



The walled garden at Castle Leslie



The house has been run by the Leslie family since 1665

A PLACE LESS ORD

With 1,000 acres of woodland, and lakes and gardens as far as the eye can see, the breathtaking Castle Leslie Estate is a place that spills over with history, charm and a feeling of home. It has just undergone an expansion, allowing it to welcome more guests with 21st-century comforts and its own unique atmosphere, writes **Caitríona McBride**

Photography: **Barry Cronin and Castle Leslie**



Castle Leslie at
Glaslough in Co
Monaghan



Concierge Owen McNaughton is on hand to welcome visitors



Margaret Canny, accommodation manager, in Castle Leslie's master bedroom



Castle Leslie Estate is no ordinary hotel. In fact, the team rarely use the word hotel to describe this family-run estate beside the picturesque village of Glaslough, Co Monaghan. There are 1,000 acres of stunning woodland, lakes and gardens on this estate, which has been run by the Leslie family since 1665. It is currently run by Samantha or ‘Sammy’ Leslie, who took the reins from her father Desmond. Sammy’s work to rejuvenate and expand the estate over the last two decades has been difficult, but ultimately successful. So much so that they have just unveiled an additional 21 new bedrooms and a new 40-seater conservatory, both at the Lodge on the estate, images of which are published for the first time here.

Brian Baldwin has been working at Castle Leslie for almost 11 years and assumed the role of chief executive last year.

“I’ve fallen in love with Castle Leslie Estate,” he says. “It’s the challenge and the uniqueness of the property that really attracted me to it, and is keeping me passionate about it today. It’s just not a hotel in a box. It’s varied, but it’s wonderful and it’s massively challenging and, at the same time, rewarding.”

The cost of estate upkeep is cumbersome and many have had to close their doors. It is quite remarkable that Leslie, Baldwin and their 150 ➡



Sammy Leslie, trustee to the Castle Leslie Estate



The equestrian centre at Castle Leslie



The Lodge at Castle Leslie, which has just unveiled an additional 21 bedrooms

full and part-time staff have not only avoided the same fate, but have experienced increasing demand, requiring them to expand.

Two decades ago, Sammy Leslie realised the estate was in a precarious state and needed urgent attention. She opened up a tea room in the conservatory to make some extra money and over two decades worked assiduously to restore the estate and refurbish bedrooms. She also added a world-class equestrian centre, treatment rooms and a cookery school.

“When you come to talk about Castle Leslie Estate, it’s thanks to the fact that the Leslie family have remained owners and guardians of the estate,” says Baldwin. “It’s thanks to them that the magic of that estate was never lost. Sammy would place a lot of emphasis on the landscaping and the existing infrastructure that was there and why change it for change’s sake? It is the most magical of destinations.”

Castle Leslie Estate’s success has seen it grow into the €10 million business that it is today. The last 27

years have seen huge regeneration to the estate and in the last decade they have experienced a 300 per cent growth in turnover.

“It’s a wonderful story to tell,” says Baldwin. “We had a supply and demand issue; there were countless nights where we ran out of rooms to sell at the Lodge and were refusing guest bookings and we don’t like to disappoint our guests, so we expanded.” He says

their success is down to a number of factors.

“We invested heavily in our brand over the last decade and have a dedicated team who are guardians of our brand. Our level of customer care is second to none, our staff right across the estate strive every day to go above and beyond their roles to offer exceptional service to our guests. I’ve always insisted that here, in Castle Leslie, we are looking for a slightly different balance. I want people’s unique personalities to shine through as opposed to this blanket response of ‘Yes, sir, no, sir’.”

What makes Castle Leslie so special is the family’s history, which is imbued throughout the estate. Everywhere feels like home. In fact the late Sir John Leslie, 4th Baronet, known as Jack, who was Sammy’s uncle, used to take his breakfast in his robe among the other guests like they were all truly at home. Jack was a first cousin once removed of Winston Churchill’s.

The Leslies have a fascinating family history and can trace their ancestry back to Attila the Hun. The first Leslie to come to Ireland was Bishop John Leslie, ‘the Fighting Bishop’, who was bishop of the Isles of Scotland. He settled first at Raphoe in Co Donegal, purchasing the lands at Glaslough with a £2,000 reward given by King Charles II for his loyalty to the crown.

The estate was passed to Desmond Leslie in 1964 and later his daughter Sammy took it over. There are numerous challenges that come with this type of property, not least that maintaining 1,000 acres requires not only deep pockets, but constant maintenance. Sammy realised that by opening up Castle Leslie as a commercial operation, she could safeguard it, while refurbishing it with any profits.

The recent new build took nine months to complete. “We added 21 bedrooms at the Lodge,” Baldwin says, “a new 40-seater conservatory; we upgraded IT customer services and TV and telephone in all 50 bedrooms; we redesigned and refurbished our Lodge and Castle kitchens, redesigned and refurbished Lodge staff facilities and staff offices and undertook extensive work in the Castle.”

Castle Leslie Estate has won over 50 national awards, many of them for food and the superb restaurant in the Lodge. Snaffles is a multi-award winner for its exceptional and exciting plates of food, each one like a work of art. There is also the option of Conor’s Bar for more casual dining, or there is a range of options in the Castle including afternoon tea in the drawing room.

They added a conservatory onto Conor’s Bar as there had been an outdoor area, but it wasn’t being fully utilised due to the unpredictability of Irish weather. It also helps because they have strong local demand for Conor’s Bar and its lounge food, and sometimes guests were waiting in a queue for ta-



A suite at the Lodge



The new 40-seater conservatory at the Lodge

bles. Baldwin said they wanted to ensure a positive problem didn't become a negative issue.

As well as the Lodge and the Castle, there are other accommodation options in the Old Stable Mews and Village cottages, which are popular self-catering options for families and groups.

One of the most appealing things about the estate for guests is the number of activities including boating and fishing, a film in the private cinema in the Castle, stunning walking trails, hot-air balloon rides, archery, falconry, or relaxing in the Victorian treatment rooms. Naturally, the equestrian centre is popular with visitors.

After years of hard work, the estate is now profitable, which allowed finance to be secured for further investment in the bedrooms and the conservatory. The works carried out have been in line with Sammy's vision: sympathetic and in keeping with the estate.

"The build programme has been fantastic," says Baldwin. "It's been on schedule, on budget, on time. Very few guests have realised where those rooms have been built. We're really looking forward to getting them open and getting them full. What's great is, already, they are pretty much 80 per cent full, bookings-wise, at this early stage, so it's fantastic."

The Lodge's new bedrooms are all named after past and present estate horses and some of them have their own private patio terrace.

With this new investment comes a certain pressure. Baldwin says that although he said he is confident the new rooms will be a success, "It's always a concern when you add more, as it needs to be fruitful."

An estate like this is subject to increased competition and, as Baldwin admits, Monaghan can be a tough sell in terms of attracting both guests and staff.

"In Monaghan," he says, "which is not the Gold Coast, we have to work hard at bringing people to us. The key thing is that once we get people to Castle Leslie Estate, we have them converted. And we are very lucky that we have a loyal local workforce, many of whom have been with me since I began."

There is a very relaxed, authentic family feel to the Castle Leslie experience. It is an unending treasure trove of antique interiors, family heirlooms, art and beautiful things, both in the Castle and the Lodge. Some of the original curtains hang in the Castle, and while they might be a little frayed, they are just one example of the unapologetic charm which is part of the heart of the estate.

The Castle, which has 20 bedrooms, is not the



The boat house



A bedroom at the Lodge

a doll's house. There is also a very relaxing, beautiful drawing room which features a grand piano and Del La Robbia fireplace. It is a very romantic place and hugely popular for weddings. Paul McCartney certainly agreed when he married (now ex-wife) Heather Mills there in 2002.

Baldwin is keen to point out that Castle Leslie Estate is not comparable to anywhere else. His hope is that guests experience a warm welcome and feel like it is a home away from home where they can kick off their shoes, sit back and read a paper and enjoy the estate.

"I would say sometimes to people, you either love it or you hate it, but it's the genuine warmth and welcome and the service. We want our guests to feel as if they're staying with family and that they're staying in a family home and a family business. We very rarely use the word hotel."

Brexit is looming over many border businesses and Castle Leslie would be well placed to feel a particularly acute concern given it is so close to the border. However, as it is still such a complex unknown, everyone is just getting on with things for now.

Elsewhere, the future looks bright at Castle Leslie and future works include the rejuvenation of the walled garden, the creation of a visitor centre, the restoration of the estate Famine wall and the restoration of the four gate lodges.

"Sammy's original dream was always great horses, good food and old-style hospitality," Baldwin says. "I'd confidently say we've now achieved her dream." ■



Falconry at Castle Leslie

typical hotel experience. There are no TVs, radios or electronic key cards. However, there is complimentary wifi.

Ensure to take your time choosing your room as they are all decorated individually, in dramatic styles. There are lots of quirky original features and curios, including Jack's bed which is on the top floor of the Castle and belonged to Madame Tallien, Napoleon's mistress. Each bathroom is unique and features include the first plumbed bath in Ireland, a throne toilet and a bathroom that is hidden away in



The boot room