



IF THE WALLS COULD TALK

When Jane Newman saw that previous owners of Burren House shared names with her grandmother, her mother and herself, she knew that she was destined to buy it, says **Mary O'Sullivan**. Photography by **Tony Gavin**

Isn't it odd how we take place names for granted? Take the Burren, for example. Many of us have been in The Burren in Co Clare; we've examined the flora, explored the caves, inspected the dolmens or just visited the pubs in the area, but few of us would think to enquire what the name means. I now know that Burren means 'a stony place' in Irish, but it took an encounter with Englishman Michael Newman to set me right.

Michael lives in a different Burren, Burren House in Co Cork. He has only been there three years, but he still went to the bother of finding out the meaning of the name of his house.

Michael and his Canadian-born wife, Jane, are that kind of couple; it's obvious that even though they only bought the house a short time ago, they've put huge commitment into it, restoring it to its Georgian glory, and, indeed, their commitment extends into the surrounding community also.

Last summer the Newmans used their home as a location for an evening of open-air opera in aid of a local charity, and they will be doing so again this summer.

Michael is a businessman with interests all over the world, and he and Jane, a jewellery designer, have homes in Canada, Morocco and England.

"We've lived a peripatetic life. We're not very good at staying in one place.

This is a second marriage for both of us and our kids are grown up and living in England, America and Australia," explains Jane. Although Jane, who was brought up in England, does have Irish family roots from way back, this lively couple had no strong links to this country, and when they were looking for a new property, France was their first port of call.

"We had a flat in Paris, but we wanted a house. We couldn't find a house we liked there, and then there was the language — we didn't speak French," says Jane, though Michael gently corrects her, saying they speak it "passably well".

They are agreed, however, on the fact that they love sailing and the sea, and also that they love properties by the water, so when they saw Burren House — on Courtmacsherry Bay, set in grounds rolling down to the water's edge, with views over the Old Head of Kinsale — it already had lots in its favour. Add its proximity to England and the airport, and they were sold.

"It was destiny for me," Jane says. "When I looked at the deeds, I noticed that a lot of women had owned the house. Three of those women were called Rosemary, Violet and Jane — my mother, my grandmother and myself — and I thought to myself: 'Jane, you've got to take this on and look after it.' We've tried to get it back to the way it might have been."

Built in 1790 on the site of an old



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fortification, the house was part of the McCarthy domain — the McCarthys being one of the most powerful families in the Kilbrittain/Courtmacsherry area of West Cork at that time.

"I asked a local historian to look into it and he said that there was a watchtower here, and from it they could watch the channel and see all the comings and goings," Jane explains.

According to Michael and Jane, the building was in poor structural order when they bought it, but they were determined to do right by the house. They engaged a local architect, John Moorehead of Wayne Moorehead, and they used all local labour and services.

Though it's been completed quite a while now, Jane can still cite all the names of those who helped to make the house the Georgian gem it is today.

"Pat O'Sullivan from Clonakilty was the contractor, John Murray of

Kilbrittain did all the sash windows, Capital Mouldings of Douglas in Cork did the ceilings and cornicing, and the House of Coolmore in Carrigaline did the kitchen," Jane recalls.

Other big jobs included installing replacement antique fireplaces in all the old rooms, bought in Belle Cheminee; plus the restoration of all the floors, the stripping of all the doors, and even the installation of a new double-sided, sweeping staircase in the hall.

And that was before they did any decoration — when they take on a house, Jane always does the interior design herself and Burren House was no different.

She has tried to be faithful to the Georgian era without being slavish, and while the house is furnished with lots of lovely antiques, she's not afraid to include modern pieces from local interiors store Bellissima, or older ones like her mother-in-law's gramophone, which dates from the Fifties.

She uses silk copiously in her curtains and furnishing fabrics, and she likes very interesting wallpapers. The reception rooms are mainly decorated in gold and aqua shades, while upstairs each bedroom is fitted out in a different

Left Part of the magnificent grounds of Burren House, where the Newmans host their annual outdoor opera night

Above Jane Newman in the drawing room of Burren House, the property she and her husband Michael have restored to its former glory. Jane did all the interior design work herself

Top right The commanding hall with its sweeping, double-sided staircase, a new feature added by Jane and Michael.

They also put in a new front door, as the original was, Jane says, 'a small, poky thing'

Middle right The solid-wood kitchen, hand-painted in cream, came from House of Coolmore in Carrigaline, Co Cork. The french-walnut table was designed and made by furniture designer Eric Pearce. The semi-circular panels on the walls depict the Medici Gardens

Bottom right The long water feature, one of many that the Newmans have installed in the gardens

colour — there's a blue room, a green room and a pink room, while the master bedroom is decorated in wine and gold. The result throughout is a fabulous mix of colour and textures.

The exterior is a similar story. The house is set on 12 acres and the grounds needed a huge restoration job. The couple set about hiring someone to renovate it, but without too much success. "We had several designers, but each one fell by the wayside. Their plans were too fussy, so we did it ourselves and kept it simple," Jane explains.

Simple, perhaps, but elegant. While most of the grounds are in smoothly rolling lawns, the Newmans planted a lot of hedging and trees and they added interest with a long water feature and a waterfall. They put in a lake, which they filled with trout. They also improved the look of the house by giving it a special stone finish. And around the grounds, they placed interesting sculpture pieces such as Dan Cronin's *The Green Man*.

"He puts his own face on his sculptures, but that's fine, it's a nice face," says Jane.

As anyone can see, the grounds of Burren House are the perfect location for an outdoor event. And so it came to pass.



"It was a spur of the moment thing, really," Michael says. "Friends had been at a musical evening, and, in passing, we said it would be nice to have music here. We're opera fans, we've been to quite a few outdoor ones with picnics, like Glyndebourne. One of our friends said he'd seen a garden opera company in England; we called them up, they were available and we did it," he recalls, adding that: "It was in aid of the RNLI. They did all the wiring and the work on the grounds, while most people brought their own picnics. The show was *Don Pasquale*. Amy Cahill O'Brien is an incredible machine, she got the whole thing organised. We did nothing, really."

"And it was on the one weekend that it didn't rain," laughs Jane.

And they're planning to do it all again, once more in aid of a local charity — this time the opera is *The Barber of Seville* and the date is August 28. It's worth attending if only for the magical location.

You'll find West Cork is just as interesting as Co Clare. **Q**

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See www.burrenhouse.net