

## **November 2023    Outing to Lady Waterford Hall, Ford Village**

### **Speaker Sue Turnbull**

Following a talk on the 'Ford Estate at the time of the Waterford Family' earlier in the week, 25 members of the Society enjoyed a visit to Lady Waterford Hall. The visit began with a talk by the Hall curator and concluded with a splendid finger buffet luncheon.

The original village of Ford had abutted the castle, with cottages which over the years had become dilapidated. It was Louisa, Lady Waterford (1818-1891), who after the untimely death of her husband, the Marquis of Waterford, from a riding accident, initiated the re-modelling of the village a little distance from the castle. In 1860 she built a new and improved school building, used as a school until 1957, and now known as Lady Waterford Hall.

The Grade II listed Hall provides much to admire, particularly its architecture and art. The ornate style of the Victorian era is particularly evident in the variety of decorative roof tiles. The interior is purposely lofty, with high roof beams supported with scissor braces, light and airy. It was cold (as noted by ex pupils) with heating provided by just two open fireplaces. Two doors at the front of the building provide separate entry for boys and girls.

Today the Hall is best known for the panels depicting scenes from the Bible, painted by Louisa, Lady Waterford. The school murals were painted over a 24 year period on canvas in her home, Ford Castle, then mounted and framed with wood. Although largely self taught, she communicated with Pre-Raphaelite artists, including Ruskin, but her remarkable art work was less appreciated and less well known than it might have been at that time. She continued to draw and paint almost until her death in 1891.

We heard of her love of children and her philanthropic nature. She wished to use her wealth for the benefit of the Estate tenantry and she set up industries to promote skills to improve their prosperity. She was a devout Christian and taught children herself at Sunday school. Her art was aimed at helping the school children understand Biblical stories with the text to aid their writing, spelling and reading. Opposite the current entrance one is faced with scenes from the Old Testament, firstly Cain and Abel, followed clockwise to New Testament scenes on the south wall. At the east end, a scene of Jesus with the elders in the temple cleverly incorporates a window and other architectural features of the building. The murals include arches which echo the hall's architecture. The characters in the paintings are portraits of the villagers, estate workers and their children – sometimes an individual appears more than once. For example, one female model was the long standing housekeeper, Mary Heslop. Over time most have been identified, often by visiting relatives. The Medallions are also portraits. In addition to her murals, a great variety of Louisa, Lady Waterford's art work and sketches hang in the small rooms of the Hall.

The Lady Waterford Hall Trustees are concerned to conserve the paintings, so humidity and light are monitored and carefully controlled.

Following this illuminating talk, attendees had time to look at the art work before enjoying lunch and time to socialise. We are grateful to the Hall's management for enabling this visit.

Rosemary Bell