

LISSAN HOUSE: A HISTORY

Home to the Staples family from c.1620 until the death of the last of the Staples, Hazel Marion Dolling in 2006, Lissan House is thought to have had the longest occupation by a single family of any domestic dwelling in Ireland. Historically it is of great national importance. It tells a story of soldier and rebel; of Planter and native; of Monarch and humble domestic worker; of war and peace; of high politics and hilarious farce; of great wealth and unimaginable hardship. Architecturally, the house tells a story of an unbroken line of small extensions and improvements stretching over 350 years none of which ever wiped out all trace of what went before. But most of all, the story of Lissan is a story of tenacity and survival: a determination to keep alive “this golden place” against all the odds.

The Staples family arrived in Ireland in around 1611 when a Bristol lawyer, Thomas Staples, settled in the then new town of Moneymore. Having married a wealthy heiress in the person of Charity Jones, daughter of the governor of the Vintner’s Company, he purchased the Lissan Estate mainly to capitalise on its iron deposits and was so successful in this venture that he was made the first Baronet Lissan and Faughanvale in 1628 by King Charles I.

The current house was substantially built by his youngest son Sir Robert Staples in around 1680 when a typical seventeenth century “L” shaped house was constructed around what is today the entrance hall (then an open courtyard). This house was greatly gentrified and improved about a century later by the Rt. Hon. John Staples, a wealthy Dublin lawyer and prominent member of the Irish House of Commons who closed in the open portion of the “L” to create the current stone-flagged entrance hall. A century later again and the 10th Baronet, Sir Nathaniel Staples created the bizarre but utterly spectacular staircase. This was done not as a concession to Victorian taste but as a result of the collapse of John Staples internal extensions which gave way under the weight of his first-floor library in 1885, bringing several upstairs rooms and the 1680 staircase crashing down. Sir Nathaniel had neither the money nor the inclination to restore the house to its former glory and so simply requested a local carpenter to rebuild the staircase in its current form without restoring the lost rooms. Other additions from Sir Nathaniel’s time include the gargantuan *porte cochère* to the entrance front and the clock tower to the rear which was dismantled from its original home in the Diamond in Magherafelt and reconstructed here at Lissan. After Sir Nathaniel’s death, the estate went into an almost terminal decline. It was inherited by his eldest son Sir John, the 11th Baronet who had been confined to a mental asylum and the Estate itself was run firstly by his brother James Head Staples and, after 1910, by the famous artist Robert Ponsonby Staples who inherited the title in 1933.

On his death in 1943, his eldest son, Sir Robert George Alexander Staples, 13th Baronet decided to leave Lissan and settled in England, his Land Agent, Harry Dolling, converting the main house into tenement apartments. At one point, the house was home to almost 100 people. All of this changed in 1970 when the 13th Baronet died and decided to leave the house not to the distant cousin who was to inherit the title but instead to his eldest daughter Hazel who returned from her career as Purser for the Cunard Line to take over the running of the Estate. Within a year of returning home, Hazel had married the Land Agent, Harry Dolling and settled here for the remainder of her life. From the death of her mother in 1990 until her own death in 2006, she lived here without mains running water or electricity.

By 1997 it had become clear to Hazel that a future would have to be found for the Estate and she established a Charitable Trust to take on the running of the Estate after her death. Following her death in 2006, the Trust have opened the house and Estate to the public and, following the first major restoration of the fabric of the great house since the 1880s in 2010, continue to seek funding and use to secure the future of this vital and irreplaceable resource to the local community of which it has always at the heart.