



Restored glory: (clockwise, from top left) The opulence of the Red Room, once occupied by William Butler Yeats; the new Equestrian Centre is attracting serious riders; one of the dining rooms; an exterior view of the castle, which lends itself to ghostly tales and featured in a UK show called *Most Haunted*.

the Hun via several Churchills, and whose ancestor, “Fighting Bishop” John Leslie, settled next to Lake Glaslough in the Kingdom of Oriel (now County Monaghan) in 1664 – courtesy of a bounty granted by King Charles II for his part in the battle against Cromwell.

“I knew from the time I was a little girl that I wanted to run the estate, restore the wonderful old buildings and fill them full of people, laughter and life,” says the dark-haired 42-year-old as she sips tea in the drawing room. “I didn’t have a bloody clue how I was going to do it all,” she adds. “Just a burning determination to make it happen.”

The castle was built by Sammy’s great-great-grandfather Sir John Leslie in 1878, next to the site of the original house. A century on, it was falling into ruin. The High Renaissance-style murals (as painted by Sir John) were fading; the family heirlooms were gathering dust; buckets caught the leaks on the top floor.

But while the resident clan of artists and eccentrics – Sammy’s father Desmond Leslie was variously a World War II Spitfire pilot, UFO expert and composer of electronic music – continued to welcome guests over the years (a youthful Mick Jagger among them), even the castle’s usually friendly ghosts were getting a bit grumpy. Allegedly.

“Oh, you know, things happen,” says Sammy, as protective of her castle spirits as she is about her

celebrity guests. “A house this old is bound to get overlaps between past and present.” The family’s history has always been pristine but much of it, they admit, is self-penned. “Here I am in Castle Leslie,” wrote family friend Dean Swift, “Rows of books upon the shelves/ Written by the Leslies/ All about themselves.”

But a castle cannot function on history alone. With her father gone (Desmond died in 2001) and her Uncle Jack (Sir John, the fourth baronet) returned to Glaslough after half a lifetime in Italy, Sammy took stock. The fifth of six children, a veteran of seven schools and a hotel management course in Switzerland, she’d exhausted a travel urge that saw her work for a time in NSW as a show-jumping groom. “I adore Australia and planned to move there if this didn’t work out,” Sammy says, waving an arm around a space filled with chandeliers, ancestral portraits and curiosities such as Winston Churchill’s christening robe. “But it did,” she adds, flashing a grin.

With the estate placed in a trust to ensure its security for generations to come, Castle Leslie has now become a private members’ club, where guests are welcome to visit once, then apply to join this “smart alternative to owning a second or third home”, where “by standing out you will fit in”. The castle is not, Sammy insists, a hotel.

There is no reception, though a welcoming fire crackles in the huge old entrance hall fireplace

in winter. There are no telephones, TVs or radios in any of the 20 themed bedrooms – not in the Governess Suite, the Chinese Room or the Red Room, whose huge panelled ensuite boasts one of the first baths installed in Ireland. Oh, and there are no showers. Or room service. The doors don’t even lock. But what there is, in spades, is character and comfort, history and architecture, faded elegance and that great Irish trait: a sense of humour.

“It’s on Tuesday, but it’s a secret,” the nonagenarian Uncle Jack told paparazzi in June 2002, letting the world in on the date and location of Paul McCartney and Heather Mills’ ill-fated fairytale wedding. “On the whole we welcome manners, etiquette and downright outrageous behaviour,” reads club rule No 4, bullet-pointed on a short list next to my complimentary bottle of Dubonnet.

In the drawing room a battered copy of Roddy Doyle’s *Barrytown Trilogy* props open the lid of a 100-year-old piano, which Uncle Jack plays, briefly and beautifully, on his regular house tours. Here, in one of only 30 or so Irish castles still home to the original family, a sense of fun and enjoyment is paramount.

“The house was built to entertain and that’s what we’re doing,” says Sammy, “entertaining on a grand scale.” Ghosts and all.

www.castleleslie.com