A place of magic

Ard na Sidhe

One of Ireland's finest Arts & Crafts buildings, Ard na Sidhe, in the Kingdom of Kerry has been restored to create a hotel full of romantic ambience. CIAN MOLLOY reports on a labour of love.

Sitting on a 32-acre site of mixed woodland and award-winning gardens and overlooking Lough Carragh near Killorglin, Ard na Sidhe is considered one of the best large Arts & Crafts buildings in the country. Built in 1913 by Lady Edith Gordon to the design of the Lancastrian English architect Richard Percy Mosley Horner, Ard na Sidhe is of a revivalist Elizabethan-style, with bold steep gables, stone-mullioned windows and metal casements with leaded lights, all set in neatly built sandstone that was quarried locally. Indeed, it is almost entirely from local materials with the only exception being the Westminster roof slates. In 1915, it was deemed to be of sufficient architectural and aesthetic merit to have its design exhibited by the Royal Academy. Described as ‘the house of my dreams’ by Lady Edith, a keen gardener, traveller and author, she boasted that ‘it never looked new’ and the weathered brown sandstone walls look as though they have stood for centuries. Coming from the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, Lady Edith was part of a vanishing breed in Ireland, her husband, Sir Home Gordon, was the last Baronet of Gordon Embo; th and (because he was childless) his various sinecures was a role as a magistrate of County Kerry, which explains how Lady Edith found this location that she loved so much.

In 1930s, Lady Gordon was forced to leave Ard na Sidhe, because she could no longer afford its upkeep. Some 25 years later, the house and its grounds were purchased by the German industrialist Hans Leibherr, who in 1958 established the Liebherr Container Crones manufacturing plant in Killarney that currently employs more than 500 people. For the last 50 years, Ard na Sidhe has been part of the Liebherr Group, which owns a total of six hotels – three in Kerry, two in Austria and one in Germany. Ard na Sidhe is very much the group’s boutique hotel having only 18 rooms in total in comparison, say, to The Europe in Killarney that has 187 bedrooms, more than 10 times as many! The refurbishment cost some €2m and was very much a labour of love by Mrs Leibherr who took a personal interest in the project and visited the construction site regularly, said James Howley of Howley Hayes Architects. ‘We’ve done a lot of restoration work and conversions of old buildings to new uses and we were recommended for this job by another firm of architects. We had previously worked on Larnby Castle designed by Ebenezer Layton, which is considered to be the best Arts & Crafts building in Ireland. Ard na Sidhe had almost certainly been inspired by it and is very much “Larnby by Lake”. The Leibherr family didn’t know this at the time of our appointment, it was a happy coincidence.”

According to Howley, in addition to requiring a general refurbishment to cope with the wear and tear suffered by the building over time, it is some of the ‘radical changes’ made when the building was first converted into a hotel in the 1970s needed to be reversed or remedied. “Most damaging was the construction of internal toilets and linen stores beside the beautiful oak staircase that almost totally concealed the staircase and created an unsatisfactory entrance that was dark, constricted and featureless,” he said. “We opened up the space and turned the upper-light of the original staircase through ninety degrees, to create a dramatic new double-height entrance hall, paved with natural stone and lined with oak panelling. The two dining rooms were linked visually by new openings, the walls paved with painted panelling and the access points re-planned. The original arch-headed, oak, front-door, which had been removed but was being used in a 1970s annex, was reinstated, albeit not in its original position.” Another significant intervention was a large, new, dormer with Arts & Crafts-style window seats to light and extend what had been a dull dark service corridor but that now leads to the first-
floor bedrooms, which were re-planned to create more satisfactory rectangular proportions, all with naturally lit bathrooms.

Howley Hayes was also responsible for all the interiors, choosing fabrics and wallpapers produced by Morris & Co., a company that played a key role in the Arts & Crafts Movement more than a century ago. The practice designed new bedroom and dining room furniture, including several antique Arts & Crafts-style light-fittings and judiciously chosen modern lamps, fittings, sockets and switches that matched the Arts & Crafts style.

Brunner Consulting Engineers provided a judiciously chosen selection of antique Arts & Crafts-style light-fittings and materials, such as the lime-based plastering internally and the lime-based mortar for the pointing externally. Indeed, one of the challenges was sorting the correct materials so that they would fit in with what was already there. That took some additional time, such as sourcing the breathable paints from England or bringing in the oak floorboards from Latvia. The steel windows had to be removed and sent to a specialist company, Fabwor Sanctuary, in Sussex to be restored and re-leaded.

“Certainly, it was a project with a substantial budget, and the contractors worked very closely with us, to ensure the best possible result.”

The challenge of the building contractors, Eamonn Costello Ltd, was one of the main reasons why the project went smoothly, said Howley. “We were obsessive in our attention to detail in the design of the building services, including procuring several antique Arts & Crafts-style light-fittings and judiciously chosen modern lamps, fittings, sockets and switches that matched the Arts & Crafts style. We tried to ensure that as little as possible was done from an engineering point of view. It is always interesting working on old buildings, because you never know what problems will be thrown up, but everything on the Ard na Sidhe project went very smoothly.”

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