Patrick Prendergast had only recently become provost of Trinity College Dublin when in 2011 he unexpectedly came across two men in boiler jackets in the splendid crimson drawing room of his official residence. After a moment of confusion, one of the strangers explained their mission: “We’re here to wind the clocks.”

In the Provost’s House in the middle of Dublin we’ve just heard 10 gentle chimes from the long-case clock in the hall, an elegant 19th-century device known as a regulator because it keeps time so accurately. Using a special key, the winders tend to the precious timepiece at the same hour.
every Thursday, part of an old ritual in which they look after several old clocks in the storied university that itself dates from 1592.

The house is one of the city’s hidden treasures, an art-filled Palladian mansion in continuous use since 1760 but largely obscured behind a railed wall. Dubliners walking past can’t see in. Prendergast, 51, came to TCD in 1983 as an undergraduate in engineering but years passed before he ever ventured inside the Provost’s House. “I wasn’t in here as a student. I think the first time was when I was a lecturer. I can remember coming up to the doors thinking: ‘Can I really go in here? Am I in the right place?’ I didn’t even know it was part of the college really.”

Trams whisking along the new line that passes the provost’s front gate signal that this is a city home. The house stands behind a forecourt at Number One Grafton Street, the starting point of Dublin’s premier shopping thoroughfare, on the edge of a 55-acre campus that has 17,000 students. Government buildings are nearby, as are the city’s finest Georgian squares and the central business district. Still, the insistent drone of a lawnmower in the provost’s secluded back garden suggests it remains a place somewhat apart from the urban throng that surrounds it.

Prendergast’s roots are rural. He grew up in Wexford, south-east Ireland, in a bungalow built by his father, who owned a haulage business. The childhood sight of workmen fixing engines led to an enduring fascination with machinery. He majored in mechanical engineering before specialising in bioengineering, a discipline concerned with medical devices such as artificial hips and coronary stents. As an enterprising young academic in the 1990s he was well-placed to ride the wave of increased research funding.
Previously vice-provost, Prendergast was elected by colleagues seven years ago to lead the university for a 10-year term, becoming the first engineer to hold the post. He is steadfast in his wide-angle view of the university’s fundamental role, insisting it must do more than educate young adults for their first job. “This is something that’s easily forgotten: a university is more than a provider of educational services,” he says. “It looks under the bonnet and talks about what’s going on and provides a forum, and a place, and a venue for all kinds of discussion that educates society in the broadest sense.”

He cites research on dementia and energy storage devices; programmes to open the university to underprivileged students; the generosity of Chuck Feeney, an Irish-American philanthropist who quietly gave millions to Irish universities while distributing his €7bn fortune. The purpose of the house is to foster a sense of community among students and staff, says the provost. The building is used for meetings, receptions, entertaining and gatherings of the university board that oversees its work.
There is no mistaking the seductive grandeur of the five-bay, two-storey granite façade of the property with its central Venetian window. An octagonal stairway leads up to the magnificent saloon, a light-filled reception room that extends along the entire length of first floor, its intricate rococo plasterwork and Corinthian columns a distraction from views of the city outside.

But this also is a private residence, bound by the rhythms of quotidian living. The kitchen provides a focal point, yet it wasn’t always that way. It was something of an “industrial catering kitchen” until it was transformed into a family room under his predecessor, complete with an Aga oven. A set of dinner plates was purchased by the wife of FSL Lyons, the historian who was provost from 1974 to 1981, showing a sense of history of the many families who have lived in the house over the centuries. “We spend most of the time here,” says Prendergast, who has a son and two daughters, the elder of whom is herself a student in the university.
To the rear is a cosy garden room, a retreat from all the splendour. The highlight is a sleek radiogram, comprising a radio, record-player and a discreet built-in drinks cabinet. Vinyl albums by Miles Davis and Van Morrison rest on the shelves.

**Trinity College Dublin** has long been a liberal force, educating and employing many of Ireland's leading lights. While today's university is regarded as one of the finest institutions in the modern Irish state, the thread of its history weaves through centuries of British rule. Established under Queen Elizabeth I, the place was a bastion of Calvinist theology and Anglicanism. When Britannia ruled the waves, it schooled for empire. After Irish independence in the 1920s the university took time to find its feet in the new order. John Charles McQuaid, the formidable Catholic archbishop of Dublin from 1940 to 1971, banned his flock from TCD for many years. “He wouldn’t get away with it now,” says Prendergast.

The 21st-century university has “an annual spend of about €375m”, according to Prendergast, which includes more than €100m for research, some of it carried out with British universities in European partnerships.

This brings us, inevitably, to Brexit, which threatens to pull UK institutions away from all that. Prendergast believes a way might be found to avoid disruption, perhaps by British universities paying to stay in EU research projects. But he says Irish-UK bilateral links are crucial. “It’s a common labour market in many respects for academics so therefore it is a special relationship that helps Irish science and Irish universities and we will need to pay attention to it to make sure that it stays strong.”
At this point we are in his library, the principal working space in the house from which he runs the university. It was in this very place that a little bit of Irish history was made only a couple of years ago. The tale began with an inconclusive general election that left the country in political stalemate. Then one day Prendergast took a call from Leo Varadkar, a minister on the rise who would go on to become prime minister in 2017, becoming the first TCD graduate to hold the office. To break the deadlock, the two biggest parties were seeking a new venue for talks. “They were looking for somewhere close by that weren’t government buildings so we were happy to give them a room,” says Prendergast.

So it was that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, the great rivals of Irish politics, came together around the provost’s library table. Prendergast recalls bringing biscuits and coffee to the negotiators as the talks dragged on. “They said they wanted it for two days, but they stayed for a week. We were happy to have them though. It was fine.”

Paintings of past provosts and scholars line the walls. One of Prendergast’s favourites is a study by James Barry of Edmund Burke, the 18th-century Irish statesman and political thinker whose statue stands outside the university’s main entrance. In such a setting it may be tempting to dwell on the past but Prendergast adamantly sets it all in the here and now. “We’re in this room...”
full of portraits but that wouldn’t be worth anything if we weren’t delivering currently as a contemporary university.”

Favourite thing

Prendergast’s choice is “Tent to Himself”, an oil painting by Camille Souter in which a clown practises his art in a circus tent with his back facing the viewer. The provost likes this depiction of an intimate moment “because the figure seems to me to have an independent spirit, like the artist herself”.

Bought in 1964, the painting has been on display in student and staff rooms, classrooms, offices and in public locations on the TCD campus. Born in England in 1929, the artist has lived between Ireland and Italy. Souter, who started painting in the 1950s, received an honorary doctorate from the university in 2015.

Arthur Beesley is the FT’s Ireland correspondent

Follow @FTProperty on Twitter to find out about our latest stories first. Subscribe to FT Life on YouTube for the latest FT Weekend videos

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2018. All rights reserved.

Latest on Trinity College Dublin

https://www.ft.com/content/d1b34988-4eca-11e8-9471-a083af05aea7