



HISTORIC ROYAL PALACES

History at Hillsborough Castle

Your short guide to the history of Hillsborough Castle and Gardens.



South Façade at Hillsborough Castle, circa 1926



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Brief History of Hillsborough Castle

Official residence of the British Monarch in Northern Ireland, pivotal venue in the Northern Ireland peace process, Government House and Georgian family home; Hillsborough Castle has a rich and interesting history to discover.

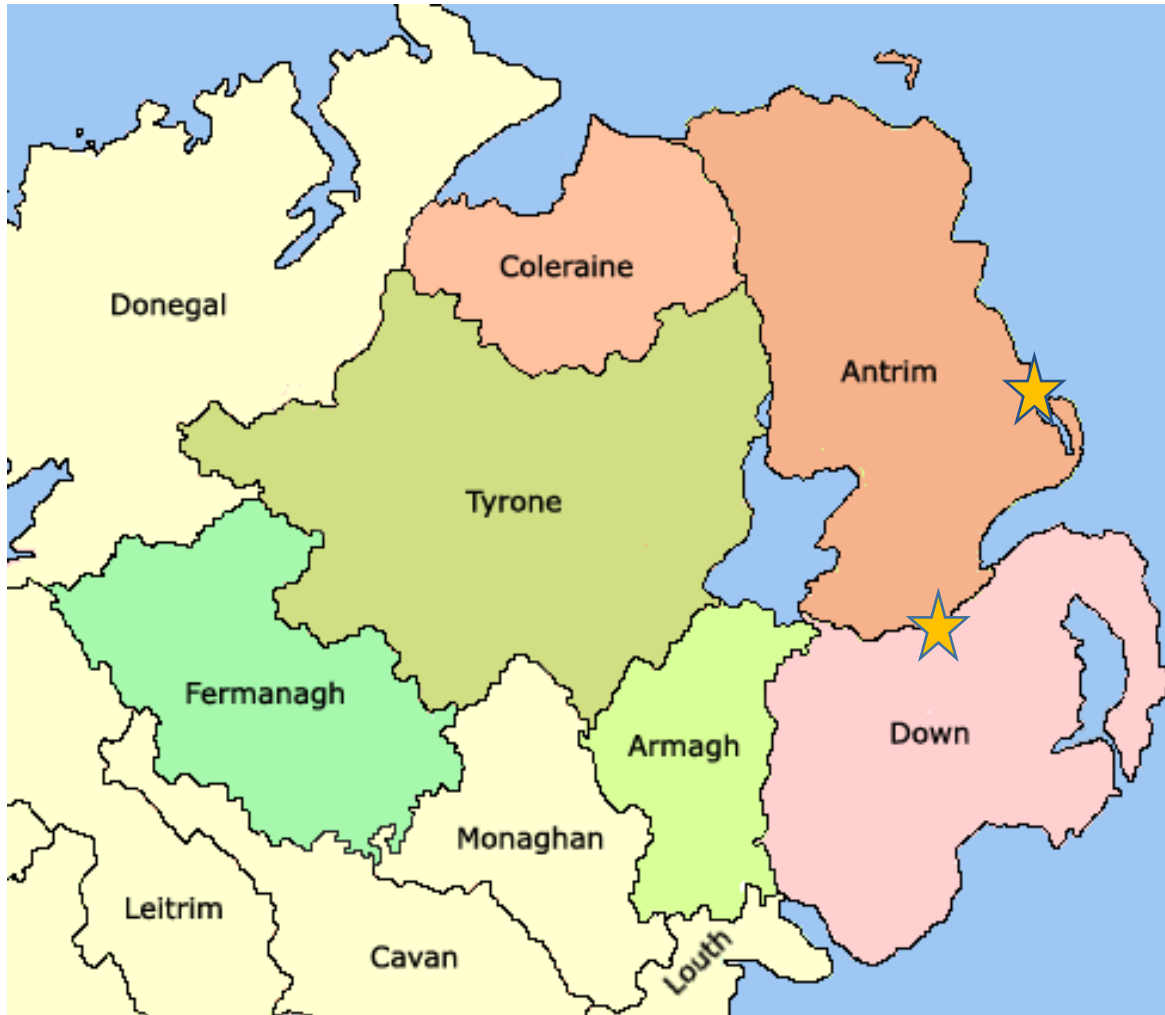
Hillsborough Castle's Origins

The origins of Hillsborough Castle begin with Sir Moyses Hill, who was originally from Devon. Moyses arrived in Ireland in 1573 as part of Walter Devereaux's army, with the intention of colonising Ulster. Initially appointed the governor of Olderfleet Castle in Larne, Moyses was knighted in 1603.

In 1611 he was granted possession of the village of Cromlyn – today, Hillsborough – and later given the position of Provost Mareschal of the Province of Ulster, in 1617. For services to the Crown, Moyses was awarded 2,000 acres of land in County Antrim, and 40,000 acres in County Down, creating an expansive estate.



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General map of Ulster showing the county boundaries as drawn by Sir John Perrott, 1584. Olderfleet Castle, Larne, shown in County Antrim and Hillsborough Castle shown in County Down.

During the 1650s, Hillsborough Fort was built with the purpose of protecting the road from Carrickfergus to Dublin and the Hill family moved there from Lisburn. In 1660, Charles II granted the head of the Hill family, Arthur Hill, the position of Constable of the Fort, and granted a Royal Charter to create a borough.

The fort still stands in Hillsborough. Today, it is directly across the road from Hillsborough Castle. Much of the fort, as seen today, including the defensive walls, are from 1650s, but the gatehouse was remodelled in the 1750s to become a tea house for social gatherings.



Image of Hillsborough Fort, mid-19th Century.

Georgian Family Home

Today, Hillsborough Castle is on the same site as the family home built by Wills Hill during the mid-late 1700s, although it has been extended and added to many times since then. Indeed, many of the features of the village can be traced to this period, including improvement work to St. Malachy's Church and the Court and Market Houses.

Although called a castle, Hillsborough is in fact, an 'Irish Big House', the name castle referring back to the original fort, the first home of the Hill family.

Unlike other 'Irish Big Houses' Hillsborough is not approached by a long, sweeping driveway and set far away from any town or village. Built as one side of a Georgian square, it is an interesting mix of traditional 'Big House' and townhouse.

Wills Hill became the first Marquess of Downshire in 1789, having been created Earl of Hillsborough in 1772. Wills had been Privy Councillor to George II in 1754. In 1768 he became the first Secretary of State for the Colonies, a role created to deal with Britain's increasingly disgruntled colonies in North America.



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It was in this latter role that Benjamin Franklin, known as one of the founding fathers of the United States of America, paid a visit to Hillsborough Castle in 1771.

Wills Hill built not only the house, but also the Court House and Market House, improved the Church and restored the fort, turning it into a fashionable pleasure garden.

Throughout the centuries, successive members of the Hill family have added to, expanded, and altered, the house and gardens. By the late 19th century however, the family were spending much less time in Hillsborough, instead spending most of their time in their London house or on their English estate, Easthampstead Park in Berkshire. By 1909, the family had decided to rent out the house, selling it completely to the British Government in 1925.

Government House

In 1925, the British Government bought Hillsborough Castle from the Hill family for £24,000 (approximately £1.3 million today) and the house entered a new phase in its history. The castle then became known as Government House, the official residence of the Governor of Northern Ireland, remaining so for over 50 years.

There were 5 governors during this time, serving from 1925 until 1972.

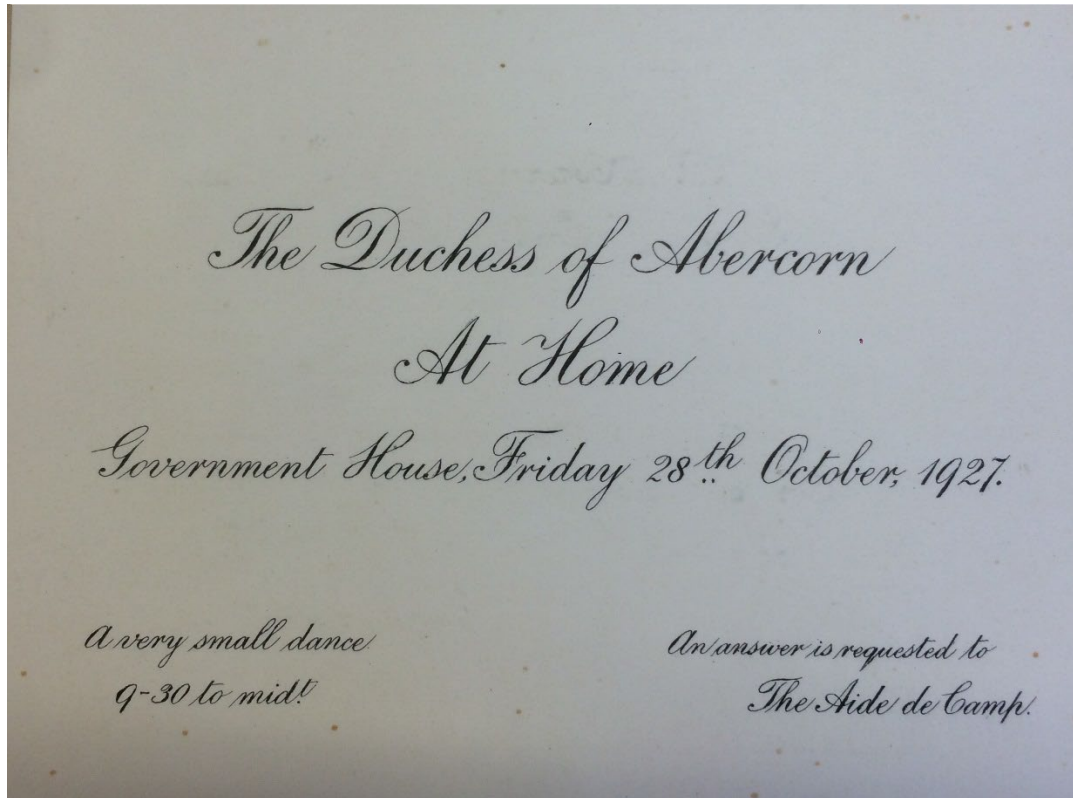
- ❖ The 1st Governor: Duke of Abercorn, 1922 – 1945
- ❖ The 2nd Governor: Earl of Granville, 1945 – 1952
- ❖ The 3rd Governor: Lord Wakehurst, 1952 – 1964
- ❖ The 4th Governor: Lord Erskine, 1964 – 1968
- ❖ The 5th Governor: Lord Grey, 1968 – 1972

In 1934, during the time the Duke of Abercorn was in residence, Hillsborough Castle suffered a devastating fire.

After the death of President von Hindenburg of Germany, the flag on the castle roof was being hoisted to half-mast, when a member of staff carelessly discarded a lit cigarette which set the flag alight. A large portion of the building was destroyed and many of the structural changes we see today date from this period.



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A Place of Politics

In 1972 Direct Rule from London was imposed and the role of Governor of Northern Ireland was abolished. The role of the Secretary of State took its place and Hillsborough Castle became the official residence of the Secretary of State while in Northern Ireland.

The current Secretary of State still stays at Hillsborough Castle when in Northern Ireland.

It has been in this phase of the castle's history that it has hosted some of the most important talks of modern Northern Irish political history and has been a venue of negotiation, discussion and agreement.

In 1985 the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed in the State Drawing Room at Hillsborough Castle, by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Irish Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald. This agreement gave Dublin an advisory role in British policy in Northern Ireland.

Discussions between political parties took place at Hillsborough Castle throughout 1997 and 1998, resulting in the Good Friday Agreement (officially known as the



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Belfast Agreement), which was signed on 10 April 1998. This was a seminal moment in Northern Ireland's history.

This was followed in 1999 by the Hillsborough Declaration, when Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, called for the timely decommissioning of weapons.

In 2010, the Hillsborough Agreement was also signed at Hillsborough Castle, resulting in the devolution of policing and justice powers to Northern Ireland.

Royal Connections

Hillsborough's royal connections stretch back to the 17th century – in the 1660s Charles II granted the town borough status and in 1690 King William III stayed overnight at Hillsborough Fort. The modern royals had a close association with Hillsborough Castle during Governor Granville's residence. Governor Granville's wife, Lady Rose, was Elizabeth II's aunt. Born Lady Rose Bowes-Lyon, she was the sister of the Queen Mother. In March 1946, supported by her aunt and uncle, the then 19-year-old Princess Elizabeth, made her first solo visit to Northern Ireland, during which she stayed at Hillsborough Castle.

In July 1953, the month after her Coronation, Queen Elizabeth II, visited Northern Ireland, and enjoyed a state banquet in the Dining Room at the castle.



Hillsborough Castle remains the official residence of the royal family while in Northern Ireland.



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In 2021, Hillsborough became the first place in Northern Ireland to be granted Royal status due to its historic and current Royal connections. Following the granting of the Letters Patent, the village officially became known as Royal Hillsborough. The Letters Patent are on display in the Ante-Room at Hillsborough Castle.

Chronology

- 1600s** Sir Moyses Hill, from Devon, settles in Ulster, with estates at Carrickfergus, Lisburn and Kilwarlin. Kilwarlin later becomes known as Hillsborough, after the family.
- 1650s** Hillsborough Fort is built, to protect the road from Carrickfergus to Dublin, and the Hill family move here from Lisburn.
- 1662** Charles II grants the head of the Hill family the role of Constable of the fort; the king also grants Hillsborough borough status.
- 1758** Mary Delaney, diarist, and wife of the Dean of Down, visits Hillsborough describing the fort, church, and plans of Wills Hill for further building.
- 1788** The house we now know as Hillsborough Castle is completed. Further alterations are made by Wills Hills's son during the late 1790s.
- 1844** A number of further additions to Hillsborough Castle are complete by 1844. The parkland is also enclosed and established, with an 18th century 'improved' landscape, and a 19th century 'Picturesque' landscape.
- 1900** By the turn of the century, the family are rarely at Hillsborough, and the house is rented out.
- 1925** The house is purchased by the British Government, who undertake alterations and repairs, and then hand it to the Government of Northern Ireland to provide a home for the newly appointed Governor, the Duke of Abercorn. With the loss of Dublin Castle, Hillsborough Castle now also provides an official residence for the Royal Family when in Northern Ireland.
- 1934** On the death of President von Hindenburg of Germany, the flag flying above Hillsborough is lowered to half-mast and the staff member lowering it discards his cigarette on the roof. Within a short time, smoke is seen coming from the roof, and within two hours the whole central block containing the State Apartments is destroyed. The British Office of Works take two years to rebuild.



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- 1940s** Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, and Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret spend more time at Hillsborough during the Governorship of Lord and Lady Granville, the Queen Mother's sister and brother-in-law.
- 1973** Direct Rule is re-imposed in 1972 and the role of Governor is abolished. Hillsborough Castle now becomes home to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The incumbent Labour Secretary of State feels Hillsborough Castle is too ostentatious and chooses instead to travel to the Culloden Hotel each evening.
- 1985** The Anglo-Irish Agreement is signed in the Drawing Room of Hillsborough Castle, between British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and Irish Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald.
- 1997** Mo Mowlam, as Secretary of State, is a key figure in Anglo-Irish talks leading up to the Good Friday Agreement.
- 2003** US President George W. Bush, and British Prime Minister Tony Blair meet at Hillsborough to discuss NATO involvement in Iraq. The following day Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, joins them to hold further political talks.
- 2009** The first meeting of the two heads of state of the Republic of Ireland, Mary McAleese, and the United Kingdom, Queen Elizabeth II, takes place at Hillsborough Castle.
- 2010** Negotiation of the Hillsborough Castle Agreement, which enabled the devolution of policing and justice powers to the power-sharing Executive, takes place.
- 2011** Irish President Mary McAleese's final official engagement outside Ireland is a reception at Hillsborough Castle.
- 2014** Historic Royal Palaces takes over the management of Hillsborough Castle from the Northern Ireland Office.



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Key figures associated with Hillsborough Castle

Wills Hill (1718 – 1793)



Wills Hill was the first Marquess of Downshire. He held various positions during his lifetime, including Secretary of State for the Colonies 1768-72. This was at a critical time for relations between Britain and America; the American War of Independence broke out just a few years later.

Hillsborough Castle was built in the 1770s by Wills Hill, he also had the parish church and market house built, and the fort remodeled.

George Romney, the artist of this portrait, was one of the most fashionable portrait artists of his day. He painted many leading society figures, most famously his muse Lady Emma Hamilton.



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Annie Fortescue Harrison (1848 – 1944)



Annie Jessie Fortescue Harrison was born in Calcutta, India, and moved to Sussex with her family in 1865. In 1877 she married Lord Arthur Hill. She was his second wife after he was widowed in 1874.

She gained fame during her lifetime as a successful composer. Perhaps her most famous piece of music is “In the Gloaming” which has been recorded many times, including by Fats Waller.

Anecdotally, the song has gained a romantic backstory. It is said that Arthur met Annie as a young man, prior to his first marriage, and that they fell in love but were prevented from marrying by the social norms of the day, their situation in life being deemed too far apart.

Some years later, after the death of his first wife, Arthur was attending a concert in London where he heard “In the Gloaming”. The music and song recalled for him, Annie, his lost love, and upon discovering that she was the composer the two were reunited and eventually married.



Countess Granville (1890 – 1967)

Rose Constance Leveson-Gower, Countess Granville, was married to William Leveson-Gower, Earl Granville, who was Governor of Northern Ireland from 1945 – 1952. They lived at Hillsborough Castle, then called Government House, during this time and made some changes to the interior décor of the house.

Countess Granville was sister to Queen Elizabeth (the Queen Mother) and stood as godmother to Princess Margaret Rose of York. Her role as wife of the Governor of Northern Ireland meant that the young Princess Elizabeth could stay with close family when on official engagements in



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Northern Ireland and learn the ropes of official royal overseas protocol supported by family.

Today you can visit the Granville Garden, a rose garden created by Countess Granville, which is situated directly outside the State Dining Room terrace. When dining at Hillsborough Castle, Elizabeth II always sat with her back to the fireplace in the Dining Room, facing the Granville Garden.

Mo Mowlam (1949 – 2005)



Marjorie Mowlam, better known as Mo, was Secretary of State to Northern Ireland from 1997 until 1999. Perhaps best known as a key player in the talks leading up to the Belfast Agreement (The Good Friday Agreement) which was signed in 1998, Mo had very close associations with Hillsborough Castle.

Known as a personable, down to earth, and at times, irreverent politician, Mo brokered key talks between Unionist and Republican parties in the relaxed atmosphere of Hillsborough Castle. She was particularly fond of the gardens and often took walks on the estate, even requesting that some of her ashes be scattered here upon her death.

Queen Elizabeth II

Elizabeth II visited Hillsborough Castle many times, the first being while she was Princess Elizabeth, when she made her first official solo visit to Northern Ireland, in order to launch a new ship by Harland & Wolff, the HMS Eagle.

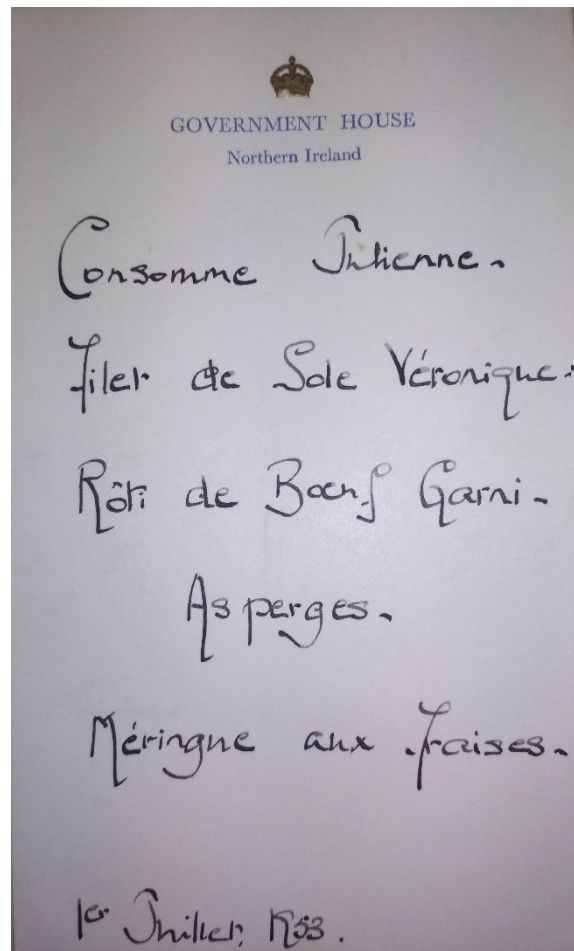
Perhaps her most famous visit occurred after her coronation in July 1953, when a banquet was held in celebration. Newspapers at the time described the simple grandeur of the Throne Room prepared for dinner:

“No tablecloth obscured the gleaming mahogany and the place mats were of the most simple white linen, scalloped in white; the service of white and gold china and the plain coloured cut glass maintained the general simplicity of the setting.



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The menu, too, was elegant rather than elaborate. There were only four courses – consommé Julienne, filet de sole Veronique, roti de boeuf, asparagus and Meringue aux fraises.” The Northern Whig, Thursday 2nd July, 1953.



Important political meetings have also taken place with Elizabeth II at Hillsborough Castle. In December 2005 she met Irish President Mary McAleese in, what is now, the Red Room at Hillsborough Castle. This was significant as it was the first meeting between a reigning British Monarch and the head of an independent Ireland, on the island of Ireland.



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Frequently Asked Questions

Why is it called Hillsborough Castle? It's not a castle!

The name Hillsborough Castle refers to Hillsborough Fort, the Hill family's first home in the area. (Which does look more castle-like with its crenellations!) It was also common for Anglo-Irish families of the period to refer to their grand country houses as castles, as it was thought it reinforced the antiquity of their families.

Does the Monarch actually stay here?

Yes, when members of the royal family visit Northern Ireland, Hillsborough Castle is their official residence. As a working royal residence, it means that sometimes we have to close to the public at short notice.

How often does the Royal Family visit?

It varies, but probably on average, two – three times a year. The most well-known occasion is for the Royal Garden Party, in late summer, hosted by a member of the royal family, when invited guests enjoy tea in the beautiful grounds.

Is the village called Hillsborough because it is on a hill?

No! It's named after the Hill family who resided here when the area was granted borough status by Charles II. The fact it is also on a hill is a happy coincidence!

Does the Secretary of State stay here?

Yes. As well as being the official residence of the royal family while in Northern Ireland, the Secretary of State also stays at Hillsborough Castle. It has been this way since the last Governor of Northern Ireland left in 1972.

Is Hillsborough Castle haunted?

That'll be up to you to decide when you visit! Some members of staff have reported unexplained noises, footsteps overhead in rooms known to be empty and banging doors, but that could all be explained by the wind, and creaks in old houses, couldn't it?



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What kind of crimes were tried at the Court House?

Hillsborough Court House is a Petty Sessions court. That means that crimes of a less serious nature were tried here. Examples would include: poaching, loitering, petty larceny, disturbing the peace, drunkenness. It would not have been used to try serious criminal cases, such as murder.

Did the fire completely destroy the castle?

The fire, started by the careless disposal of a member of staff's cigarette, was devastating to the central portion of the castle, with large portions of the interior being badly damaged or destroyed.

The castle as we see it today is largely from the period of repair and rebuilding after the fire.

The Abercorns were absent at the time of the fire but staff and villagers managed to save a large number of valuable furniture and artwork, even removing some in wheelbarrows!