

# Find a room with a view, a turret and a friendly ghost in this historic hotel

In the first of a series of articles looking at businesses with an unique Ulster-Scots link, we focus on the Ballygally Castle Hotel on the Antrim coast road.

**These days it's the epitome of luxury, boasting all the mod cons of a contemporary four-star hotel, attracting business and leisure visitors from every corner of the world.**

It has its 44 superbly-appointed bedrooms, a plush restaurant and bar, and conferencing suites complete with wi-fi and the sort of gadgets we've come to expect.

But make no mistake, the Ballygally Castle is no ordinary hotel...

For while its owners can list the likes of the Culloden, Europa and Slieve Donard in its burgeoning hotels portfolio, none has the chequered history of this stunning property, situated at the start of the scenic Antrim coast, at the foot of the famous nine Glens of Antrim and the Giant's Causeway.

Built in 1625 by James Shaw and his wife Isabella Brisbane - at a time when Ulster was unsettled - Ballygally Castle has operated in many guises through the centuries, and indeed is unique today in being one of the few 17th century buildings in Northern Ireland still being used as a residence.

Shaw had arrived Ballygally from Greenock in 1613, when he came into possession of a sub-grant of land, at the low rent of 24 pounds a year, from the Earl of Antrim. It was on this land that Ballygally Castle was built 12 years later as a place of defence as well as one of residence.

The castle was originally constructed in mostly local stone, in the style of classic Scottish architecture, with high walls, a steep roof, dormer windows and corner turrets. The walls were about five feet thick, with loopholes for musketry, and the stairs were built of stone, and spiral in construction.

Through the outer hall ran an open stream of water for the use of the inhabitants, in case of siege, and above the dormer windows were carvings, still traceable today.

Outside were originally two courtyards, one surrounded by high walls; the other inside the higher walls. The inner courtyard was marked by two stone pillar mounted with round stone balls.

Inside the courtyard were stables, coach houses, byres, sheep pens, a brew-house and dovecot. Outside there was a wash-house and a scutching-mill and, in the little glen on the other side of the river, was a cornmill.

In 1657, the Shaws acquired the

Brisbane Estate: James Shaw, son of James Shaw of Ballygally, married his cousin, Elizabeth Brisbane.

Over the main entrance door of Ballygally Castle, leading to the tower, is a carved stone tablet bearing the date 1625, and the legend God's Providence Is My Inheritance.

It is probable that the original building was more extensive than the current remains of the ancient Castle indicate, for it served as a place of refuge for the Protestants during the turmoil of the 17th century.

Ballygally passed through many troubles and was used again as a fortress as late as the 18th Century.

Towards the mid-18th Century, considerable additions were made to the castle. Henry Shaw married a Miss Hamilton, accompanied by her two sisters, all of whom resided at the castle. In 1799, William Shaw, the last member of the family to live at the castle, succeeded to the estate.

In the early 1800s, the Shaw family lost their lands and wealth, and the estate was sold to the Agnew family for £15,400.

For some years the castle served as a

coastguard station, then became the residence of the Rev Classon Porter and his family, who lived there for many years.

It was eventually acquired by the Moore family. They then sold Ballygally to Cyril Lord in the early 1950s, who refurbished it as a hotel. In 1996 Sir William Hastings purchased the Ballygally Castle Hotel from Mr Lord for the princely sum of £40,000.

Through the decades the Hastings Hotel Group has invested millions of pounds in various extensions and renovations, which have transformed it to the charming hotel it is today.

And as you'd expect, all developments have been carefully undertaken so as not to distract from the history of the original building. Among its 44 en suite bedrooms are several with turrets!

"We refer to Ballygally Castle as the hidden jewel in the Hastings Crown," owner Billy Hastings says. And, of course, no castle would be complete without its own ghost, and Ballygally is reputed to have as many as three! The popular theory is that the principal ghost is that of Lady Isabella Shaw, wife of Lord James

Shaw. He had wanted a son, and when his wife delivered his heir, he snatched the baby from her and locked her in a room at the top of the castle. While trying to escape to search for her beloved child, Lady Isabella allegedly fell to her death from the tower window (although another theory is that she was actually thrown from the window by the cruel lord or one of his henchmen!). But fear not, because Lady Isabella's ghost is reputed to be a "friendly" spirit who walks the corridors of the old castle, and down through the years many guests have reported strange experiences and have felt a presence in their rooms!

And not wanting to miss an opportunity, the Ballygally owners even have "The Ghost Room" in one of the turrets in the oldest part of the castle. Dare you go there?

Ballygally Castle Hotel (phone 028 2858 1066) is located at Coast Road, Ballygally, Co Antrim BT40 2QZ. It is part of the Hastings Hotel Group.

