

# RE-GENERATION GAME

*Ballinlough Castle in Co Westmeath  
has been re-imagined for a brand  
new chapter in its 400-year history.  
Catherine Heaney meets its owners*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
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Alice Nugent at Ballinlough  
Castle, photographed by  
James Fennell.



# This Glossy Life

In the drawing room, 18th-century plasterwork and a marble mantel by James Wyatt.



The castle, set beside a lake, has been inhabited by the Nugent family since 1614.

Ballinlough Castle, in the gently rolling countryside of Westmeath, has been home to the Nugent family for over four centuries. As you might expect, the castle has a rich and storied past. But that past is very much balanced with life in the present and its role as a family home to Alice and Nick Nugent and their two daughters. That balance between past and present, old and new, is reflected in the interiors, which successfully tread the line between the preservation of wonderful features, including exquisite 18th-century plasterwork and marble fireplaces, and the ability to meet the needs of a busy modern family. While the castle is sometimes rented out privately and is home to the Body & Soul Festival, as Alice points out, Ballinlough is first and foremost a home.

London design firm Todhunter Earle has worked with the Nugents over many years to restore and refresh Ballinlough's elegant interiors, remaining respectful of its history and maintaining the atmosphere of familiar warmth. Kate Earle, one half of the firm, whose gorgeous new interiors book features a chapter on Ballinlough, is a friend of the couple. Because she was so familiar with the property, and close to Nick and Alice, rather than carry out a complete one-off overhaul, she was able to help them approach the project room by room over years in a more organic and budget-conscious way. Todhunter Earle was founded by Emily Todhunter in 1988 and the firm's projects range from classic English country houses to well-known restaurants, yachts, small boutique hotels, ski chalets and beautiful private homes.





In the grand dining room, family treasures have been unearthed and reinstated.



Kate Earle chose warm and inviting colours. Yellow is uplifting even when skies are grey.

Long-forgotten furniture from different parts of the house was upcycled and pressed into service, with fabric and wallpaper updated by Earle, often echoing what was originally there. “Kate was so clever at finding things in old cupboards,” explains Alice. “From old washstands to vintage hatboxes. She was amazing, pulling things from here and there.”

Lamps and rugs and linens were chosen. Practicality prevails with a woodburning stove in the drawing room fireplace and a massive stainless steel double-sink in the kitchen. Clever design solutions were sought and found. As the castle is rented in its entirety a couple of times a year – mostly for family gatherings, or weddings, with many clients coming from the US – it also

had to meet the needs of visitors looking for the country house experience without some of the features typical of old country houses, such as erratic plumbing. “When we were starting to rent the house, I said, the most important things are comfortable beds and hot water,” says Alice. “It’s not a chichi, five-star hotel experience, it’s very much a home. It’s relaxed, not ‘don’t touch’. People come here and have a happy time. It’s just one of those houses. There’s something really spiritually positive about it – I remember feeling it the first time I came here.”

Built in 1614, the castle was extended in 1790 by one of Nick’s ancestors, Sir Hugh Nugent, who was knighted by King George III. The house continued to be lived in by Nugents for another 140 years until Nick’s grandfather undertook its restoration in the 1930s, eventually moving back with his English bride, whose “eyes were out on stalks” when, on the night of her arrival, she was thrust into the middle of a raucous Hunt Ball in the castle’s basement.

Nick’s own parents returned from England to take over the running of the house in the 1980s, with Nick and Alice stepping in 20 years ago. Nick is a director at Goffs, maintaining a family link to the world of horseracing and Alice comes from the English horseracing centre of Newmarket. Thanks to her Irish mother, she used to spend summers in Limerick and so already had a connection, and the couple lived in Dublin before moving to Ballinlough.

Eldest daughter, Lucy, a student at Bristol University, helps out when guests come to stay and nine-year-old Lara – described by her father as a “rural terrorist” – has been known to lead visitors in games of hide-and-seek. She spends hours with her grandmother, who lives in a house on the grounds, listening to stories of the castle’s past. In 2010, the couple’s middle daughter Katie died of leukemia at the age of six, and while the loss was devastating, it has informed their activities at Ballinlough in meaningful ways. “Everything

here just evolves; things happen by accident,” says Alice. “I used to worry all the time, and since Katie died, I don’t worry. Something always seems to be around the corner and something different arrives.”

One of those things has been the Body & Soul Festival which, under normal circumstances, brings a technicolour band of musicians, artists and revellers to the castle’s grounds every June. Originally part of the Electric Picnic, Alice and Nick brought Body & Soul to Ballinlough with the support of late concert promoter John Reynolds and its director Avril Stanley. And as with everything here, it’s more than just a business relationship – the festival’s first outing took place in June 2010, just a month after Katie passed away, which cemented the bond between the Nugents and the crew, many of whom became friends. “Body & Soul just brought this whole new dimension to our lives and to this house,” says Alice, “and it has been wonderful for the kids growing up with festivals going on.”

While they’ve missed the annual bustle during the pandemic, the enforced break has given the land a chance to rest and heal from the impact of 15,000 annual visitors. A festival buzz has been replaced by a literal one, as bumble bees thrive in the quiet gardens. But the stage awaits and as we walk around the grounds, Nick and Alice point out where the cocktail bar and spoken word arena would usually be, and will return.

Things rarely stand still at Ballinlough. As well as helping to manage Body & Soul and the castle, Alice is a psychotherapist and runs the Katie Nugent Fund, which provides emotional support for families dealing with childhood cancer. And with the world cautiously reopening, there are festivals to be planned and new visitors to be welcomed. ■ *Modern English, Todhunter Earle Interiors, published by Vendôme, is out now. See [www.ballinloughcastle.ie](http://www.ballinloughcastle.ie) for details of events and castle hire. For information on the Katie Nugent Fund, email [ballinloughcastle@gmail.com](mailto:ballinloughcastle@gmail.com).*



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