

Groomsport House



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Photograph from <http://lordbelmontinnorthernireland.blogspot.com/2015/06/groomsport-house.html>

In May 1843, the following advertisement appeared in several newspapers.

Notice to Builders.

PROPOSALS to Build a **HOUSE** and **OFFICES**
at **GROOMSPORT**, near Bangor, in County of
Down, will be received on or before **MONDAY**, the 22d
day of May next.

Proposals (sealed) to be addressed to **J. W. MAXWELL,**
Esq. at Finnebrogue, Downpatrick.

The Plans and Specifications to be seen at the Office of
JAMES SANDS, Esq. Architect, Hillsborough.

Finnebrogue, April 29, 1843. (140)

Belfast Commercial Chronicle 13 May 1843

The foundation stone was laid on 11 September 1844 by John Waring Maxwell's wife, Madelina Martha, after which about 70 people "sat down to a plentiful repast" (Northern Whig 17 September 1844.)

The house, which was completed by about 1848, has been described as being in the "Tudor Revival" or "Jacobethan" (ie Jacobean / Elizabethan) style. The sandstone used in its construction was shipped from Ayrshire at a cost of £6,000.

Marcus Patton, in "Historic buildings, groups of buildings and areas of architectural importance in Bangor and Groomsport" (Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, 1984), has the following entry for the Groomsport House, on page 64:

B (c.1850, formerly Maxwell House): Situated in once-generous grounds at the east of the village overlooking Cove Bay, this is a two-and-a-half-/three-storey cream sandstone building in Jacobethan style with shouldered gables, mullioned windows with label mouldings and tall octagonal chimney stacks; canted bays to seaward side with quatrefoil fretwork; porch has Gothic openings and octagonal corner pillars. There is a good interior with encaustic tiles and ribbed vaulting in the hall, spacious stairhall with good panelled doors, and ornate cornices to main rooms.

John Waring Maxwell (1788-1869), who was childless, built the house for his nephew and heir, Robert Perceval-Maxwell (1813-1905).

On 13 May 1848, the Downpatrick Recorder had the following report:

Yesterday evening, Robert Perceval **Maxwell** Esq., and family, who had been latterly residing at Moorhill, in the county Waterford, were met on their return, within a quarter of a mile of this town, on the Dublin road, by a number of the tenantry, who took the horses from the carriages, and drew them, amid lusty cheering and exhilarating music, to Finnebrogue House, the residence of his uncle, John Waring **Maxwell** Esq. We understand that Mr. Perceval **Maxwell** intends to reside permanently at Groomsport, where an elegant marine villa has lately been erected by Mr. J. W. **Maxwell**

(Moore Hill was the family home of Perceval-Maxwell's wife, Helena. She inherited Moore Hill in 1860.)

Groomsport House was Perceval-Maxwell's principal residence until he inherited the "Maxwell" estates, on the death of his uncle, in 1869, after which he moved to live at Finnebrogue, near Downpatrick. Groomsport House then became a summer residence for Robert Perceval-Maxwell, his wife and 12 children.

The house and the grounds were so extensive that 40 staff were employed, mostly people from the village. They included a butler, maids, kitchen staff, a blacksmith, a carpenter and gardeners. One employee recalled that the lawns were cut by a horse-drawn mover. However, to protect the lawn, the horses were shod with leather shoes.

The 1901 Census recorded that Groomsport House had 33 rooms and 44 out-buildings.

When Robert Perceval-Maxwell died in Finnebrogue in 1905 he left Groomsport House to his two unmarried daughters for their lifetimes. Isabella and Anna (the Misses Perceval-Maxwell) both took an active interest in village life until they died in 1923 and 1928.

Like many large houses, during the Second World War, Groomsport House was used by the armed forces. The following is from Charles Eugene Sumners' "Darkness Visible: Memoir of a World War II Combat Photographer":

"The Maxwell House Castle near Groomsport in Northern Ireland was large enough to take care of 150 men. My entire company, the 166th Signal Photo Company, was billeted in the castle from March 11 to April 25 1944. There was a beautiful stretch of beach just below the castle where we would go down in the afternoon and spread our blankets, hoping that some Irish lassies would come and sit with us." (page 16)

Sumners' colleague, Sgt. John S Blankenhorn wrote, in a letter:

"We are somewhere in Northern Ireland housed in an enormous, great, cold, gloomy manor house with a facade which suggests the England of Hugh Walpole and Warwick Deeping. What a line they must have had for the plumbing during a big house party!"*
(County Down Spectator, 22 October 2020)



Groomsport House in 1944

Photograph taken by Sgt John S Blankenhorn of 166th Signal Photography Company, US Army

* Hugh Walpole (1884-1941) and Warwick Deeping (1877-1950) - English novelists

The Perceval-Maxwell family returned to Groomsport House in 1951. Gavin Perceval-Maxwell restored the house and part of the grounds became a caravan park (now the Cove Bay development). He sold the Groomsport House in 1968 and it became an hotel.

Around the turn of the century, the house was converted into apartments and additional apartments were built on the site.

Peter Gibson
January 2023

Additional research by Perry Moore.

Sources, in addition to those referenced:

Lord Belmont's blog on Groomsport House, accessed at:
<http://lordbelmontinnorthernireland.blogspot.com/2015/06/groomsport-house.html>

"Tides and Times at the Port" by Rev Dr David Irwin

Newspaper reports accessed at the Irish Newspaper archive of: www.findmypast.co.uk