



Castle Life

The Corscadden family is immersed in the history of the Irish hotel business, impressively spanning four generations, numerous counties and properties therein and three beautiful castles - Cabra Castle in County Cavan, Ballyseede Castle in County Kerry and Bellingham Castle in County Louth.

We were delighted to meet with hotelier Howard Corscadden recently, to discuss the family history, the properties in their ownership and the acquisition, and major refurbishment, of Bellingham Castle in the last eighteen months.

So, when did this great family tradition of hoteliers begin? In Co. Wicklow in the 1940's and 1950's, Howard's grandfather, Pops Corscadden and his wife Mamie, ran the International Hotel in Bray. Renowned for the adjoining Arcadia Ballroom, this hotel and dancehall are fondly-remembered from the heyday of the bygone Showband Era. Pops' three sons continued in the hotel tradition, and each bought their own hotels; Sean set up Corscadden's Hotel in Kilcock, Co. Meath and his brother Alex acquired three properties - two in Wicklow and one in England. Howard's father Pappy, with his wife Mitzie acquired and ran The Derby House in Kildare, where Howard and his siblings were raised.

The tradition continued as Howard and his sister Marnie both trained at Shannon College of Hotel Management, following in the steps of their mother Mitzie, who still serves as counsellor to the three properties.

In 1991, having sold Derby House, they acquired Cabra Castle which is run by Howard and his team. "When the economy took off, Cabra took off," he tells us, "we were unique in that we were the only four star castle in the country, apart from the five star Dromoland and Ashford. We filled a niche in providing an opportunity for tourists who wished to enjoy the experience of a Castle stay, allowing them to do so at a more affordable price."

Cabra Castle is now a 110 bed-roomed Castle Hotel, featuring a converted courtyard, as well as charming woodland cottages and being marketed by Manor

House Hotels of Ireland. "It's a well-established hotel, and I would say, one of the leaders in the region."

The family's acquisition of their next Castle Hotel, Ballyseede Castle in Tralee, makes for a suitably eccentric and funny story; Howard visited the castle with his sister Marnie and their mother, and when he returned from checking the roof, the two women had struck a deal and bought it.

"I was sent upstairs - they were like 'get rid of him,'" laughs Howard. "On my return, they asked me how the roof was, and when I replied that it was fine, they said 'good, because we've bought the castle!'"

There are certainly no regrets or admonishments of haste. "That was around eight years ago. Ballyseede is the only Castle Hotel in Co. Kerry, so it is unique. It's now one of the leading wedding hotels in the southwest; it is always full, with 100% occupancy in the Summer months and we only close for 4 weeks each year." Marnie now runs Ballyseede with her husband Rory.

A year ago, Bellingham Castle completed the trinity. The family were on the lookout for 

'be design'

Audrey Gaffney and the 'be design' team have pulled out all the stops in recreating the grandeur that was once Bellingham Castle. From speaking with Audrey she relayed her team's involvement in the overall project which included a huge amount of pre-planning from the concept and architectural requirements. "A lot of our involvement was architectural and planning as well as the recognisable design, concepts & finishes. We managed the entire project, co-ordinating consultants and trades such as the structural engineers, conservation architect, fire consultant and landscape architect to ensure that the final design would not be compromised," explains Audrey Gaffney, Interior Architect and owner of 'be design'.

As timelines were tight 'be design's' vast experience and expertise in the hospitality industry came into play, ensuring that this project maintained the 5 star luxury finish the client required. As design procedures can vary with each project, it was important to ensure that consideration was given to the program and that a tight rein was kept on progress. All this was possible given the level of proficiency in the hospitality sector within the 'be design' team. They also undertook to preserve and repair any of the original features and details within the castle, and full consideration was given to ensure that any additional works was in keeping with the Castle's expectation which shows in exquisite final furnishings and finishes.

The castle is home to 19 bedroom suites, each one having its own distinctive layout and timeless classic scheme. The ground floor is impressive with the large marble fireplace located within the entrance hall and the checkerboard black and white marble flooring. "This floor is seen as what would have once been the grand house. It all needs to lean itself to what is now a hotel but we need to ensure that the guests feel at home and that the feeling of belonging is theirs during their stay," explains Amy O'Sullivan, leading Interior Architect on this project. "A lot of thought has gone into how the end user will use the space, and it needs to function for our client also behind the scenes," adds Audrey Gaffney. The lower ground floor houses the ballroom with its specular crystal chandeliers and elegant panelling, and leads to a magical classic walled garden beyond. Further on is a series of informal, stylish and elegant reception rooms and bar. There is a rustic kitchen where you can help yourself to some tea or coffee, a snug little coal bunker, and then the wine cellar which leads you into a grand but cosy sitting room. The smart refined bar and lounge gives that feel of country life and running onto a paved patio area where the outdoors can be brought inside during the warm Irish summer that we all hope are coming.

This project was design led requiring any M&E and building works to be co-ordinated around the design requirements. From the bespoke carpets to the carefully selected wall coverings and the antique furniture to the crystal chandeliers, each room was uniquely designed lending to the obvious exclusive destination that is now Bellingham Castle.

You can find Audrey Gaffney and the 'be design' team at Unit 1 Scurlockstown Business Park, Dublin Road, Trim, Co. Meath. Contact them directly on info@bedesign.ie or 046 9064190



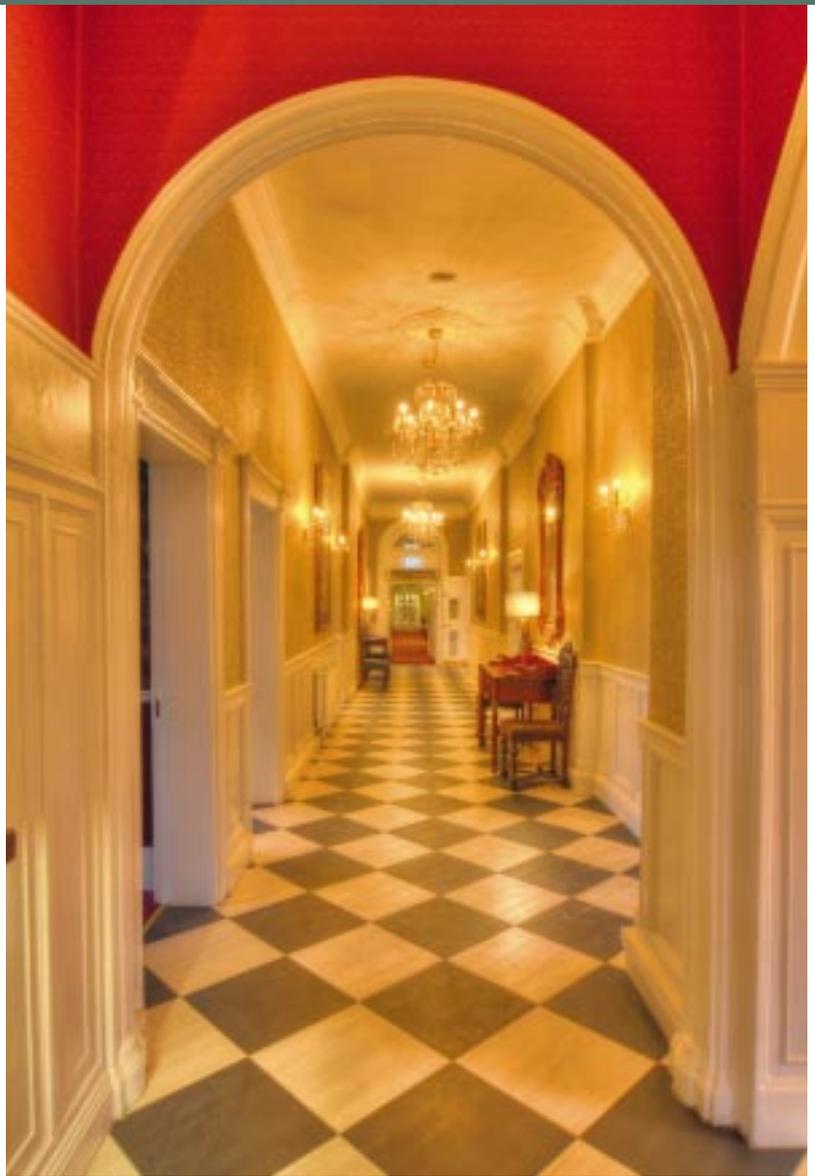


another castle and the advent of the recession nudged Bellingham into their budget. With this property however, the family have chosen a different operational model from that of Cabra and Ballyseede.

Howard explains: "We decided that there is no point in competing directly with Cabra. Given that the wedding market has evolved, a trend has emerged in recent times, whereby some wedding couples are looking for exclusively private use of their wedding venue for this special day. They may not necessarily wish to follow the traditional format and where they are looking for an alternative approach, Bellingham Castle can be retained on a private rental basis, inclusive of all its 19 bedrooms and a 'free run' of the property. Guests can relax in a home-style atmosphere, with self service tea and coffee and a slice of cake - it's a true home from home approach, offering a comfortable, inviting atmosphere, mellow colours, couches, open fires and even its own guest parlour and kitchen. With its myriad of interconnecting rooms, all of your guests are catered for and it appeals to all generations, as might typically be attending a family wedding."

The building is steeped in history, Howard tells us and aptly - almost serendipitously - the first-ever wedding video took place there in 1905, when one of the wealthiest men in Britain, the Fourth Marquess of Bute, married the then Lady Bellingham.

The Corscaddens completely gutted Bellingham to bring it back to its original state. It was sandblasted, re-plumbed, re-wired and re-roofed. The ground floor is now made up of gracious public rooms, and long corridors featuring decorative, hanging chandeliers; downstairs in the original servants' quarter, the kitchen, boiler house and pantry have all been restored to snugs and living rooms. The grounds and the coach house have also been restored to



their original splendour. One bridal suite overlooks the River Glyde, whilst a second suite overlooks the newly-sculpted formal gardens and fountains.

"They didn't get it wrong. When they built castles in the olden days, the best of architects and designers were retained, so that when it came to a makeover, we just brought it back to what it was. The Drawing Room has been reinstated as a drawing room, the library as the library (it had been the ladies' and gents' toilets in its last incarnation); we discovered the old fireplace behind the urinals, so revelations like that pointed us in the right direction..."

Of course, from a start up point of view, Bellingham certainly has an immediate advantage, with the standards already established at Cabra and Ballyseede.

"Clients who have been willing to pay a deposit to book Bellingham before the Ballroom was even completed, are testament to a trust generated by the established brands of Cabra and Ballyseede Castles. We have actually been overwhelmed by the level of interest in Bellingham Castle and the amount of couples that want to come and see it; at a recent wedding open day, we had almost 800 people attend for showarounds for potential wedding bookings."

So, why this love of Castles? Owning three surely indicates something of a passion? Howard tells us: "With the three properties, there is a large amount of local goodwill as these buildings are part of the community - they 'belong' to the local people and are an integral part of their home town. At Christmas, we had over 1,000 of the local neighbours who called in to view the newly-refurbished Bellingham Castle. Everyone has a connection with it - their grandparents worked here in the old days, they attended family events and special occasions here down the years, they grew up around it and it is part of their history. Castles are different from custom built hotels - they are unique and special, they offer something mystical and almost magical. They can never be considered 'ordinary' as they are sanctuaries where lifelong memories are made - and of course, they keep history alive." ○

All photography by Niall Cummins Photography.

