also be a serious democratic deficit if lobbying happened behind closed doors.

The Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015 was enacted as a result of recommendations from the Mahon tribunal into corrupt payments to politicians on planning decisions. It sought to reform the process of lobbying by

specific groups and to bring much-needed transparency.

The act defines lobbying and obliges lobbyists to record their activities three times a year on a public register (lobbying.ie). Importantly, it also defines what are called designated public officials – mostly ministers, their advisers, and some senior civil and public servants.

Lobbying is defined as communicating directly or indirectly with a designated public official: to initiate or modify any

public policy or programme; to prepare or amend any legislation; or to influence the award of any grants, licence or contract using public funds. Interestingly, lobbyists are mostly defined as bodies or companies, except in the case of the development or zoning of land where "anyone" who petitions is a lobbyist.

From September to December 2015, about 1,130 lobbyists registered more than 2,500 returns. At 1,318, attempts to influence public policy or

programmes were the largest category of returns, followed by attempts to amend or prepare legislation at 573, and the use of public funds at 450. There were 171 records involving the zoning or development of land. That was just over a four-month period.

The body recording the highest amount of lobbying returns was the Irish Farmers' Association, followed by the Irish Business and Employers' Confederation. Third, and of particular housing interest, was the Construction Industry Federation.

Between September 2015 and May 20 this year, the federation registered 63 lobbying returns – an average of about two a week, on issues ranging from the housing needs of Waterford to boosting apprenticeships. Obviously it is as entitled as any other members' body to lobby for its interests, but there are still some concerns surrounding lobbying in Ireland, particularly in housing.

First, many of the key civil service staff who advise the housing minister on policy are not designated public officials. This means that



At their worst, lobbyists can be self-serving and promote vested interests

groups can lobby these people without having to register the meetings. This is a significant transparency gap. Who can tell how many times lobbyists have bent the ear of senior civil servants outside publicised stakeholder consultation to influence policy or legislation? Nobody may ever know.

Second, many of the groups

that lobby in the housing sector are only nominally different and have an overlap of membership, meaning their members get more than one bite at the lobbying cherry. Third, there is much evidence – particularly from America where the impact of lobbying is much more understood – that the building of personal relationships (easy in a small

country such as ours) and the provision of useful information also ensures positive hearings. It is also clear that policymakers hear more often from one side than the other. There is an imbalance in the system where not all interests are equally represented, and this is evident in housing policymaking in Ireland.

It is also not unknown for lobbying during short-term crises to further their own long-term strategic interests, especially when arguments are monetised and social impacts disregarded.

The counterweight to lobbying is public involvement and consultation. This balances the considerable influence of the sector's profit-driven interests. Until recently, the Department of the Environment had a poor record in public consultation. It seems to be improving under housing minister Simon Coveney, but the degree to which it gets balanced against professional lobbying is still unclear.

Lobbying is a valuable tool but it needs more careful handling than has been seen to date.

LORCAN SIRR ON THE HOME FRONT

