

THE LAFCADIO HEARN JAPANESE GARDENS OF TRAMORE, SOUTH EAST IRELAND  
AND NEIGHBOURING GARDENS OF WATERFORD

## Introduction

***Last December The Gardens Trust invited Agnes Aylward, of the Lafcadio Hearn Japanese Gardens in Tramore, South East Ireland, to give a lecture in our 'Unforgettable Garden' Series. This triggered several requests for further details of these gardens and how to visit them. In this article, Agnes and her board colleague, Laura Cassin, have combined forces to provide this guide on how to get to the Lafcadio Hearn gardens, together with suggestions for an enjoyable short break visiting other top cultural and garden destinations in their vicinity.***

## DAY 1:

### The Lafcadio Hearn Japanese Gardens, Tramore

Our itinerary begins with a visit to these unusual and authentic Japanese Gardens, which are situated in the beautiful seaside town of Tramore, County Waterford, Ireland. Their layout reflects the life and work of Patrick Lafcadio Hearn, known in Japan as Koizumi Yakumo, 1850-1904, who grew up in Ireland, and whose life journey embraced several parts of the world. The gardens pay particular homage to the fame he attained in Japan through his incomparable literary descriptions of the people, customs and culture of that country. The gardens were recently singled out for praise by the Japanese Government, which, in 2021, made a special Commendation Award to its founder, Agnes Aylward. This was in recognition of the garden's "*contribution to promoting mutual understanding between Japan and Ireland*". (PHOTOGRAPHS: HEARN BRONZE, SORIBASHI BRIDGE).

As a young boy, Hearn spent many happy summers in Tramore in the care of his guardian and great aunt, Sarah Brenane. Founded in 2014, on the site of a former 2.5 acre Victorian Garden/town park in the centre of the town, the gardens feature eleven different tableau illustrating the life journey of Hearn from the Victorian era in Ireland, through the post US civil war cities of Cincinnati and New Orleans, to his final fourteen years in Japan where he was a major collector of ghost stories and legends and a sympathetic chronicler of the country's social mores and traditions. Hearn's most distinguished work, published posthumously in 1904, earned him the title of *Japan's Great Interpreter to the West*. (1).

To trace the journey of his life, related through plants, landscape, water and stone, the visitor follows a guided route through a small walled Victorian garden, an American prairie style garden, and a Greek amphitheatre, before reaching the main sections of the garden that commemorates Hearn's life and work in Japan.

Particular attention was paid in the design and layout of the gardens to the incorporation of rocks in accordance with Japanese custom and style. Lafcadio Hearn wrote, in his famous essay on Japanese Gardens: "*In order to comprehend the beauty of a Japanese garden, it is necessary to understand—or at least to learn to understand—the beauty of stones.*" Hence the gardens incorporate turtle and crane rock features, a guardian stone, an impressive statue rock, a rock walled grotto and several other representational rocks. Martin Curran, the garden designer who led the team that constructed the gardens, brought with him invaluable knowledge and experience of the Japanese sense of spatial awareness in rock placement, that he had gleaned working in Japan for a number of years.

Several notable Japanese garden structures have been added since the formal opening in 2015. These include a teahouse, an azumaya or summer pavilion and a fujidana or pergola which acts as the '*Gateway to Japan*' in the story of Hearn's journey from West to East. All these structures were designed by architect Mike Roberts, an expert on Japanese garden structures, and made on site by master carpenter Richard Cowman.

The planting in the gardens is surprisingly mature for a garden of such recent vintage. The pre existing 19<sup>th</sup> century planting of mature trees created an established backdrop for the more recent addition of cherries, bamboos, pine trees, camellia, magnolia and many other specimen plants. The ‘Shakkei’ or borrowed landscape concept, which enhances many Japanese gardens, is successfully adapted in the Tramore gardens to embrace the surrounding views of historic Tramore Bay: “*the Graveyard of Ships*”.

The gardens have received many favorable visitor reviews. One of our favorites comes from some German visitors:

*‘Lafcadio Hearn Gardens is a unique place. It combines the spiritual symbolism and traditional architecture of the East with the western idea of biography. To recount the life story of an Irish-Greek man who, after a long stay in the United States, immigrated to Japan, plants, trees and water, rocks and stone sculptures are integrated into a plot that leads the visitor from birth to death and from earth to heaven. Making specific use of the site, as well as of light and colour, the layout inspires a meta-physical walk and gives way to a fascinating interplay of Japanese folk tales and the search for revelation that lies at the core of European literature since ancient times. Hearn figures as the Spiritus Rector of the Gardens and is remembered as an honourable pioneer of intercultural dialogue.’ (3)*

**More in Tramore:** Follow (or precede) your visit to the gardens by a walk on the town’s seafront promenade overlooking the three mile sandy beach which has given the town it’s Gaelic name of Trá Mhór (big strand). Or take a short walk on the highly scenic Doneraile Walk, a cliff walk within the town which leads to the old Coastguard Station, now a café and cultural centre, and which gives fine views out over the entire bay, with its guardian pillars at Brownstown Head to the East, and Newtown Head to the West. There the centre pillar, known as the Metal Man, is topped by a 3 metre high metal figure of a sailor pointing to sea, erected as a warning to ships to keep out from the ‘Graveyard of Ships’, so named in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, due to the multiple wrecks of sailing vessels that sought shelter from storms in the shallow bay. (PHOTOGRAPH OF METAL MAN)

#### **Note for Golfers**

As an alternative for any non-garden lovers in your party, there are several championship golf courses in the Waterford City/Tramore area. For convenience of access try the courses at Faithlegg House Hotel, Waterford Castle Hotel and Tramore.

## **Other Gardens in County Waterford**

Waterford County has a host of other gardens well worthy of a visit. Some ten gardens, including the Lafcadio Hearn Japanese Gardens, are members of the Waterford Garden Trail. All these gardens are within an hours drive from Waterford City. Descriptions, photographs and details of opening times can be found at:

<https://visitwaterford.com/category/explore/waterford-garden-trail/>

#### **DAY 2: Two Historic Gardens within 25km of Waterford City**

The most significant gardens in this region, which we recommend to culturally curious visitors to Irish shores, are largely derived from the legacy of Ireland’s Big House ascendancy landowners. These demesnes, attaching to important castles and great houses were intended to provide private enjoyment for the landowners and their friends, and have only been open to the public in the last twenty years or so. Many of them were planted in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. We recommend visits to the following two destinations within easy reach of Waterford City:

**(i) Mount Congreve**, situated on the river Suir, is within 10km of Waterford City. This is the ancestral home of the Congreve family, and to a major degree, the legacy of the late Ambrose Congreve, CBE, one of the great Irish plantsmen of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He died in 2011, aged 104, whilst en route to the Chelsea Flower Show where he was a repeated recipient of Gold Medals.

Mount Congreve is a garden with scale and mass planting at the forefront. On entry, pass through the vast walled garden, where the middle beds are lined with fruit trees and the surrounding beds with an array of vegetables and herbaceous perennials. Interest abounds through the summer months. The peony walk is a favourite, carefully tended to ensure the biggest blooms. Ambrose Congreve created the vast planting schemes over the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and where others may use plants in multiples of tens here the multiples are in the hundreds. Visit in early spring to see the carpets of bulbs in blues, whites and yellows and a little later for the flowering of the biggest rhododendron collection in Europe, along with notable camellia, Japanese maple and magnolia collections. The woodland pathways are stretched along the elongated site and punctuated by features of interest such as a cascading waterfall, Chinese pagoda, a Temple and glimpses through to the River Suir.

Currently the house and gardens are being transformed as a worthy tourist attraction. The gardens are undoubtedly of international importance and improvement works are underway to meet future visitor requirements. Extensive upgrades include a visitor centre, orientation improvements and way finding's in the woodlands and newly accessible wetlands. A pathway through the gardens to the adjoining greenway offers a wonderful point to view the River Suir and brings the vibrancy of passing cyclists and walkers into the gardens. Following improvements, the gardens expect to re-open in the summer of 2022.

**(ii) Curraghmore Estate**, the seat of the Marquises of Waterford:

Curraghmore House is set in a valley close to the Comeragh mountains some 25 km from Waterford City. It is the historic home of the ninth Marquis of Waterford whose ancestors (the de la Poers) came to Ireland from Normandy around 1170. Some 1,000 hectares of formal gardens, woodland and grazing fields make it the country's largest private demesne and the longest continuously inhabited house in Ireland.

Designed initially as a French style garden it evolved over the centuries, firstly embracing the popular English landscape style and later with Victorian additions. Woodlands and arboretum surround the house. A manmade lake sits to the front with formal terraces behind and a perfect line of Irish Yew trees settling the house into the stunning backdrop. Curraghmore is all about the setting and its unique tree collection. It is the notable trees in this arboretum that make these gardens outstanding. These include an avenue of gnarled pink chestnuts and an extensive collection, which includes Cedars, Pines, Firs, Sweet Chestnuts and Ireland's tallest tree, a Sitka Spruce. This spruce, planted in the 1830s, stands guard over King John's Bridge which dates back to 1205. The mature Arboretum and woodlands are also home to some of the estates many pheasants.

Group tours of the main reception rooms of Curraghmore House can be arranged by prior appointment. This tour takes in some fine neo-classical rooms which feature magnificent plaster work by James Wyatt and grisaille panels by Peter de Gree.

A little gem, not to be missed, and set in an unassuming shrubbery, is the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Shell House, which is entirely covered in shells collected from warmer more tropical seas. Twenty kilometres of famine relief boundary wall and four sturdy wrought iron gates surround the estate

**Scenic Views of Waterford's Copper Coast and Greenway:**

Following your visit to Mount Congreve and/or Curraghmore you could complete the day by taking the beautiful and unspoiled coastal road drive westwards through the little villages of Annestown and Bonmahon, and past the old copper mines: There are spectacular sea and cliff views to be enjoyed, particularly if you happen to pass this way towards sunset. An alternative suggestion for the physically agile is a visit the acclaimed Waterford Greenway, where you can walk or rent a bicycle along this 46 km glorious car free pathway which traverses the county via the former railway track which from Waterford City to Dungarvan Town.

**DAY 3: A Day in the City's Museum Quarter**

If you wish to get an in-depth sense of the rich historic past of this area, we would strongly recommend a visit to the Museum Quarter in Waterford City, which is Ireland's oldest city.

The Waterford Treasures Museums are a suite of five museums and visitor attractions located in the historic heart of Waterford, in an area known as the Viking Triangle. The museums are a veritable treasure trove of objects that cover the entire 1100 year span of Waterford's History. Step inside **Reginald's Tower** on the quayside to learn about the Viking Founders. Drop into the **Medieval Museum** to understand the height of Waterford's power as a royal port city, or stop by the **Bishop's Palace** to see how the other half lived in Georgian Waterford. If the decorative arts are more your style then visit the two excellent new museums added in 2021; the **Irish Silver Museum** and the **Museum of Time**, each of which explore the history of this island through beautiful and useful pieces of art.

If you would enjoy an overview through the narrow streets of the old city centre, then the Epic Walking Tour may be for you - 1000 years in 1000 paces right around the centre of old Vadrarfjordr. There is a multi-pass ticket, known as the 'Freedom Ticket' designed to ensure you see everything.

#### **DAY/S 4/5 Explore West County Waterford**

Within an hour's drive from Waterford City, there are several lovely small towns in the west of the County. If you decide to spend a couple of days in this area, you may wish to take up a new base in the towns of Dungarvan, Ardmore or Lismore. Well worth a visit is Ardmore, with its 12<sup>th</sup> century round tower and spectacular cliff walk. Dungarvan is a bustling town with a choice of several high quality restaurants. Lismore is an unspoiled heritage town.

#### **Lismore Town**

Many people have written of their visit to the heritage town of Lismore, a small, unspoiled rural village in West County Waterford. Perhaps the most attractive account is the childhood memoir of George O'Brien – entitled '*The Village of Longing*' (3). The town is also home to one of Ireland's most intrepid travel writers, Dervyla Murphy.

One of the architectural gems in Lismore is St. Carthage's Cathedral. Rebuilt on the site of the 7<sup>th</sup> century monastery of St. Carthage, the current building dates from 1633. Despite bearing the name of cathedral, the current building is small and utterly charming and is situated at the edge of the village with panoramic views over the river. Visitors can view medieval tombs, stone carvings, fine stained glass windows and fascinating wall plaques and dedications, which illustrate the complex history of West Waterford. If you only visit one church building in the course of your holiday, this is the one we recommend, renowned for its quiet calm and the sense that it is a true time capsule.

#### **Lismore Castle and Gardens**

Commanding the entrance to the town, overlooking the River Blackwater, is Lismore Castle, the Irish residence of the Devonshire family. Spread over seven acres, the historic gardens at Lismore Castle are divided into two very distinct and different halves. The Upper Garden is a complete example of the 17th-century walled garden first constructed here by Richard Boyle, the First Earl of Cork, in about 1605. The outer walls and terraces remain and the plantings have changed to match the tastes of those living within the castle.

The Lower Garden was mostly created in the 19th century for the Sixth Duke of Devonshire. This garden is informal with shrubs, trees and lawns while the stately Yew Avenue is much older. The gardens contain a fine collection of magnolias, camellias, rhododendrons, herbaceous borders and contemporary sculpture and a remarkable yew walk where Edmund Spenser is said to have written 'The Faerie Queen'.

#### **More West Waterford Gardens**

Apart from the great houses and estates already mentioned, the Blackwater Valley, which runs through West Waterford is replete with provincial great houses, many of them with fine gardens with vistas of the surrounding countryside, the fine river itself and the nearby Comeragh and Knockmealdown mountain ranges. Recommended gardens in this area, which are members of the

Waterford Garden Trail are Dromana House and Gardens near Cappoquin, Cappoquin House and Tourin House between Cappoquin and Lismore.

#### **FINAL DAY: Wexford and Johnston Castle**

On your return journey to Rosslare, you may have time to visit Wexford town, an attractive town of narrow streets and Norman origin and home to the internationally known Wexford Opera Festival.

**Johnstown Castle Estate, Museum and Gardens**, situated close to Wexford town, is ideally situated for a pre sailing detour on the return journey to Rosslare harbour. A dwelling of significance has been on this site for over 900 years since the Norman family of Esmonde settled there in 1170. Extensive development in the last number of years includes restoration to both house and gardens and the addition of a visitor centre with shop and restaurant. The Gothic Revival limestone Castle is impressive on approach and is flanked by the Estates three linked lakes, pleasure grounds, walled garden and impressive Arboretum. The gardens offer a variety of walking routes, meandering around the castle lakes and through well-managed adjoining woodlands.

Head gardener Ciarán Fitzgerald is careful in his approach to respect the historic richness of the grounds while thinking forward with sustainability at the forefront. His vision is one of restoration alongside rewilding, which allows for incorporating biodiversity while respecting this extensive and varied historic landscape. The practice of allowing the extensive lawns to develop as hay meadows through summer months is not new but is a repeating trend historically. Photographs from the castles archive shows this practice carried out in the arboretum's younger days.

A small recently restored sunken garden surrounded by mature trees is an unexpected touch of formality hidden away amongst the mature tree collection. Originally Baroque style but now a symmetrical design using old Irish symbols, it is a new layer to this evolving garden.

An area of recently planted heritage apple trees forms the basis of an edible woodland to which will be added fruit and nut trees. The walled garden was laid out in the 1850's but was neglected for a period of time, it was revisited in the 1950's with some structural and herbaceous planting added. The head gardener with a team of volunteers is undertaking extensive works through gardens and neglected glasshouses. Even at this early stage of redevelopment the walled garden is a pleasant visit awash with summer flower colour enticing visitors to return. The balustrade walks lakeside, impressive trees and the occasional wandering peacock gives the grounds an old world elegance and a feeling of stepping back in time.

Also worth a mention is the restoration of an 87metre servant's tunnel to the main house, thought to be the longest of its kind in the country, and an impressive Agricultural museum.

#### **Suggested Route from the UK**

Our suggested best route for UK visitors who wish to bring their car, is to take the ferry from Fishguard to Rosslare Harbour on the South East tip of Ireland – a circa 3 hour crossing. Rosslare Harbour is just over a one-hour drive from Waterford City via the N25. A stay in Waterford or its environs will provide easy access to the Lafcadio Hearn Japanese Gardens just 10km from Waterford City, and to a wide range of other interesting gardens and cultural and scenic attractions. Waterford City provides a choice of several good quality hotels if you are seeking a city base. These include the Granville situated on the city quays and Waterford Castle hotel. If you prefer a more rural setting, we would suggest Faithlegg House Hotel, which is a ten-minute drive from the city, but can be accessed more directly from Rosslare Harbour (N25 and R733 with ferry crossing of river Suir at Ballyhack/Passage East). This latter route avoids driving through Waterford City, which you may prefer to save for a full day's exploration later in your trip.

#### **References**

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3. Bauer M. and Patrut I. Department of German Literature and Culture, Flensburg University, 2017. *Visitor's Book Lafcadio Hearn Japanese Gardens*.
4. O'Brien, George, 1987. *The Village of Longing*. The Lilliput Press Ltd. 1990 Paperback edition, Penguin.

**Biographical Notes on Authors:**

**Agnes Aylward:** Founder and chairperson of the Lafcadio Hearn Japanese Gardens is a former public servant with a long-term interest in the restoration of historic gardens.

**Laura Cassin:** Lecturer in Garden Design and Horticulture at Kildalton College, Waterford: Designer of the Victorian and American Garden areas.

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