

Bryan Meade / Fergal Phillips



As a boy, Barry Flood played in the derelict New Park House in Co Dublin

Where do you think you live?



The history of a Georgian house in Emmet Square, Clonakilty, owned by, inset left, Neville and Gaynor, was uncovered by, right, Fitzsimons and her team



More and more owners are turning to genealogists to uncover the histories of their homes, writes Siobhán Maguire

Growing up in the Ward, a rural enclave in north Co Dublin, Barry Flood loved playing in a tumble-down house on the family farm. The two-storey-over-basement house, which had no roof and crumbling stone walls, was a great den for Flood, his three older brothers and a set of cousins who lived on the same road.

"We would spend hours in the house, playing cowboys and indians and telling ghost stories," says Flood, 26. "The house was falling into disrepair and none of us knew just how old it was, but it was a very important part of our childhood."

The "playhouse", it later turned out, was one of the lost big houses of Ireland, built between 1702 and 1710 for Robert Rochfort, one of the wealthiest Irishmen of the period. Research showed the property, New Park House, was fitted out in opulent style and became an entertainment hub for the upper classes.

Flood's father, Joe, decided to unearth the house's history after he had failed to secure planning permission five years ago to reconstruct it on a site beside the original, which was by then completely derelict and located in a light industrial area.

Despite having no information about the house, Joe Flood instinctively felt

there was more to it than met the eye. For help, he turned to Eneclann, a Trinity College Dublin campus company that specialises in historical research.

"Joe Flood came to us in 2008 as a romantic who wanted to rebuild New Park House as it once stood," says Fiona Fitzsimons, director and general manager.

"At the time, Joe told me he thought the house was interesting and he would love to restore it. He thought it might have been built between 1800 and 1820. But really, none of us knew how significant it was. He did say there was some nice cut stone, which had fallen from the house and was lying beneath some ivy, and he couldn't believe there was no historical record of it."

"I started to research the house and it wasn't long before I realised that this house was a lot older, early 18th century in fact. But New Park wasn't recorded in the Buildings of Ireland inventory or in the architectural archives — all knowledge of it had been lost."

Fitzsimons and her team of genealogists — or historical detectives — discovered that the Rochfort family, whose seat was in Co Westmeath, had bought the land in 1702. The house was built some time before 1710, to be used when the family was in Dublin. The researchers found a will from 1726 in which Robert Rochfort bequeathed to his wife the furniture and goods belonging to her in New Park. Eneclann also discovered that this property — of which there were no official records — was so important that Jonathan Swift, the satirist, wrote a verse about it.

Although the Floods have yet to convince the planners to allow them to rebuild New Park House, they believe the discovery of its history is a personal victory — and they encourage others to undertake similar research. Thanks to the popularity of programmes such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* — in which celebrities including Ryan Tubridy, Rosanna Davison and Diarmuid Gavin have investigated their family trees, with the help of research by Eneclann

— more and more homeowners are turning to property genealogy.

Perhaps Eneclann's most famous discovery is the home of the Irish ancestors of President Barack Obama, in the village of Moneygall, Co Offaly. An American genealogist was the first to trace Obama's family back to Offaly in the 1830s. Fitzsimons and her team went one better, however, and traced the president's Irish links to the Kearney family as far back as 1698.

"We found they had business interests in milling and in the wheat trade, but we also found an ancestor had been involved in Dublin city politics between the 1720s and 1760s, and that hadn't been known about before," says Fitzsimons.

Eneclann introduced its house histories in 1998 and says the number of inquiries has increased in the past year — not only from people seeking an unusual present for a home's owner but also from those seeking information to support planning or heritage applications.

"House histories were a slow but consistent seller until 2007, when interest fell dramatically," says Fitzsimons. "But in the last year, there has been a big pick-up in inquiries."

The cost starts at €75, a fee that covers an initial assessment to determine whether the historians will be able to undertake a more comprehensive investigation. If there is scope to carry out a detailed investigation, the starting fee is €450, excluding Vat.

It is preferable that the houses put forward are more than 100 years old and legible copies of the original deeds must be submitted. The historians also ask for photographs of the front and rear elevations and details of any unusual features — a bricked-up door in Fitzsimons's grandparents' house fascinated her as a child and later convinced her to offer the house histories.

"We also ask for a photograph of the roof and chimney stacks because an old house might be renovated three or four

times over 200 years," says Fitzsimons. "It might be added to in accordance with the style of that time. But the last thing to be changed, because it's not there for decorative purposes, is the chimney stack."

"In one case, we were doing a house history in Co Mayo and the client wanted to be able to draw down a heritage grant and they had been asked to provide a full report of the house history. We were able to identify that the envelope of the house dated from the third quarter of the 18th century on the basis of a number of architectural features, including the chimney stack."

For Tessa Neville, a psychiatrist in Co Cork, receiving the gift of a house history was particularly poignant. Neville and her husband, Eamonn Gaynor, live in a Georgian house in Emmet Square, Clonakilty — a location historically linked with Michael Collins, a former resident. Neville was raised in the house with her siblings, three of

whom died as young adults. After Neville inherited the house, she and Gaynor lovingly restored it in the 1980s at a cost equivalent to more than €50,000.

"We were in recession back then too and the builder we found was a local man who was letting staff go, so our restoration was a lifeline to him," says Gaynor. "We restored it to how it was, repairing the sash windows and preserving period features."

When Neville was presented with the house history, she discovered her home, which has been in her family since 1940, was a lot older than she expected. The researchers also found that the house was formerly inhabited by a manager of Deasy's Brewery, now defunct, which was built in 1807. That manager came from Weston-Super-Mare in southwest England and lent the name of his hometown to the house, which is called Weston Lodge to this day.

Neville says: "We always knew a lot about the house because we had title deeds, but to have the whole house researched threw up information as far back as 1806. Because the house existed in 1806, we think it might even date back to 1790. Eneclann found the square back then was established by the Earl of Shannon and was known as Shannon Square, not Emmet Square, and it's possible that our house was built even before that."

Fitzsimons says: "What we do is valuable. I suppose we're like historical detectives. We're going into the archives, we're focusing on one specific house and asking questions about that house or building and we're tracing all the documentary records that survive in the national archives, registry of deeds, state records and family records and in the county libraries and archives."

"We're following this paper trail and building up all this information and writing its history. So we can say a lot more about those buildings because we have the luxury of time to research."

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Davison, with historian Turtle Bunbury, studied her family tree