

Inside the 1,000-acre estate run by one of Ireland's last remaining chatelaines

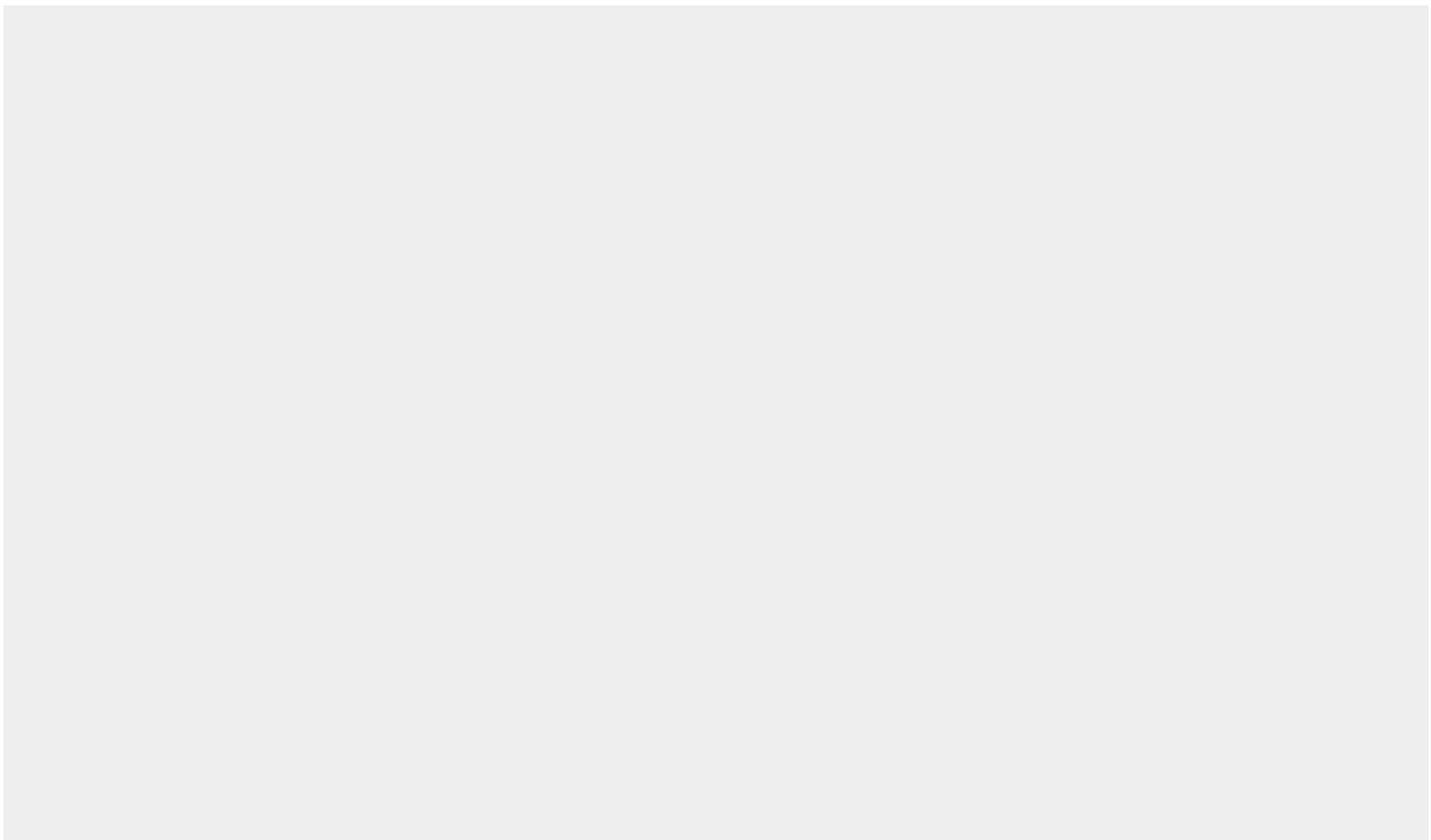
Great Estates: Sammy Leslie has never regretted turning her ancestral home into a luxury hotel



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The estate sits on the border of the Republic of Ireland and the Northern Irish counties of Armagh and Tyrone Credit: Ben Ryan/Alamy



Eleanor Doughty

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Castle Leslie

Year built
1878

Notable occupiers
Sir John ‘Shane’ Leslie, 3rd Baronet,
diplomat and man of letters

Where to find it
Castle Leslie, Glaslough, Castle Leslie
Estate, Co. Monaghan, H18 FY04,
Ireland; castleleslie.com

How big
1,000 acres

Castle Leslie, which sits on the border of the Republic of Ireland and the Northern Irish counties of Armagh and Tyrone, has been owned by the Leslie family since 1878 – though the family’s claim to the land dates back as far as the 17th century.

That they've managed to keep hold of it is notable: there are vanishingly few "big houses" in the Republic of Ireland still owned by their founding families.

During the Irish War of Independence and Irish Civil War, at least 275 country houses belonging to Anglo-Irish ascendancy families were burned by republican forces. Some were never restored, while plenty others have since been sold.

When the Irish Free State was established in 1922, Castle Leslie was right on the new border, and today is run by Sammy Leslie, having taken the mantle from her father, Desmond.



Sammy Leslie was the only one of her father's five children who was interested in running the 19th century castle Credit: Charles McQuillan

She was just two when the civil rights movement began in Caledon village, five miles away across the field in [Northern Ireland](#). "You learned how to navigate it," she says of the Troubles. "It was there in the searches and the checkpoints, and the 'we regret to interrupt this television programme...'. It was frighteningly normal."

Sammy remembers coming home from shopping in the north one day with her mother Helen, at a time when VAT was charged on children's clothing in the Republic. Stopped by customs officials, she had her coat pulled from her, which incensed her mother.

“She was 6ft tall and her nickname was Boadicea. She swung at the official with the coat, clearing pens and papers off the counter.” Sammy says the police were called, to which her mother responded: “‘Tell them Mrs Leslie is looking to speak to them’, and apparently the officer replied, ‘If I were you, I’d let her go’”



Castle Leslie has undergone several restorations over the past two decades Credit: Ashley Morrison/Alamy

The Leslies were not threatened directly, but violence was close by: IRA bombs were planted at Caledon Castle in 1972 and 1973, and in 1981 Sir Norman Stronge, 8th Baronet, MC and his son James were murdered by the [IRA](#) at Tynan Abbey, seven miles away.

Desmond had never meant to run Castle Leslie at all. By 1908, his father – the writer Sir John Leslie, later 3rd Baronet – had chosen – as he described, “in an outburst of Celtic fervour” – to call himself “Shane”, convert to Catholicism and renounce the estates entailed on him.

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His Protestant parents, shocked, devolved what remained of the Castle Leslie estate – which, before the land acts, had been over 40,000 acres – on to his

younger brother Norman, who was later killed in the First World War.

In time, Shane's elder son Jack became the future inheritor of Castle Leslie. He, Desmond and their sister Anita recalled growing up in a particularly unloving environment. As Anita described, "We realised fairly early that our own father did not exactly dislike us – he would merely have preferred us not to have been born."



The castle can host wedding parties of up to 70 guests. Sir Paul McCartney married Heather Mills at the castle Credit: Charles McQuillan

Decades later, after being battered by five years in a German prisoner-of-war camp, Jack announced that, like his father, he didn't want Castle Leslie either.

In 1966, it was left to Desmond to manage – though his plans for the estate were thwarted by the Troubles. As the years wore on, it became clear that of his five children, only Sammy was interested in running the house. She prepared for this with entrepreneurial zeal and, aged 18, set up a yard buying, selling and training horses, before going travelling and studying hotel management at École Les Roches in Switzerland.

When Desmond rang up and asked if she would like to come home, or else the estate might be sold, she returned to Monaghan.

In May 1991 she opened the tearooms, and the decision was made that the [house would become a hotel](#). In 2002, the year after Desmond died, Sir Paul

McCartney married Heather Mills at Castle Leslie. “I thank him every day for picking here,” says Sammy, “not just for here, but for what it did to the perception of the border area.”



There are 21 guest bedrooms in the castle, while the nearby lodge has 50 Credit: Charles McQuillan

She bought her siblings out of the house that no one wanted – which, leaking and in need of rewiring, “almost had a negative value” – and has been hard at work ever since.

There are two types of people heritage, she says: “The taxidermists who are good at spending money making dead things look good, and the vets who don’t have much money but keep something living and breathing. We are vets. It’s about doing things softly and gently.”

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She feels no sadness about her old family home becoming a hotel. “It’s beautifully restored and we have been able to do all sorts of things that we wouldn’t have been able to otherwise. There’s only me and my cats – what

would be the point of having all of this? I couldn't have cats in the main house anyway – I lost one up a chimney once.”

Over the last 20 years Sammy has completed a series of restoration projects – on the castle, the lodge, a 50-room hotel, and the surrounding buildings – but she reckons that they are only halfway there. Beyond the castle is the four-mile famine wall, which needs work, and further afield still is Badia di San Sebastiano, a 6th century monastery outside Rome that Jack happened upon in the 1960s, and which she is now preparing for sale.



Sammy prepared for becoming an estate owner with entrepreneurial zeal and by 18 had set up a yard buying, selling and training horses Credit: Charles McQuillan

The future of Castle Leslie will be within the Leslie Foundation, a charitable trust. In Ireland, a challenge faced by the country house community concerns “the next generation wanting to take them on,” says Sammy. “I have nieces and nephews, but they’re following their own passions, and you can’t do this unless you really want to.”

The community of those that can empathise is small. “Lots of people get offered big cheques [for their houses]. Friends of my age, their parents sold – the LeFroys sold Carrigglas Manor in 2005, and then it got caught in the property crash and the house was boarded up.”



The Leslie family describe themselves as 'distinguished and somewhat individual' Credit: Charles McQuillan

It all goes to show how remarkable it is that the Leslies have hung on for 361 years. “We resisted Cromwell’s forces, put in a bill against absentee landlords and refused the Castlereagh bribes – we are a different-thinking family,” says Sammy. “There are companies today that are about extracting as much profit as possible, while others work on the basis of social enterprise. Estates were the same – they either chose to do the right thing or they didn’t.”

Does she feel a sense of duty? “It’s more in England than in Ireland, that sense of duty, but as John F Kennedy said, ‘ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.’ Do what you can to bring these places back to life – rather than sit there going, ‘well, what can all of that give me?’”

Sammy took on Castle Leslie because she wanted to, but, she says, “Looking back, if I hadn’t done it, what would have happened? A bad dose of dry rot, a fire when there was no insurance... I don’t know.”

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