

Muckross House, Killarney, Co. Kerry

Muckross House, built 1839–43 for Henry Herbert, is set within Killarney National Park, with vistas over the lakes. Our group was greeted by Nora, an enthusiastic and helpful guide who on seeing our interest in furniture allowed full access for close examination. We were surrounded by the warmth of local oak used in the woodwork of the house. In the hallway were three impressive sideboards by the firm of James Egan of Killarney, each carved to depict plentiful hunting trophies including a 16-lb trout; side tables and chairs on the landing were also made in Egan's workshop.

The Killarney furniture industry started in the 1840s, with several makers exhibiting at the major exhibitions in London, Cork and Dublin from 1851. With the arrival of the railway in 1853, together with Queen Victoria's visit in 1861, furniture manufacture flourished.

The library and drawing rooms held special interest for us with numerous examples of inlaid Killarney furniture, including Davenportes, games and centre tables. A rich colour was achieved with a blend of wood veneers cut from the evergreen trees on the estate, yew being generally used as the background, with arbutus for the features together with holly for the trailing borders. Arbutus, the strawberry tree, grows nearby on the lower slopes surrounding Lough Leane. Whilst the timber is predominately a yellow close-grained wood, the colour warms to a rich brown closer to its heart. Oval or round inlaid designs depicting the ruins of Muckross Abbey

together with other antiquities were popular. Other designs included ferns, Irish harp, eagle, shamrock and, in the piece we saw made for Queen Victoria, the Royal Coat of Arms, rose and thistle. The finer detailed 'engraving' was worked by pyrography, produced by a heated stylus which burnt the design into the inlay. We noticed a variation in quality, some not unlike a Victorian scrapbook, others finely worked.

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