

Markree Castle a View Into the Past

For 350 years the Cooper family have been living at Markree Castle. Their story is a journey through time, starting in the 16th century with the invasion of Ireland by Cromwell.

The young officer, Edward Cooper, was serving under Cromwell when his army defeated the mighty O'Brien Clan. O'Brien himself lost his life in this battle and Edward married his widow Máire Rua (Red Mary). With her and her two sons he went to live at Luimneach Castle in Limerick, which is now a ruin. She had her two sons take the name of Cooper as protection from the English invaders. Cromwell's army marched on, further northwards in spite of the fact that he did not have the means to pay his officers. Instead, he gave them large pieces of land. Thus, he gave Markree Castle and the surrounding grounds to Edward Cooper. Until then, Markree had been a fortified outpost of the McDonagh Clan, protected on three sides by the river Unshin. Of Máire Rua's two sons the first was left the castle in Limerick and the second inherited Markree Castle. Charles Cooper, the current owner, is a direct descendant of the second son. Times remained turbulent and during an attempt by the English King James to regain the throne, Markree Castle was occupied by the Catholic army and the Coopers had to flee. After the battle of the Boyne in 1690, they returned and have been resident here ever since except for a brief period during the Civil War in the 1920s Markree was again occupied, this time by the Free State army.

The family was always politically involved and several ancestors represented the County at Westminster. They did not always follow party policy (maybe because they were descended from the O'Briens) and opposed the Act of Union, which sought to dissolve the parliament in Dublin and centralise power in London, in 1802. The Coopers' opposition to the Act of Union cost them the title that they had been promised and it is for this reason that Markree is one of the very few castles in Ireland that is not owned by a titled family. In 1922, the grandfather of the current owner Charles Cooper was one of the two members of Westminster Parliament who were also elected as a TD to the first Dáil Eireann (the Irish Parliament) after independence. After the Second World War Markree Castle fell on hard times and it stood empty and derelict for many years. In the early 1980s it appeared on the front cover of a book entitled *Vanishing Houses of Ireland*, a testament to the sad state of decay in which many of Ireland's great houses found themselves. In 1989, Charles Cooper, having worked in the hotel business all his life, came back to Markree to renovate the castle and run it as a hotel.

Each generation left its mark on the estate, but the castle as we can see it today, dates from 1802 with some changes made, mainly to the interior, in 1896. Walking around the outside of the Castle you can see dates of completion carved in stone on the walls. The stained glass window in the hall traces the Cooper family tree from Victorian times back to the time of King John. The restaurant is an architectural masterpiece designed by Francis Johnston and executed by Italian craftsmen.

A conservation area, the estate holds an array of wild life from red squirrels, to otters, to kingfishers. It has proved inspirational and the hymn *All Things Bright and*

Beautiful was written here in the 1800s. At the heart of Yeats' Country, the poet W.B. Yeats was a guest here when the Castle was still a private residence. More recently the singer-songwriter Johnny Cash and the golfer Tom Watson have stayed here.

The castle boasts 30 guest bedrooms with all modern amenities and beautiful views over the gardens and the surrounding landscape. It is available for weddings and other functions, conferences and team-building days, as well as a quiet few days break away from the rat-race. Dinner is served each evening in the restaurant, with a full lunch served on Sundays. Afternoon teas and light lunches are available in the lounge.