

Castle Leslie Estate celebrates 30 years in business with an Afternoon Tea, a salute to the Tea Rooms where it all began

By Veronica Corr

Although there is over 1000 years recorded of Leslie family history, the 10th of May 2022 marked the 30th anniversary of Castle Leslie Estate operating as a thriving business located in Glaslough Village. Sammy Leslie and the dedicated team celebrated the occasion by inviting friends of the estate to an Afternoon Tea, a salute to the business's beginnings with Tea Rooms. Sammy not only had that initial vision to start the business, but has also grown it from there. Castle Leslie Estate now employs a team of 200 members, all of whom the entrepreneur is incredibly grateful to.

Castle Leslie Estate is set on 1,000 acres of rolling parkland with ancient trees and glittering lakes teeming with wildlife. It is one of the most breath-taking estates in Ireland. The estate is one of only a handful of castles and estates in Ireland still home to its founding family. It is the only one operating on such a scale and it has now become one of the most individual and best-loved places to stay in Ireland.

Arco String Quartet provided the very soothing soundtrack to the event, putting a classical spin on popular music, while guests enjoyed a sumptuous spread of sweet and savoury delights that feature on the Castle's Afternoon Tea menu. The magnificent cake, which formed the centrepiece, was brought out by Kevin Kenny, Hotel Manager and Aaron Duffy, Executive Chef at Castle Leslie. It was cut with the ceremonial sword by Sammy Leslie and Castle Leslie Estate's Chief Executive Officer Brian Baldwin.

Sammy's voice was laden with emotion when she commented on the stunning cake, the design of which was a surprise to her. She noted that the absence of the much-loved Sir Jack Leslie (RIP), whom she knew as Uncle Jack. He was a great man for a party, she observed. Sammy delivered a speech that was touching and humorous in equal measure. She said: "I can't quite believe I'm here. I'd just like to thank the County Enterprise Office,



Joan and Joe Mallon at the 30th anniversary celebrations of Castle Leslie. Photo Rory Geary

who gave me a loan of £5000 (Irish pounds/punt) to do the Tea Rooms, it was 50% match-funding. I didn't have the cash so I sold dad's car when he was out of the country!"

The entrepreneur recalled the day they opened Tea Rooms and while they had thought of every flavour of tea under the sun, they forgot about teapots! These were borrowed from the Pillar House and the rest, as they say, is history!

"So for the first few days with borrowed teapots and if somebody then had said we would be where we are now — we'd have the lodge with all the amazing rooms, our amazing architects and builders are here today as well — and more than anything

else, that there would be such an amazing team of people that have been part of the journey over the 30 years. At the end of the day, it's everybody in this room that has made this journey happen and I just want to say a huge thank you to my team, and to Brian who is here nearly 15 of those 30 years," she added.

Sammy was good enough to accommodate this reporter with a brief interview. When asked how she would like to be described in the piece and the word 'owner' was suggested, she replied: "Call me Sammy, no-one owns a place like this! ... Like my father, I strongly believe that we neither inherit nor own lands, we are just guardians doing our best for future generations. It is my hope that Castle Leslie

Estate will provide more decades of employment for those who live locally and will continue to be a sanctuary for all our guests".

When asked to reflect on where it all began and the highlights to date, the entrepreneur said that she and some of the team went on a girls' night out to see Downton Abbey the night before: "Seeing the leaking rooves in the film and the buckets everywhere — I think one of the many highlights has been that the buildings don't leak anymore! We've got all the buildings watertight. That means we can start to reinvigorate them, have fun with them and let people enjoy them. Seeing the place so full of people is so lovely. That's what makes a place. It's a real trip down memory lane today, seeing all the different members of the team, (past and present), I'm very pleased."

Sammy went on to convey her vision of how the estate should function into the future: "These houses were built to entertain on a large scale... there would have always been a big team here, always busy. Then, when times changed, there were a couple of elderly cousins living in a wing, with mum and dad here when they could be and it shrank to almost nothing. We were on the Border during the Troubles, so it was a very different world. It was so lovely to see things move forward and change. These buildings should be used, be relevant, add value, bring communities together and do good things. Otherwise what is the point in keeping them?"

When asked how the business evolved, Sammy commented: "In the beginning, it was literally a handful of part-time girls who were 14 when they started, four of them are here today. They were on 50-pence-an-hour because that was the going rate, then that went up to 75-pence-an-hour plus tips, part-time, during weekends and school holidays. Now there is an amazingly talented full-time crew and it's also lovely to see students come through as well. They have it on their CV."

"Our family's ethos has always been one of creativity and curiosity, openness and sharing, of innovation and entrepreneurship, of sensitivity and working with, of involvement and teamwork. With 1000 years of Leslie family history recorded, and 30 years in business, it is my great honour to be the one tasked with bringing a unique and important part of Ireland's living heritage through to the future."

It was interesting to learn how the business brought the history of the estate back to life as it grew, Sammy recalled: "Dad started the equestrian centre in '74 and he sold it in '84. We were able to buy it back in 2004, did all of the work and all of the new bedrooms as well. Each time, it's looking at an historic building and asking 'what can we do and how do we do it?' ... So hopefully, in five years' time, we'll be able to say that we figured out how to restore the Famine Wall. We know how to do it, but it's rather large and very expensive," she said, adding that there were ambitions to restore the Walled Garden.

This brought us onto the subject of the employment the Leslie family had provided over many, many decades, Sammy commented: "What's been lovely, looking back over old photographs, is the real range of people that were employed and some for many, many generations. There are portraits ... Jimmy Vogan, who was the Gamekeeper, underneath his, it says 'To our beloved Vogan'. He was such a close part of the family. The boys absolutely adored him."

Castle Leslie's custodian paid tribute to many friends who used to work there during her speech, but when she was asked if she wanted to

single people out, she conceded that it could be dangerous, so she said: "Brian is the rock of the place, he's been here for such a long time. He's such a talented hotelier, but it's impossible to single people out, there are just so many amazingly talented people, there really are. I would like to say a huge thanks to every member of our incredible team (both past and present), all our loyal customers and our wonderful suppliers."

"I would also like to acknowledge the extended Leslie family and the work of The Castle Leslie Trust. In 2017, we established The Leslie Foundation. It was founded to ensure that the wide social and economic benefits created by Castle Leslie Estate will continue and expand for generations to come. The Leslie Foundation's priorities are — people, place, planet, and peace."

Having spoken to some of the management team, it was very obvious that the feeling is mutual and that people who work there are not only colleagues, but friends. It was described by several people as a family.

Commenting on the estate being part of the tourism offering for County Monaghan, Sammy said: "It is, absolutely. Monaghan is working closely with Fáilte Ireland looking and saying 'what's next, how can we get more people to Monaghan — especially North Monaghan?' It is such an undiscovered county. We're parallel to Armagh, we go South to get to Newry. Lots of people aren't quite sure where we are and how close we are to Armagh and Belfast." Then she concluded our interview with this hilarious observation: "I keep saying Monaghan is like a belly dancer's navel, no-one is quite sure where it is! It seems to move around a lot!"

Castle Leslie's CEO Brian Baldwin told The Northern Standard: "I'm here 14 years, I came in 2008, it has been a really rewarding journey. Today acknowledges the hard work of the team and Sammy. I think that's what today is really all about, an acknowledgement of everyone's hard work and a celebration of the community. Glaslough Village and Castle Leslie have a very close relationship. There is a synergy between the two, it has always been there. We've been very fortunate with local people working here, and supporting us whether it's birthdays, christenings or weddings etc."

This reporter observed that there appeared to be a mixture of community and business people in attendance of the event, to which Brian responded: "That's very important. For us, we wanted to recognise over the last number of years, those who would have supported Sammy from very early on, from people who would have lent a hand or even given stuff to Sammy. She has done an amazing job in galvanising that support. It's great to see 200 and something people here to support Sammy. We're just blow-ins, but Sammy is the connection and she's the glue of the place."

Brian made the observation that estates such as the one in Glaslough had been most at risk over the past 30 or 40 years, because the vast majority of owners have moved generation. "There are very few of these estates left and what is remarkable about what Sammy has achieved is there is not a multi-million corporate investor backing her," he added.

During his speech earlier in the afternoon, Brian was unreserved in his praise of the management and staff of the estate, who put huge effort into the event. Everyone who spoke to this newspaper on the day concurred that there is no "I" in "team."

Eugene Rooney, Assistant Food and Beverage Manager commented: "Castle Leslie is a very special place and as I say to all of the staff here, 'we are not only working in one of the elite properties of Ireland, we are also working in a family home.' That's what the ethos of Castle Leslie is, we're here to create experiences and memories for everyone who comes through the gates of the estate. Those experiences and memories last a lifetime and I'm only too honoured to be part of the guests' journey while here, but also of the journey of Castle Leslie and the plans that it has for the future."

When asked how hard it was to put together the fabulous function to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the business, Eugene said: "We are a well-oiled machine. We are all very capable, very skilled individuals and collectively as a team we can do most things. Working together is what we're about, we're a family at work so everyone chips in. We make sure that everything goes as it's meant to and aim to exceed expectations in all that we do."

Eimear Winters, Director of Sales and Marketing, explained that Castle Leslie features in Ireland's Blue Book hotels, and it's no surprise. She added: "Our main market is the domestic market, but we would get a lot of business from North America and United Arab Emirates, we've had influencers staying with us from those markets, it's opening up (post pandemic)."

Dympna Condra, Tourism Officer with Monaghan County Council said: "I'm delighted to be here, 30 years is a big feat, as Sammy said, they have been progressively developing from Tea Rooms, to the castle, the lodge and the extension to the lodge. We worked with them and the village to do an audio trail for Glaslough 'One Village, Two Voices'. The connection between the village and the castle is so important. The village itself is absolutely beautiful. It's a really good visitor experience here and the Tidy Towns have made such great strides here. So between that, the chocolate box village and the fabulous facility here, Castle Leslie is a massive, massive asset to Co. Monaghan. So we will continue to work on promoting it. This is a great day."

Shane Raftery, Ireland's Ancient East Officer with Fáilte Ireland commented: "The rich and intriguing history of Castle Leslie and its wonderful architecture, grounds, stories and character, make it a perfect fit for the Ireland's Ancient East brand proposition and a key asset for tourism in Monaghan. Castle Leslie is one of Ireland's leading resorts, offering the very best of local hospitality, accommodation and food to domestic and international visitors alike. Fáilte Ireland and the Ireland's Ancient East team wish Sammy, Brian and the whole team many more years of success in Castle Leslie, and we look forward to continuing to work with and support them into the future."

The original dream for Castle Leslie Estate was great horses, good food and good old-style hospitality. It is safe to say that this dream is flourishing, with over 50 national and international awards under their belt. (Please see front page and advertisement for Castle Leslie Estate in this edition).



Samatha Leslie speaking at the 30th anniversary celebrations of Castle Leslie. Photo Rory Geary



At the Castle Leslie 30th anniversary celebrations were (L-R) Claire McAree, Samantha Leslie and Orla McKenna. Photo Rory Geary



At the 30th anniversary celebrations were (L-R) Margaret Fanning, Caroline Brennan, Catherine Whelan and Geraldine Kelly. Photo Rory Geary



Samantha Leslie, right, with some of the original staff of Castle Leslie at the 30th anniversary celebrations. In photo are (L-R) Lorna Connolly, Barbara Sheridan, Jackie Gormley, Sarah Woods, Róisín O'Reilly, Maggie Donoghue, Sinead Treanor and Samantha Leslie. Photo Rory Geary



Pictured at the 30th anniversary celebrations were (L-R) Brian Baldwin, Castle Leslie, Suzanne Doran and Leonie Kearns. Photo Rory Geary



Soyna Foy and Roslyn Gillanders at the 30th anniversary celebrations of Castle Leslie.