

Markree Castle, Sligo- 20 years in business.

*Markree Castle celebrates 20 years in business this year with a charity gala ball in aid of the Northwest Hospice on **July 4th**. An achievement that owners, Charles & Mary Cooper are being customarily quiet about but one that deserves at least a small amount of fuss and certainly a good party! All proceeds will go to the **Northwest Hopsice, Sligo**.*

A lot of people make assumptions about how and why Markree Castle turned from family home to one of Ireland's longest established castle hotels and famous Sligo landmark. The immediate assumption is that Charles decided, in 1989, to open the doors of his family home to the public, with beds, bathrooms and ballroom intact and ready to go. In reality, at the start of 1988, not only was Markree in a ruinous state, Charles didn't even own it. He did, however, grow up there, one of five children. After the World War II and throughout his childhood more and more of the building was closed off as the cost of upkeep became prohibitive, allowing damp and dry rot to take hold. He left Markree at the age of 16, moving to London where he got his start in the hotel industry at the Savoy. That was the beginning of his long career in hotels which took him from Switzerland to the U.S.A., Germany, France and eventually back to Ireland. Meanwhile, Markree Castle was falling into a sad state of disrepair and the family finally closed the doors for good after Charles' father's death in 1982. Its photo, on the cover of Vanishing Country Houses of Ireland in 1988, a volume dedicated to decline and decay of this aspect of Ireland's rural architectural heritage, highlighted Markree's plight alongside many of Ireland's finest big houses.

Markree Castle's future seemed bleak- one could stand in what is now the dining and see daylight through the roof two floors above, while sheep grazed the gardens outside. Most of the furniture had long-since been sold. Charles's eldest brother, according to tradition, had inherited the castle from his father in 1982 and it had stood empty ever since, a white elephant with no certain future. Charles and Mary were at that time running a successful guest house and acclaimed restaurant at Glen Lodge, near Strandhill in Sligo. When, in early 1988, Charles' brother discussed selling the castle, the prospect of ending 350 years of Coopers living at Markree brought Charles and Mary to make a life-changing decision. Markree was bought at €100,000, the market value for a ruin of that size at the time. Funding was of course the number one priority and eventually he found, in his words, "a bank foolish enough to lend the money". He got the support of his accountant, who admitted that the project did not make financial sense but that it was something that Charles at least had to try- even if failure was inevitable. With the backing of a handful of close, "probably stupid" friends and bank loans, the budget was set at £500,000 with an optimistic 6 month renovation time. The castle opened on April 30th 1989 on time and within budget. Still a work in progress, a whole floor was left un-renovated until 1995 and more recently the chapel and bar have been restored. Finances dictate that the focus be very much on making small steps as and when funds can be begged or borrowed, struggling along and making it all work somehow. There is always a leak in the roof somewhere, but to Markree's dedicated following of regular guests, wedding couples and excitable American tourists, this all adds to the charm and the fun of the old place.

Markree Castle as a hotel is full of idiosyncrasies and character- it does not deny its turbulent past and recent history and is very much a work in progress. Any of the many brides and grooms who have used it to celebrate their wedding will tell you that it is the best place for a party. It has an undeniable quirky charm and a unique character and atmosphere. Any sound business person would look at the figures and think the Coopers mad to have stuck with it for twenty years, but Markree Castle as a hotel is a labour of love rather than a money making exercise. July 4th will be a night to celebrate the history of this great building, an integral part of the Sligo landscape and ingrained part of our collective local and national history. It is also a time to celebrate endeavour and the now alien concept of 'heart over head' in business. We are looking forward to the next twenty years.

*Tickets €100 to include, cocktails, dinner & dancing to 'The Conquerors' as well as a few (nice) surprises. All proceeds go to the **Northwest Hospice**.*

*For further details go online at www.markreecastle.ie
For tickets call 071-9167800 or email info@markreecastle.ie*

Press: contact Patricia at patricia@markreecastle.ie or 071-9167800