Hillsborough Castle and Gardens reopens to the public

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"The grandest house in County Down" was brought back to life thanks to an ambitious restoration project.

Hillsborough Castle and Gardens reopens its doors today (9 April) as a "must-visit attraction" in the heart of Northern Ireland.

Almost £5million from The National Lottery Heritage Fund has helped to transform the visitor experience at the castle, which now hopes to welcome 200,000 people each year.

The project, which was led by independent charity Historic Royal Palaces, has conserved and interpreted the site’s unique heritage and made it more accessible with the addition of new visitor facilities. It has also helped boost the local economy and created employment opportunities at the site.

Speaking at the opening event, Sir Peter Luff, Chair of The National Lottery Heritage Fund said: “The restoration has transformed and reimagined Hillsborough Castle as a must-visit attraction, and it is wonderful to see the ornate State Rooms and magnificent grounds restored to their former glory, with their unique history opened up for more people to enjoy."

The Throne Room. Credit: Historic Royal Palaces

Secrets revealed and stories told

Hillsborough Castle and Gardens was built in the late 18th century as an Irish "Big House". It replaced the fort which had been the first home of the wealthy Hill family, who gave the town its name. Today it is part of a 100-acre estate made up of historic buildings, gardens and parklands and is now the official home of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and a royal residence.

Lady Alice's Temple. Image credit: Historic Royal Palaces

Visitors can now tour the Castle’s State Rooms to learn more about their use as a venue for royal visits and political discussions. Outside, the Walled Garden’s historic features have been restored and the once Lost Garden has been rediscovered with new paths and trails allowing visitors to fully explore the extensive grounds.

A dedicated learning centre for families, schools and youth and community groups has also been created in the Stable Yard.

Sir Peter added: "This is a very special place, a view that will undoubtedly be shared by the increasing number of visitors expected here in the future.”