

A Kilkenny castle earns its keep

Alanna Gallagher

It took two generations of Campions to revive a ruined tower, turning it into a glorious getaway

Many of us dream of being king or queen of the castle but one Co Kilkenny man, a doctor by day and restoration man by night, picked up where his father had left off and turned a tower house, a structure built some 500 years ago and uninhabited for over a century, when it was used as a shed for his family's dairy herd, into a warm and comfortable home.

It took two generations of Campions, a father and son, both named John, to make it happen. Their people have farmed the rich lands of southwest Kilkenny for generations.

Tubbrid Castle has always been in their lives. It was constructed in the 1500s reputedly by Margaret Fitzgerald, Eighth Countess of Ormond, and is one of about five in this part of southwest Kilkenny. Skirmishes saw the property pass into the hands of the Shortalls who owned at least three similar structures in the area and then to the local landed gentry, the St Georges. It was still in their ownership when a Catherine Campion, John's great-great grandmother, is listed in the Griffith Valuation of 1851 as residing in the castle as a tenant of Sir RB St George.

His great-grandparents bought the lands on which Tubbrid Castle stood around the turn of the 20th century, when the Land Acts allowed tenants to buy the lands they were renting from their landlords.

It was a bleak house, Campion recalls, devoid of a roof and no glass in the windows. Around the same time the family moved into a farmhouse a couple of hundred metres from the historical house and they took a limestone fireplace from it with them. Carved in two pieces, each bore the numerals 15 and 96 marking 1596, possibly the year the tower was built.

The castle was used as a shed for the family's dairy herd, mainly Friesian and Holsteins whose milk they sell to Glánbia for use in its Avonmore ranges.

Rehabilitation plans

Growing up, John Campion Snr had plans to rehabilitate the tower house. When he had reared his family he started turning those dreams into a reality and began works in 2004 when he was in his mid-50s. He hired a conservation engineer, Ivor McElveen, who suggested he repaint the exterior, put a roof on it and even employed professional stonemasons to rebuild the door and window lintels.

I think my mum was skeptical at the start, Campion Jnr recalls. "She thought it was a crazy idea. And it was. But to save it from falling down she was at my dad's side. When he started it he was in the full of his health."

His father then got Lewy's Body dementia, a progressive condition with Parkinson's like symptoms.

"Dad put so much effort into saving it from falling down, I felt it would be a shame not to complete the task."

He applied for planning permission in 2016 and had to submit archaeological impact reports, and retain an archaeologist throughout the works.

He was lucky. If his father hadn't started the works 14 years ago, it would have become irretrievable, he explains.

"But the efforts to make it safe and habitable are eclipsed by the original physical effort it took to erect it. In an era of mechanised cranes and power tools the effort is unimaginable."

With his architect, Cormac O'Sullivan of Bluett & O'Donoghue Architects, he went through every detail which meant by the time Murphy Brothers Building Contractors came onto the site much of the problem-solving had been done.

Campion jnr wanted the renovation to have a light touch but to be comfortable. He wanted it to showcase indigenous materials and to have a sustainability aspect. An air to water heat pump powered the underfloor heating which has eliminated damp and its electricity comes from wind sources through supplier Airtricity.

He engaged designer Orla Kelly to give the place a contemporary feel. The idea was to



deliver a contemporary Scandi-inspired interior within the medieval property, she says.

Kelly had previously worked on Clomantagh Castle for the Irish Landmark Trust and knew what to look out for but she found that the restoration work had been carried out to a high standard.

Everything John Campion snr had done he had done really well, she recalls. "The hammer beams under the roof, for example, had all been constructed using timber dowels, as it would have been before nails or screws, by Paul Price of Dún Laoghaire-based Woodwrights."

The ground and first floors each have a vaulted ceiling of about five metres high. The luxury was to retain one room per floor. Each floor measures about 40sq m, the average size of a one-bedroom apartment. Stone steps climb the tower from a corner of each room.

The property opens into the first of its three bedrooms. It has an oak bed and shelving with yew and sycamore bedside tables which were made by The Wood Factory. A gorgeous bathroom, with the bath set into the eight foot thick walls, picked out in Genesis, a periwinkle grey, with a limestone sink from Tilestyle and a black mixer from BTW.

The open plan kitchen living room is on the

floor above. All the furniture had to be craned in through the windows as the steps were too narrow to bring anything up except flat pack furniture. A modica grey kitchen was sourced from Cash & Carry Kitchens and built *in situ*.

The dining table and the Malmesbury fireside chairs were sourced from Meubles in Kilkenny city. The emerald green dining chairs came from UK retailer Made.com. Kelly sourced the Armani velvet for the drapes from The Fabric Outlet in Newbridge, where she also sourced a tweed for curtains on the floor above.

Lush countryside

Touches like pillar candles from local maker Moth to a Flame help amplify the atmosphere. Chunky velvet seat cushions, by Ide's Upholstery, create a feature out of the thick walls. John now breakfasts at the window seat of the first floor surveying the glorious lush countryside.

One floor up and you can see that the fireplace with the build date has been reinstated and surrounds another stove in this bedroom. A Sassy Boo bed, a black four-poster with barleysugar twists, from the French Bedroom Company is the focal point of the room. The room has a feature wall with bench seating all painted in Colourtrend's Blue

■ John Campion jnr at Tubbrid Castle in Co Kilkenny which has been in his family for generations. The interior has been fully refurbished and decorated in Scandi style
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Period 0690 – a creative and sophisticated way of hiding the heating system, she explains. There is a window seat on each level, a space in which, Kelly says, you can curl up, close the curtains and create a small but scenic room.

Kelly couldn't get a wardrobe up the stairs so she improvised by installing brass hooks by Miller, also BTW, and constructing a chest of drawers from Ikea in the bedroom. The bedside locker came from Made.com and the bedside lamps from Meubles.

Sixty-four steps to the top and if the ascent doesn't take your breath away, the views will; on a clear day you can see to the counties of Laois, Tipperary and across Kilkenny. On a clear night, the stargazing from the buttresses is pretty epic.

The room at the top of the house has brass-style beds and bed-end blanket boxes, both from Made.com. It is painted a Colourtrend Kimono red and feels like it could be one of the dormitories from Harry Potter, Kelly says.

All told, Campion jnr estimates that he has spent around €280,000 on this final phase of the renovation for which has taken out a mortgage. Sadly his father passed away last year before the works were finished and is buried in the churchyard not 100 metres from his beloved castle.

The property is now available as a short-let. A minimum two-night stay for two costs €390 midweek and €440 at weekends on Airbnb.

orkellydesign.com; boda.ie; ivormcelveenassociates.ie; woodwrights.ie; murphybrothersbuildingcontractorsbusiness.site; meubles.com; tubbridcastle.com

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