

# History IRELAND

Number Twenty Nine  
Dublin's Georgian House Museum  
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## Opening Times

Tuesday – Saturday 10.00am – 5.00pm  
Sunday 1.00pm – 5.00pm  
Closed Mondays and two weeks at Christmas

Admission charge - €5

Number Twenty Nine is situated in a historic area of Dublin that not only reflects the Georgian glory of the past but is within strolling distance of Leinster House and our national museums. You enter the house by going down steps to what were once the cellars but now contain a gift shop and small café. At the shop you purchase your ticket and are directed to the small theatre where you meet other people scheduled for the tour which begins with a short video.

This features the “ghost” of Mrs. Olivia Beatty, the original owner of the house who in a chatty way tells us something of its history, the lifestyle of Dublin's affluent middle class in the Georgian period and a little about the social history of Dublin at that time. We learn that she lived in the house from 1794 until her death in 1843 at the age of eighty-three. She had three servants to help her run the house: a cook/housekeeper, a maid and a general handyman. There was also a governess to educate the children but she was not counted a servant.

Mrs Beatty, or her ghost at any rate, is well informed about Dublin and the kind of life enjoyed then. People largely entertained themselves at home with music recitals and card games, for example, but also went out to the theatre which not only provided plays and music but other forms of entertainment including indoor pony racing in the Theatre Royal!

After the video, the group is taken to the entrance of the exhibition proper and introduced to your guide. On the day that I was there the visitors constituted a multi-national crowd. The group ahead of us was Spanish while my party included Italians, Americans and Scots. Our guide, Jim, was enthusiastic and charming. Before unlocking the door into the house, he set the scene with some general remarks about it and the Beatty family. We then followed him into the scullery where the maid began her day drawing water for breakfast and washing. From there we went to the kitchen passing on the way the bells that summoned the servants to the various rooms, such as the boudoir or drawing room. Each bell has a distinctive tone so that they can be recognised by ear.

After a quick turn around the kitchen where we had the chance to see how food was cooked and made ready for serving, Jim led us to the pantry next door where food was stored. The feature here that attracted most attention was the rat shelf. This is cleverly suspended from the ceiling and fresh food was kept there out of reach of rats. Here too was a bath tub which was carried upstairs when one of the family wanted to bathe, a rare enough occurrence. When we see

paintings from the Georgian era we can be dazzled by the splendour little realising that they lived in close proximity to vermin and probably smelled quite bad underneath the perfumes they wore.

On the same floor was the housekeeper's room. She was the only servant to live on the premises and the only one to be trusted. The theme of the masters' distrust of their servants arose again and again throughout the tour. The housekeeper had a window looking into the pantry so as to ensure that the servants, who lived in the nearby slums, would not steal food. Many containers in the house, from tea caddy to wine chest, had locks that only Mrs Beatty, or the housekeeper, had keys to. Her room was plainly furnished with a bed and a few comforts. It should be said that all the items on display are genuine artefacts from Georgian times, both here and in all the other rooms in the house.

More splendid artefacts were on display when we went upstairs to where the family lived. It was here that we really began to appreciate the work done by the ESB and the National Museum in restoring the house. The project began in 1989 and completed in 1991 in time to be opened to the public when Dublin was the European City of Culture. Where possible, wallpaper and carpets were replicas of what had been there before or else authentic replacements were used. All the furniture, fittings and clothes are genuine Georgian items taken from the National Museum's collection making going through the house an authentic experience.

It is certainly better to see a chair or silver service, for example, in its natural surroundings rather than behind glass in a conventional museum. We were led through each room by our guide who explained about the furniture and other objects. The front and back drawing rooms both had magnificent Irish made crystal chandeliers. The back drawing room also had an Irish made piano and harp, fine examples of the craftsmanship of the period. Mrs Beatty's boudoir, upstairs, was her own private space in which she came to relax on her chaise longue or read by the fire. One curious item here was the "belly warmer", a flat copper canister which was filled with hot water and held against the stomach as a cure for indigestion.

As well as the expected items of furniture and accessories, each room had something unusual or intriguing which threw light on how people lived back then. For a tour of this house is as much a lesson in social (and family) history as a chance to admire antiquities. In the master bedroom we saw a small set of ornate steps that Mrs Beatty used to climb into her enormous bed. In the corner was a "liver shaker", a contraption to provide exercise when it was too inclement to go out of doors for a walk or ride on horseback.

The governess's room was simple but comfortable and doubled up as a classroom. It has a rare Irish mirror which has a border of blue glass studs. The children's room, with all the paraphernalia of childhood, led onto a toy room in which was a large but detailed doll's house.

The tour lasts about forty minutes and is well worth the money. Having an actual person guide you through the house is a big bonus. Not only is he a font of knowledge who brings the house to life but visitors can also ask him questions. As an insight into a bygone age and Dublin in more splendid times, Number Twenty Nine is certainly worth a visit. It is good too to see furniture, costumes and antiquities from the period in situ rather than in a display cabinet. This is a gem of a place that is perhaps not as well known as it should be and both the National Museum and the ESB are to be congratulated for their work there.

Tony Canavan