

Egerton Shelswell-White

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Charles Lysaght recalls the music lover whose historic home, hospitality, and cultural appetite enlivened west Cork

AS heir to the Whites, Earls of Bantry, Egerton Shelswell-White, who died on December 9 at the age of 79, returned from America to take over the management of his ancestral Bantry House on the death of his mother in 1978.

On her watch, it had, in 1946, become the first Irish country house opened to paying visitors. Her son Egerton and his second wife Brigitte built on this foundation, establishing guest accommodation and tea rooms, hosting music, theatre and other events, so making their historic house overlooking Bantry Bay a vibrant centre of west Cork life.

Born in December 1933, Shelswell-White went from Bantry to school at Castle Park Dalkey and Winchester and on to university at Trinity College Oxford. He then worked on trawlers in Iceland and for British European Airways before moving to the US in 1965. After a spell teaching history and sex education, he farmed in Alabama before his return to Ireland.

Only 100 acres of land remained in family ownership, so the future lay in exploiting the house and its dramatically beautiful situation. By the late Eighties, visitor numbers had increased by a factor of eight to 80,000 per year.

An armada exhibition was mounted, commemorating the assembly of the French fleet off Bantry Bay in 1796 for an invasion that never happened. With the assistance of an EU grant, the continental garden, with its Italian statuary created by the second earl in the 19th Century, was restored to its pristine splendour. A competent trombone player in his own right, Shelswell-White delighted most in staging musical events.

In his childhood, he had felt imprisoned by the walls of the demesne and escaped only occasionally, when he would fraternise with the Spanish fisherman who then frequented Bantry. He was not allowed to make friends with local boys and had to import schoolfellows as companions in the holidays.

Determined not to visit such isolation on his own children, he sent them to school in Bantry and Schull. One of his daughters, Sophie, returned from Australia a few years ago to take over the management of the property.

He is survived by his wife Brigitte and by his two sons and four daughters.

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