

HOUSE, HOME AND HERITAGE SINCE 1690

Bantry House was the principal seat of the Earls of Bantry and is now owned by the Shelswell-White family. It has been the residence of the family since about 1765. The Whites originally lived nearby on Whiddy Island, and over the years acquired land in and around Bantry and all along Bantry Bay. In 1765, the family bought Blackrock House on the main land, which was then renamed Seafield House and subsequently, in 1816, Bantry House.

INVASION 1796

In the winter of 1796, a formidable French Armada, inspired by Theobald Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen and under the command of Admiral Hoche, sailed from Brest in France. Their purpose was to invade Ireland, put an end to British rule and establish an independent Irish Republic.

Almost 50 warships carrying 15,000 soldiers set sail for the south-west of County Cork. Richard White, the owner of Seafield House, alerted by rumours of the possible invasion, had already raised a militia. The militia consisted mostly of his own tenants, who were loyal to himself and the British Crown. He trained his men and stored their muskets and powder kegs in the basement of Bantry House for safe keeping.

By mid-December that year he had posted look-outs at the furthest seaward reaches of the county (Mizen Head and Sheep's Head) to bring news as soon as the French fleet was sighted. In the event the weather did his work for him. Huge storms interrupted ship-to-ship communication, the invasion foundered and the fleet eventually turned for home. Ten ships were lost, one of these, the *Surveillante*, was too storm damaged to make the return passage to France and was scuttled off Whiddy Island, opposite Bantry House.

The *Surveillante* lay undisturbed for almost 200 years, was rediscovered in 1982 and declared an Irish National Monument in 1985. Work began on her recovery, conservation and exhibition.

THE WHITE FAMILY HISTORY

Counsellor Richard White, a farmer, had an only son, Simon (1739-1776). In 1766, Simon married Frances Jane Hedges Eyre (1748-1816) of Mount Hedges, Co. Cork, daughter of Richard Hedges Eyre and Helena (nee Herbert of Muckcross, Killarney, Co. Kerry). They had two sons, Richard, (1767-1851), and Simon (1768 - 1838).

Richard White was made Baron Bantry in 1797 for his loyalty during the 1796 invasion. In 1799 he married Lady Margaret Anne Hare, daughter of Viscount Ennismore, later the 1st Earl of Listowel. They had four sons and a daughter who died in infancy.

Simon White married Sarah Newenham. They had four children and lived in Glengarriff Castle

In 1801, the title was advanced from Baron Bantry to Viscount Berehaven, and in 1816 Richard was created 1st Earl of Bantry.

His eldest son, also Richard (1800-1868) married Lady Mary O'Brien (1805-1853) of Dromoland Castle, Co. Clare, daughter of the second Marquis of Thomond. Beginning in the 1820s Richard and Mary traveled extensively in Europe. They visited Russia, Scandinavia, Spain, Italy and France

collecting furniture, paintings, tapestries and artifacts, most of which are still on display in Bantry House today. In 1851 Richard became 2nd Earl of Bantry. His father had started modest additions to the house but Richard, then Viscount Berehaven had much grander visions of what his house should be like. He laid out the gardens, added the wings and the library and also a grand conservatory facing the 100 steps, which sadly is no more. The two stables flanking Bantry House and the five gatelodges were also built. Only one gatelodge survives.

As the couple had no children, the title and property went to his younger brother William (1801-1884), who until then lived at Macroom Castle, which he had inherited from his great-uncle, Robert Hedges Eyre. William (who became the 3rd Earl of Bantry in 1868) married Jane Herbert (1823-1898) of Muckross House, Killarney, Co. Kerry, and they had five daughters, Elizabeth, Olivia, Ina, Jane, and Mary, and an only son, William (1854-1891). In 1884 William became the 4th and last Earl of Bantry.

In 1886, William married Rosamond Petre (d. 1942). They had no children and on William's death in 1891 the title of the Earls of Bantry became extinct. The estate passed through his eldest sister, Lady Elizabeth (1847-1880), the wife of Egerton Leigh of High Leigh, Cheshire, England, to their son, Edward Leigh (1876-1920). He assumed the additional name of White in 1897.

In 1904 Edward Leigh-White married Arethusa Hawker (1885-1959) of Longparish House, Hampshire, England, They had two daughters, Clodagh (1905-1978) and Rachel (1906-1987). Edward Leigh-White died in 1920, and was succeeded by his eldest daughter. Clodagh married Geoffrey Shelswell (1897-1962) in 1926 and they also incorporated White into their name. They had three children, Delia (1928-1990), Oonagh (1930-2006) and Egerton (1933) the present owner.

IN WAR AND IN PEACE: 1919 - 1945

During the Irish Civil War (1922 - 23), the Cottage Hospital in Bantry, was destroyed by fire. Arethusa Leigh-White offered Bantry House as a hospital to the nuns of the Convent of Mercy, who in those days ran the hospital. Arethusa only made one proviso; the injured on both sides of the conflict should be cared for. A chapel was sanctified in the library and the nuns and their patients moved in for five years.

In 1926, Clodagh Leigh-White came of age and assumed responsibility for the Estate.

Later that year, Clodagh traveled to Zanzibar, Africa, where she met and married Geoffrey Shelswell, then the Assistant District Commissioner of Zanzibar.

During the Second World War (known as "The Emergency" in Ireland), the house and stables were occupied by the Second Cyclist Squadron of the Irish Army.

There are two plaques on the north wall of the house in memory of the men and the officers of the Royal Canadian Air Force who died when their plane crashed into the sea off the Fastnet Rock.

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

In 1946, Clodagh and Geoffrey Shelswell-White opened the doors of Bantry House to the public. Geoffrey died in 1962 and Clodagh lived in the house on her own, until her death in 1978.

THE FAMILY TODAY

The property passed to her son, Egerton Shelswell-White. Egerton married twice, firstly in 1961. He had two children with Jill (née Dumeresque), Edward (b. 1961) and Janie (b. 1965).

He married again in 1981, and he and Brigitte (née Kleihs), have four children . Sophie (b. 1981) Simon (b.1984), Anna (b.1987) and Julie (b.1990). Egerton passed away in December 2012. His daughter Sophie manages the estate on her mother's behalf.