

THE CORSCADDEN DYNASTY



The Corscadden family have carved out their own niche in the Irish boutique castle hotel market.

Four generations of Corscaddens have worked in the Irish hospitality sector, and a series of shrewd purchases at opportune times over the past few years have grown their impressive portfolio of Irish castle hotels to four. That's a castle in every province.

The family's most recent acquisition was Markree Castle in Sligo, that has been beautifully restored by its new owners. The other three Corscadden hotels are Cabra Castle in Co Cavan, Bellingham Castle in Co Louth and Ballyseede Castle in the Kingdom.

Howard Corscadden's grandparents started the family down the hotelier path when they ran the International Hotel in Bray during the '30s and '40s, where its Arcadia Ballroom was hugely popular with that era's showbands. "My family have been in catering for near on a hundred years now," says Howard. "My great grandparents had the International Hotel in Bray plus the Arcadia. My own parents had a hotel in Kildare called Derby House Hotel."

Howard is from a family of five, and has two brothers and two sisters. "We're all involved in the hotel and catering business. My mother, Mitzie, was one of first graduates of Shannon. Me and my sister Marnie, both attended there too. So, you could say we're steeped in hotels and catering. It's deep in our blood."

When he finished school, Howard went to study in Shannon College of Hotel Management, followed by his sister. Like most hotel families in Ireland, Howard had started working in the family business as a child. It was there that Howard and his siblings got their first taste of the hotel business. "I started working young and probably illegally. At twelve I was emptying skips and doing the wash up. In fact, we all did our share in the hotel."

He says this early experience shaped all of them. "It was a very good finishing school. It taught us all the value of hard work. We used to get pocket money but we had to earn it to get it. That gave us all a sound background going forward into business."

Time spent abroad to find out where the industry is going, what international standards are like and so on is crucial according to Howard. When you come back, you can then introduce what you learned to



the business at home While studying in Shannon, he spent stints working in Switzerland, London and the States, before returning to Ireland getting his first job in Dromoland Castle. "I went in there as front of house manager and came out deputy general manager."

"Each country did things differently," says Howard. "Switzerland was very traditional and old school. America was brash and bold. It was all about quick service and a very differently style of catering. In London I worked in the Waldorf and that was a mix of the two styles so all in all I got a well-rounded education in catering."

Flicking through the property pages of the Irish Independent one day, he spotted a castle for sale. The property had been completely refurbished and was ready to move into. "After my work experience in Dromoland, I knew there was an opening for a four-star hotel in Ireland." He bought Cabra castle in 1991 and opened it up as a 19-bedroom hotel.

Just outside Kingscourt in Co Cavan, Cabra Castle dates to 1760 and has expansive gardens and parkland with panoramic views of nearby Dún na Rí Forest Park. The rooms are all individually designed with lots of canopy, four-poster and half-tester bed.

"All my brothers and sisters joined us and we built that business up to its present size - a 110-bedroomed hotel," he says.

"Whilst we were purchasing other properties we never lost sight of Cabra Castle," says Howard. "Over the last five years we've done a yearly reinvestment programme which started with ballroom. Then we refurbished and extended the main bar and over the past few years have refurbished all of our bedrooms, including the six cottages." They also we did up the restaurant and kitchen.



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PROPERTIES WE NEVER LOST SIGHT OF
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“Last year we felt it was time to look at the exterior – it hasn’t changed its outward appearance since we bought it. We started a two-year renovation programme and on one side we’ve put an Italian garden with water feature and next year we’re doing a new patio an terrace and barbeque are and set down only with a water feature.”

The outward appearance of Cabra castle is very much bringing it back to original splendour. “Once you approach the castle on the way up the driveway, you’ll see patios and gardens and all of the cars will be hidden from view so it looks a lot more castle-like and regal. We’re getting great responses to new Italian garden which we called after my mother – Mitzie’s garden.”

“While building up the business in Cabra, we figured that one castle wouldn’t be enough for one family. We are all quite ambitious and we all like to be our own bosses.”

Fourteen years ago, they bought Ballyseede castle in Kerry. It is Kerry’s only castle hotel and while it retains all its antiquity, it also blends the modern with the old – you could say it’s the best of both worlds. Nowadays it is run by Howard’s sister Marnie and her husband Rory. They’ve just opened their new 16-bedroom extension this year so now it’s a 45-bedroomed hotel and one of foremost wedding venues in Ireland.

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The Corscadden family's third castle purchase came in 2012 when they acquired Bellingham Castle. "Six years ago - during the recession - we saw an opportunity and bought Bellingham Castle in Co Louth. It's a 19-bedroomed private castle that has been voted one of top small hotels in Ireland by Trip Advisor for past three years. My brother Patrick and his partner Clara run that property." It has since become one of the country's most picturesque and sought-after four-star wedding and conference venues.

Business is good for the family right now, having seen out the recession by keeping their heads down and restricting their expenditure. Navigating the recession required reining in on expenses, according to Howard, but the businesses survived without having to let go any staff.

"Certainly, we received a number of cancellations due to people losing jobs and deciding a wedding was a luxury they couldn't afford. And there was a slow down on our business overall. But we managed our costs. We didn't make anyone redundant but had a freeze on hiring new people and we had very little borrowings. We just rode the storm out."

"WE ARE ALL QUITE AMBITIOUS ..."



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ASSOCIATES

Interior Architects, Interior Designers and Project Managers on Cabra Castle Hotel and Cottages refurbishments from 2011, brief included:

- Function Room
- Bridal Suite
- Castle Bedrooms
- Toilets
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"We'd be slightly worried about Brexit and its effect on border counties now. Wedding parties from Northern Ireland have declined, with the uncertainty of the border issue. That effect was immediate, and started once the vote was taken," says Howard. "We'd certainly encourage the Government to resolve it as soon as they can. Uncertainty isn't good for business."

Post-recession, they bought Markree Castle in Sligo. It is the first time that the castle has changed hands since it was gifted to the Cooper family in the mid-17th century. The current building dates back to the 18th century, when it was transformed from a Big House to a castle by architect Francis Johnston, who famously designed Dublin's GPO. Under the guidance of conservation architects, the Gothic beauty of Markee Castle has been reclaimed, although this renovation project was a huge task. After completely refurbishing and rewiring it, the castle is now a 31-bedroomed hotel. They also have fifteen apartments in the old courtyard and Hollywood recently came calling.

"It was taken over by Hallmark to make the movie, *Royalty Forever*, that came out in conjunction with Harry and Meghan's wedding. It's now run by Patricia, my sister, and Philip." What's next for the Corscaddens?



WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE CORSCADDENS?



“EVERY AMERICAN TOURIST THAT COMES TO IRELAND HAS STAYING IN A CASTLE ON THEIR BUCKET LIST.”

and secure for the next hundred years. Each castle that we purchased had to have a complete refurbishment, and we are proud to hand them down to the next generation.”

The Corcaddens's children have all worked in business at some stage. “There are ten grandchildren and all of them have worked in the business at some stage or other. We're not applying any pressure on anybody and it's there for them if they want to come into it or if they want to go their own way.”

“The nice thing is that we are all family,” he says, “all of us are our own bosses but can pick up the phone and get advice from any of our brothers and sisters. We all do collective marketing. We're a small group and there's a nice competitive edge to it as well, over who gets the most compliments, most weddings etc.”

In the meantime, further castle acquisitions haven't been ruled out, although not in the short-term – there aren't many bargains out there. “We'd like another castle. There's one member of the family who doesn't have one yet, so we're on the lookout. Unfortunately, there aren't many bargains out there. We might have to wait until the next recession,” says Howard.

“It would have to be a castle because this is what we know. I know there's extra expense involved in running a castle but they always bring in business. Every American tourist that comes to Ireland has staying in a castle on their bucket list.”



All images by Niall Cummins Photography

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