

Castle History

The estate of Glenveagh was created in 1857-9 by the purchase of several smaller holdings by John George Adair, a wealthy land speculator from Co. Laois. John Adair was to later incur infamy throughout Donegal and Ireland by ruthlessly evicting some 244 tenants in the Derryveagh Evictions in April of 1861 with the aid of 200 constables.

Once the people and their belongings were removed their houses were knocked down or de-roofed so that they could not return. This arose over a feud with some of his tenants over hunting rights on tenants' land, which led to the murder of Murray, a shepherd employed by John George Adair. With the murder remaining unsolved, relations between Adair and his tenants deteriorated to the point of eviction. These actions earned Adair the nickname 'Black Jack Adair'.

After marrying his American-born wife Cornelia, Adair began the construction of Glenveagh Castle in 1867, which was completed by 1873. However, Adair was never to fulfil his dream of creating a hunting estate in the highlands of Donegal as he died suddenly in 1885 on return from a business trip to America. After her husband's death Cornelia took over the running of the estate and introduced deer stalking in the 1890s. She continually sought to improve the Castle's comforts and the beauty of its grounds, carrying out major improvements to the estate and laying out the gardens. Over the next 30 years she was to become a much-noted society hostess and continued to summer at the Castle until 1916. Following the death of Mrs Adair in London in 1921, Glenveagh fell into decline and was occupied by both the Anti-treaty and Free State Army forces during the Irish Civil War. Glenveagh's next owner was not until 1929 when the estate was purchased by Professor Arthur Kingsley Porter of Harvard University, who came to Ireland to study Irish archaeology and culture. The Kingsley Porters mainly entertained Irish literary and artistic figures including close friend AE Russell, whose paintings still hang in the library of the Castle. Their stay was to be short however as Arthur Kingsley Porter mysteriously disappeared during a visit to Inishbofin Island in 1933. The last private owner was Mr Henry McIlhenny of Philadelphia who bought the estate in 1937. Henry McIlhenny was an Irish American whose grandfather John McIlhenny grew up in Milford, a few miles north of Glenveagh. After buying the estate, Mr McIlhenny restored the Castle and developed its gardens.

Eventually Henry McIlhenny began to find travelling to and from Ireland too demanding and the upkeep of the estate was also becoming a strain. In 1975 he agreed to the sale of the estate to the Office of Public Works, which allowed for the creation of a National Park. In 1983 he bestowed the Castle to the nation along with its gardens and much of the contents. Glenveagh National Park opened to the public in 1984 while the Castle opened in 1986. Today, as under private ownership, Glenveagh continues to attract and inspire visitors from all over the world.

Garden History

The Castle Gardens are regarded as one of Ireland's top five outstanding horticultural masterpieces. Our mission is to conserve and enhance the historic flower gardens that surround the Castle as an inspirational environment that cherishes and protects the biodiversity of the plant world. We grow many rare plants, some unique to Irish gardens.

The Adairs

The wilderness setting of the Castle and Gardens, placed within the exposed mountain-scape of central Donegal, creates an unforgettable impression. It was conceived as a Victorian Camelot and romantic retreat where an idyllic lifestyle was pursued by lovers of nature and art. The lovers were John George Adair (an Irish born venture capitalist) and his beloved Cornelia Wadsworth (a wealthy blue-blood American). When construction began the year of their marriage in 1867, their intention was to develop the Glenveagh estate as a summer retreat where sport hunting and fishing would be the major activities. The townland of Glenveagh is found south of Lough Veagh and it was here that Glenveagh Lodge once stood. The only access to the valley was by a track leading from the head of the Glen to Glenveagh Cottage. John George had purchased the estate lands of Glenveagh, Lough Gartan and Manor Gore in the years between 1857 and 1858. The road that follows the lake was completed in the 1840s, perhaps as 'relief works' before or during the Great Famine. The site occupied by the Castle and Gardens was chosen for its central commanding location, maximising the 'borrowed landscape' of wild mountain, lake and moorland.

Between 1868 and 1873 the first phase of the Castle was constructed. Consisting of a four-story keep and adjoining wing, similar in appearance to Castle Doe and the O'Donnell Castle in Donegal Town. Glenveagh Castle is made from locally quarried granite in an eclectic style that blends traditional castle features that include corner turrets or bartizans with decorative arrow loops, a mock watchtower, Irish stepped battlements, rounded Romanesque arches over doors and windows on the keep, and an adjoining wing with Gothic style windows. Remarkably the completed and lavishly furnished Castle was destroyed by accidental fire in February 1872. It was insured for £8000 and the Adairs restored the damaged Castle and added a new wing as servants' quarters in 1873.

Extending the Castle and enhancing the gardens

It was not until 1888 that the range of buildings at the Castle was extended to add the drawing room, stable block, boathouse and gardener's cottage, all finished with stepped castellations. At this time the landscaping of the gardens began. The two major landscape features were the Pleasure Grounds and Kitchen Garden, constructed around 1890. Great quantities of topsoil were carted in at a penny a cartload to make-up the ground in the Kitchen Garden and Pleasure Grounds. This original Victorian garden layout made for Mrs. Adair remains intact. Mrs. Adair had a Gardener's House constructed at the top of the Walled Garden and employed Kew-trained gardener John Rainey to lay out the gardens. Some of the planting in the Pleasure Grounds such as some old rhododendron arboreum, cryptomeria, bamboo and the shelter-belt of Scots pine trees, were planted at this time.

The Kingsley Porters

In 1929 Lucy and Arthur Kingsley Porter became the new owners of the Glenveagh estate. They revitalised the estate by restoring and renovating the Castle interiors, spending £4000 on repairs to the Castle and a further £6000 on repairing the deer fence. Both Lucy and Arthur had fine art backgrounds, and the shellwork in the entrance hall and colour scheme in the library are examples of their aesthetic. They were also keen gardeners and Mrs Porter introduced the single red dahlia to Glenveagh. From 1929 to 1937 the kitchen garden and glasshouses provided an abundance of produce for the Castle kitchen. A guest described the garden at the time: "we talked to a woman in charge of the vegetables, bright flowers, fine vegetables and fruit. A pure white peacock perched on the battlements, bowls of peaches, nectarines, bananas, red and yellow currants from their hot houses". Their dahlia has been grown at Glenveagh since 1930, named for the Glenveagh gardener who raised it - Dahlia 'Matt Armour'.

Henry P McIlhenny

The last private owner, Henry P McIlhenny, began to develop the gardens in the late 1940s with the assistance of James Russell of Sunningdale Nurseries and Lanning Roper, his Harvard classmate, both well-known garden design consultants. From the late 1950s through to the early 1980s the design and layout of the garden was transformed and refined to include an ornamental walled Jardin Potager (1950), the 67 Steps (1955), the Tuscan Garden (1957), the Gothic Orangery (1958), the Italian Terrace (1969), and the development of the diverse plant collection that included large-scale landscape planting throughout the 1950s.

Henry was passionate about his garden at Glenveagh, where eight full-time gardeners (all local men like Matt Armour, Willie Brady, Mickey Neilis and John Connaghan) were employed to care for a richly planted woodland garden that surrounds the Castle. Many of the architectural features added by Henry were built by talented craftsmen like carpenter Tommy Ryan and stone mason Jim Russell. Henry curated a culture of excellence in hospitality for which he was well known, and he wanted the highest quality achievable on his estate and within his beloved Castle gardens.

Glenveagh is well known today for its rich collection of trees and shrubs specialising in southern hemisphere species and a diverse rhododendron collection. Displays of rhododendrons are at their best from late March to the end of May. A large collection of old narcissi varieties from Donegal gardens fills the walled garden in March and April. Displays of colour in the Walled Garden are at their best through the summer months. Fine specimens of the white flowered Eucryphia tree adorn the gardens in late summer. Dramatic autumn colour follows in October.

Glenveagh Castle and Gardens are now in the care of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and our commitment is to conserve and enhance the cultural heritage element of these landmarks within the wider context of Glenveagh National Park.