

Regeneration History

Castle Leslie Estate's colourful history is awash with politics, royalty and war. The Leslie family has lived on the Estate since 1665. The land was purchased with a £2000-reward given to John Leslie, the fighting bishop, by King Charles II. The Family's non-conformist ancestors include warlike bishops, politicians, social reformers, agricultural innovators, philanthropic wives, fine pre-Raphaelite painters, furniture collectors, writers and war heroes. They've been connected with royalty, ambassadors and prime ministers, and regularly visited by foreign emigres, wits, poets and infamous kleptomaniacs.

The Estate was passed to Desmond Leslie in 1964 and subsequently to his daughter Samantha Leslie. The size and nature of the Estate, the cost of its upkeep and the effects of the troubles on the border county ensured that Castle Leslie Estate was a 'hot potato' within the family.

Typifying the Victorian excesses of its day, the Castle was built by Sammy's great great grandfather. When Sammy took it over from her father, she recognised it as a commercially viable opportunity that would not only ensure the future safekeeping of the Estate and its history but also prompt its regeneration.

Sammy's ambition was to bring the Estate back to life, gain sustainability through tourism and work symbiotically with local communities. She also wanted to have fun in the process! Her desire was to restore the Castle in the style and manner it was built to enable guest entertainment on a grand scale. But she started small, establishing tea rooms in the old conservatory thereby creating income to restore the roof.

Between 1995 and 1997, Sammy refurbished fourteen of the Castle bedrooms and bathrooms, each in its own unique style, in an effort to maintain the individuality and uniqueness of the property. Dinners were served by candlelight in the original dining room, just as it had been in the old days, with pre-dinner drinks served in the Drawing Room or Fountain Garden.

The Castle at Castle Leslie Estate was soon rewarded with The Good Hotel Guide Caesar Award for being 'utterly enjoyable and mildly eccentric'. It is a wonderful refuge for grown-ups where there are no TVs, phones or radios - just wonderful food, relaxed and friendly service, lazy breakfasts served until noon and picnics by the lake.

When peace finally came to Northern Ireland with the Good Friday Agreement, the Leslie Family took the opportunity to restore the rest of the Estate, slowly but surely, to its former glory.

In June 2002, Castle Leslie Estate hit centre stage when it hosted the wedding of Paul McCartney and Heather Mills. Over 800 million people worldwide saw the event on TV which had a huge impact on the progression of Castle Leslie Estate and the border counties.

In 2004, after 20 years in external ownership, the Estate's Equestrian Centre and Hunting Lodge were re-purchased. Having secured euro cross-border funding, the family set about restoring and regenerating the Castle at Castle Leslie Estate. The redevelopment of the Long Gallery Wing in the Castle enabled the Estate to offer business and corporate facilities. The addition of six further guestrooms brought the room total in the Castle to 20. The transformation of the old Victorian Kitchens into a Cookery School added another dimension to the expanding Estate.

With 78,000 square feet of historic buildings, miles of famine wall and the Hunting Lodge back in the fold, funding was sourced for reinvestment in the Estate. Inspired by Poundbury, the town Prince Charles built in England, Sammy Leslie worked with a team of Irish architects to extend the village of Glaslough back over the Estate where it had been, prior to a fire in the 1850s. A seamless extension to Glaslough village, the Village Cottages and houses are built around a Village Square and Green. Sammy wanted to ensure that the development would be sensitive to the Irish Countryside and sympathetic to the current style of the existing village so she called in specialists in conservation and heritage architecture to design the development. All proceeds from the sale of the houses are re-invested to fund the continual regeneration of the Estate.

Located at the gates of Castle Leslie Estate, the Hunting Lodge and Equestrian Centre underwent extensive refurbishment and renovation before re-opening in May 2007. Both had been in the Leslie family for many years until 1984 when Desmond Leslie sold them. It was in the midst of the Irish troubles and his daughter Sammy had just qualified as an intermediate instructor. Undeterred, Sammy set up a yard in the old Estate farm buildings. Here she bought, sold and broke horses until 1987, vowing to re-purchase the Hunting Lodge when she could. She achieved her goal in 2004.

All the hard work and commitment started to pay off in 2005 when Castle Leslie Estate won the Sunday Times 'Best Country House' and Food & Wine's 'Best Country House Restaurant in Ulster' awards. More recognition followed in 2006 with the Hotel & Catering Review Gold Medal Award for Best Country House which recognises excellence in 11 categories.

In January 2006, work started on the €10million refurbishment to expand and improve the existing facilities - the 35-bedroomed Lodge and the new state-of-the-art Equestrian Centre. The project was supported by grant aid from the

Irish Government and part-financed by the European Union under the National Development Plan 2000-2006, administered by Fáilte Ireland.

This has allowed Sammy to go back again to her original dream - great horses, good food and old-style hospitality. But never one to rest, she has already identified a number of future projects including the restoration of the Walled Garden and Gate Lodge.