

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DECADE MAKES...

Sandra Dempsey

AN OLD HAWTHORN stood lonely and scant in the field near the ruin of Kilbrackan House. It held as much promise of survival as the house itself, which perhaps should have shaded our enthusiasm as we looked out at it from a hole in the stone wall where there once was a kitchen window. It was 2001 and we had just purchased the edifice which had been an abandoned dwelling for more than a decade, except for live-stock—mostly sheep—that had been the last inhabitants.

In 2007, six years into our restoration of Kilbrackan House, I wrote about Living in Leitrim for *The Leitrim Guardian*. I described the big old house on the hill overlooking the Killeshandra-Carrigallen road—once known as Crowe's House—as a “ruin with a view.” It took a decade to complete the restoration of the house which is actually a new house inside the more than 200-year-old, massive stone structure. In the first year we lived in a mobile

home we parked near the house which overlooked

■ The old Hawthorne tree still stands in the field near the kitchen door at Kilbrackan House



the same spectacular view as we enjoy now from the front windows. In that year we converted the dilapidated Byre into a one-bedroom apartment, and the adjacent Hay Shed into a multifunctional facility which houses equipment and operates as a workshop as well as a party house with its own Stable Bar.

Restoration is much more than reconstructing stone and mortar. And the passion required to persevere becomes as much a reflection of one's essence as the project itself.

Retirement can be a form of restoration and a time when one's soul may surface in new, exciting ways. Shay Dempsey was 63-years-old when we first drove up the avenue at Kilbrackan House. And his craft and experience from 30 years in the engineers department at Guinness provided the vision to see the

■ Above: The entrance to Kilbrackan House today

■ Inset: The derelict Kilbrackan House used with the 2007 “Living in Leitrim” article: In 2001 Shay & Sandra Dempsey purchased Kilbrackan House shown here as the new roof was being constructed

■ Below: The Drawing Room in disrepair in 2001

■ Bottom right (next page) : The Drawing Room today

■ Bottom far right (next page) : Lord John Kilbracken (a regular contributor to *The Leitrim Guardian*), having tea with Shay Dempsey in Kilbrackan House's Dining Room undergoing renovation in 2001





■ Above: Kilbrackan House Dining Room today

■ Left: The Byre reconstructed from a cow shed into a one-bedroom apartment

■ Inset: The Byre outbuilding in ruin and under reconstruction in 2001

mighty foundation beneath the overgrowth.

Shay's discipline as a professional musician then tuned and retuned the subtle tones of this centuries-old home and transformed it into a modern replica of Georgian country living.

Certainly, we were challenged by the immense task ahead of us. But then the times we were in were also risky with the undertones of destruction and reconstruction.

When we first came to Kilbrackan it was a side trip in our route back to Dublin from the Galway races. Helicopters were the trend there at the races. And they reflected the time of Ireland's roaring new wealth, and this small island's reputation for

having more of these aircraft per capita than anywhere else in the world—in the world!

No wonder that in the decade that followed the 2007 Living in Leitrim article – when I wrote that we were transfixed by “the beauty of the countryside – shimmering lakes, glossy green meadows and pastel patchworks on Sliabh an Iarainn”—the banks failed, financial markets were in turmoil and billionaires lost and billionaires won.

A century after “The Restoration” of the English monarchy, when in 1660 Charles II wrested back power from the grizzly grip of Oliver Cromwell, William Wordsworth reflected on the power of Nature and the nature of man.

*...“To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man...”*

*If this belief from heaven be sent,
If such be Nature's holy plan,
Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?”*

One may ask what difference does a decade, a century or a lifetime make? For us here at Kilbrackan House the difference is true— as we enjoy the decade of our labour of love which restored a hearty old monument of Leitrim lore.

Yet also steeped in Nature's folklore—from the Crown of Thorns to the vessel Mayflower— the Hawthorn with gnarled nobility still stands in the field outside our kitchen door.

Sandra Dempsey has been a professional journalist, author and broadcaster in her career spanning three decades—from fashion editor at a major newspaper, contributing travel magazine editor to European and American publications and host of her own PBS radio program.

Shay Dempsey enjoyed dual careers—one at the engineers department at Guinness and the other as band leader and vocalist in the early showband days with Dickie Rock. Shay was resident band leader in all the main 5-star Dublin Hotels during his career.

