

Sophie's Choice

BY JACKIE KEOGH

RUTH Watson, the lady with the bulletproof blonde bob, is a restaurateur, hotelier, television presenter and food writer, but she is perhaps better known in Ireland as the woman who comes to the rescue of country home owners.

You start off thinking, 'How lovely, a large rambling home, with cavernous fireplaces, and deep sofas in long libraries,' and then you meet the person who has inherited the family pile and has to make it work as a going concern and then you start to think, 'Good grief, that's an awful lot of work.'

Earlier this year, at the age of twenty-nine, Sophie Shelswell-White took over as general manager of Bantry House and Gardens, which is not only West Cork's premier stately home, but also one of the region's most important tourist attractions.

Sophie took over more than the running of the house. She took over the running of the garden, the bed and breakfast business, the restaurant and

Bantry House as the venue for countless concerts and community events from her parents, Egerton and Brigitte Shelswell-White.

The house in all its incarnations has always been privately owned. In fact, it has been in the White family since 1700s. Sophie's dad, Egerton, was the ninth generation descendant entrusted with preserving this amenity and family home.

It was Egerton's dad, Geoffrey Shelswell, who married Clodagh White, the woman credited with first opening the house to the public in 1946. Next year, they plan to host a variety of events to mark the 65th anniversary of the day Bantry House opened its doors to visitors.

Inherited everything

The house and gardens stayed steadily open until 1978 when Sophie's grandmother died. Egerton, who was living in the United States at the time, inherited everything and came home to take on the daily opening, like his mother had done before him.

It was at a lifeboat dinner dance at the Reens Desert Hotel in Ballylickey that he met his future intended, Brigitte, an Austrian picture restorer who was living locally at the time.

After falling in love with the owner, it wasn't too difficult to then go and fall in love with Bantry House – a place full of beautiful paintings and furniture that needed not just a woman's touch, but an expert hand to bring them back to their full glory.

Now that they have 'retired' (although you will still see both of them lovingly tending the garden) it is Sophie's turn to shine.

'This is my first year back,' said Sophie who, despite having been a self-confessed 'home bird' for much of her childhood years was quick to fly the coop and work in Australia (via France, Italy and Greece) for a number of years immediately after finishing her tourism and marketing degree in college.

Australia was wonderful, but Sophie said she is glad to be home. Although it is on the rather large side, Sophie said:

'It is still very much a home. My parents raised a family in this house.'

'We all grew up here in an apartment within the building. It is a normal house within the main house, and only takes up one part of it. It has got a lovely big kitchen and, like most homes, that's the place where we – my parents, Sam, Anna, Julie and I – spend most of our time.'

Things have gone well this year: After a rather grim 2009, Sophie is pleased that their numbers in the bed and breakfast have gone up from 30% to 60%. 'We reduced our prices a little bit, did a few more special offers, and held a series of events in the house and gardens that opened it all up.'

When it was put to her that she now has a lot of responsibilities to deal with, Sophie said: 'I asked for this. I put my hand up, and came home especially for this.'

I originally came home in September 2005, and worked for eighteen months so I could learn the ropes.

'Of course, you could say that



Sophie Shelswell-White has taken over as the general manager of Bantry House.

I always knew the ropes, but working here gave me a clearer idea of what would be required of me if I took on the running of the house and gardens.

It takes total dedication and

your own heritage, your own history. Every day, I am learning.'

The many lives of 'Oscar' at Bantry House

BY JACKIE KEOGH

THE Paris-based theatre company, Dear Conjunction, will be presenting *More Lives than One: Oscar Wilde* and *The Black Douglas* at Bantry House on Friday, October 29th.

Written and played by Leslie Clack and directed by Patricia Kessler, the play was originally inspired by Michael Mac Liammoir's *The Importance of Being Oscar*.

Leslie loosely based his text on Mac Liammoir's style and structure, resulting in an exceptional piece of work, not just in the writing but in the performance and the direction as well.

Oscar Wilde flouted the strict morality of the 1890s Victorian England, not just in his works but also in his private, and sometimes all too public life as well.

Often the admiration and enthusiasm, kindled by the sparkling wit of Wilde's comedies, were matched by the hatred directed at him by the Marquis of Queensberry, father of the young Lord Alfred Douglas, or "Bosie" as his lover, Wilde, called him.

In this show, Leslie uses extracts from Wilde's comedies and other works, as well as scenes from his fateful trials, to present, with great sensitivity, the fantastic highs and tragic lows of the short but dazzling life of Oscar Wilde.

Bantry House set to celebrate 65th year as tourist attraction

BY JACKIE KEOGH

BANTRY House has made headlines around the world as the venue for the West Cork Chamber Music Festival; it has also been the setting for the movie 'Moll Flanders' and, on a more prosaic note, it is the perfect place to potter around on a sunny summer's day.

Next year, Bantry House celebrates its 65th anniversary as a tourist attraction and in the lead up to that the general manager, Sophie Shelswell-White has decided to keep the accommodation side of the business running over the winter months.

This year, she proudly reported that Bantry House bucked the national trend by increasing its rate of occupancy in the bed and breakfast side of the business because discerning customers wanted some place memorable to stay.

'Staying in a stately home used to be the preserve of wealthy Americans,' she said, 'but now more and more Irish people are booking choice destinations. The same is true for wedding parties, civil ceremonies, family celebrations and corporate events.'

Although it doesn't come under the star-rating system, Trip Advisor gives Bantry House a definite thumbs up, but that has more to do with it being a complete package over and above the offer of crisp linen sheets and a really good Irish breakfast.

A lot of work has gone into all of the house's component parts, especially returning the



The grounds of Bantry House have been restored to their former glory.

gardens to their former glory – back to the days when they were first created by Richard White, the second Earl of Bantry.

With four or five businesses

all under one roof, the summer season can be frenetic, but Bantry House changes gears for the winter. From the end of October until mid-March, the house – which was built in the

Queen Anne style – is closed to the viewing public, although Sophie said they might keep it open to bus tours this year.

Consequently, the forty-acre formal garden is also closed to

the public, giving it and its two full-time gardeners time to rest. For the Shelswell-White family, the work will continue, but at a much less demanding pace.

Nature paints a picture in the grounds of Bantry House

BY JACKIE KEOGH

PETER Little and Felix Power are two artists who have been inspired by nature to create beautiful sculptures and interactive installations.

An exhibition of their work – in the grounds of Bantry's stately home – marks the end of a year's work, designing and creating the pieces on display. It also serves as a homecoming for both artists after exhibiting installations throughout Ireland and the UK.

Peter Little is the artist and sculptor behind 'Hortisculptures' – a design process that creates sculptures which interact with, and complement, the environment.

Following hugely successful and celebrated installations this summer at Bloom in the Park in Dublin and the Clontarf Festival of Performing Arts, Peter is currently exhibiting a collection of his sculptures in a landscaped pool of water.

Lit with his magical flower pod lanterns, and surrounded by predominantly native plants, 'The Pods' are interactive pieces in which the viewer can envelope themselves within the cocoon-like pod, complete with ambient lighting and music.

The pieces were created in Peter's workshop at Coomhola in West Cork, where he uses traditional blacksmithing techniques as well as a variety of sculptural techniques with

an array of materials.

Speaking to *The Southern Star*, Peter said: 'In the current economic climate artistic installations can bring a relief from the humdrum of our lives and transport viewers on magical journeys into the imagination.'

Meanwhile, the Kerry-based artist, Felix Power said he cannot take sole credit for creating his art. He says it is a collaboration between his brain, his hands and the force of nature. He says he makes the frame, but nature paints the picture.

Felix told *The Southern Star*: 'It's been a convoluted route to get to this stage.' He said he went from being a teenager without hobbies to doing an arts degree that taught him to make clever art – making soulless art with technology – to forgetting about art altogether, and then building things with wood.

However, he returned to the idea that art can be clever. But, more importantly than that, it should be beautiful. He said: 'It should represent your deepest thoughts and deepest passions and, right now, those thoughts turn to love and the passion turns to nature.'

Felix's work is temporal, impermanent, constantly on the verge of decay. It seems to say: 'It may not be like this forever.'

Too true: The exhibition only lasts until the end of November.

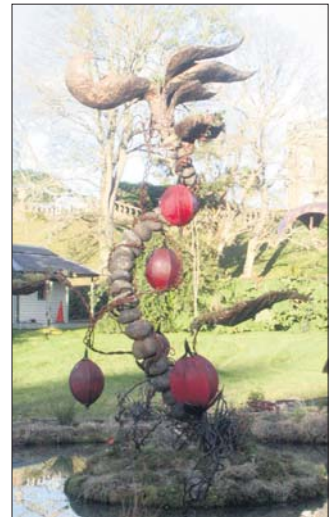


The wisteria is a noted attraction at Bantry House.

Pod people: Interacting with nature



Taking a break in one of the interactive pods in the grounds of Bantry House.



The exhibition features the work of Peter Little and Felix Power. The exhibition features the work of Peter Little and Felix Power.