

Custodian of stately home and beloved patron of the arts

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EGERTON SHELSWELL-WHITE: Egerton Shelswell-White, who has died aged 79, was the eighth generation of his family to live at Bantry House in west Cork. There he created a thriving tourism business and welcomed its internationally renowned chamber music festival into his ancestral home.

Dating back to 1700, it was acquired by the White family in 1750 and was the first stately home in Ireland to open to the public in 1946. On inheriting the estate in 1978, he and his second wife Brigitte returned from America to face the daunting challenge of maintaining the crumbling fabric of the old house.

Having tried his hand at fishing on trawlers in Iceland and working with British European Airways, he moved in 1965 to the United States where he played in a band, taught history and sex education and farmed in Alabama. With so much experience behind him, he realised that Bantry House would have to be run as a commercial enterprise.

Musicians and poets

He began a costly restoration programme, later grant-aided by the European Union, thus enhancing its attractions, making the house the cultural heartbeat of west Cork. He opened its doors to musicians and poets, hosting classical concerts during the Chamber Music Festival, founded 17 years ago, and welcomed the Masters of Tradition, a festival of traditional Irish music.

Shelswell-White also turned a wing of the house into a stately BB and exhibited arts and crafts in the stables where book fairs are also held during the West Cork Literary Festival. Theatrical events are staged in the Italian gardens, part of the remaining 100 acres of an estate that once embraced most of the lands of Bantry and the Beara peninsula.

In fitting tribute to his memory, West Cork Music described his support and encouragement as “fundamental to the establishment of the West Cork Chamber Music Festival, the Masters of Tradition and all the other musical events that took place in that much-loved old House. His passing will be mourned by the hundreds of musicians who have played there and enjoyed Egerton’s and his family’s generous hospitality”.

He recalled a lonely childhood behind high estate walls, schooldays at Castle Park in Dalkey, Co Dublin, followed by public school in Winchester and later Trinity College Oxford. He sent his own children to a local school.

His daughter Sophie now manages Bantry House which her parents had built up to the extent that at one point it was attracting 80,000 visitors a year.

To conserve historic family papers, he donated the archive to UCC. The papers recall the pivotal role his ancestor, Richard White, first earl of Bantry, played in Irish history.

Having alerted the English forces in 1796 that French ships carrying Wolfe Tone were in Bantry Bay, he raised a militia known as the Bantry Cavalry, organised local resistance and opened the house to the army.

The Bantry Cavalry standard, bearing on one side a heron, the White family crest, and on the other a crown, symbolising allegiance to the English monarch, was restored by Shelswell-White.

He is survived by his wife Brigitte and six children: Edward, Janie, Sophie, Sam, Anna and Julie.

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