

# Stirring it up at old country residence

**T**HE longest part of the walk from Inchiquin House to the village of Corofin is the avenue. To call this an avenue is at first something of a compliment. It begins as a rough drive, turns into a farm track and then — to the visitor's great relief — a pair of formal gate piers announces the smoother appearance and consistency of an avenue. There is no deception in this combination of rural features, for Inchiquin House was a farmhouse.

Whatever else Ronan Harbison and his father Peter are aiming for as they renew this property, they insist on authenticity. Set in a little decline close to Lake Inchiquin and surrounded by 100 acres of woods and farmland, the house has an appealing charm, rustic but gracefully redolent of its Georgian origins.

Applied to a house which was built in the 1740s, the word authenticity can have a cold ring to it, but not here. "The people who built here knew about light," says Ronan Harbison, whose business life in Dublin is interrupted by his attachment to Inchiquin House.

He stands in the double-sided porch which was added to protect the entrance front from the weather and which now floods the narrow hall with brightness — with its armchairs and reading-lamps it is an indication of the way in which homely comfort has been matched with respect for architectural style. The impression is immediately warm, even on one of the coldest of winter days. Beyond the arch, which indicates the site of the original doorway, the hall itself is narrow but again light shines in from the half-landing and down from the bedroom landing above.

On either side of the hall the main reception rooms share this quality: in the sitting-room the emphasis is on comfort trimmed with excellent upholstery, wide sash windows (the shutters are in working order throughout the house) and a generous fireplace. The atmosphere is of traditional, tranquil but confidently presented hospitality, flavoured with family photographs, books and



**Mary Leland** visits Inchiquin House in Co Clare which is about to serve up weekend cookery classes

memorabilia.

The dining-room is more formal but again a kind of family-based exuberance sets the tone with the darker furniture — all the furniture restoration is the work of Nigel Barnes of Old Chairs Restoration — and the more dramatic paint scheme enlivened by natural light, lamplight and beautifully appropriate décor. As with the bright, inviting bedrooms and sparkling bathrooms, this is the work of Rory Kelly Interiors. Relying on a sense of the inner life of the house, it mixes the contemporary with the original evidence while remaining sensitive to the best elements of the past.

What in a grander house would be called the service wing has been transformed into a large modern kitchen — it used to be the kitchen with the dairy attached — complete with a double Waterford cooker, Siemens appliances and fittings, oak kitchen units by Frankly Kitchens in Portlaoise and granite counter-tops from Portlaoise Stone. Floored with porcelain tiles and ending in a wide French window leading out to a terrace



**Inchiquin Country House, Corofin, Co Clare, was built in the 1740s and has been painstakingly restored. Right: Peter and Ronan Harbison outside their family home.**

area and the garden (which ends in a little paddock complete with pony), this is to be the hub of the whole house. Which, when you think of it, is more or less what it must always have been.

Now that the impeccable and painstaking process of restoration has been completed by Tom Howard of Kilnaboy, Inchiquin House is once again going to earn its living. The Harbisons' plans for its future include the imminent introduction of a programme of weekend residential cookery courses (spouses, partners and friends not participating can stay at overnight B&B rates) conducted by chef Liam Walsh (ex-Marfield in Gorey and Gregan's Castle in Ballyvaughan).

Centred in this kitchen where the array of Dresden porridge plates keeps the old connections alive, the course is designed to suit small groups, but the kitchen can also accommodate the demands of a wedding reception with marquees on the lawns close to the house as well as those of corporate events and business meetings — wheelchair access is also attractively provided. Above all it will suit private rentals for

family gatherings or holidays — already Ronan is finding people taking the house for two and three-week bookings.

It was always a family house. Inchiquin was originally the island of O'Quin and the area's history can be traced through the centuries to the catalogue of names in the 19th century. Col James MacNamara bought the house in 1910. Serving with the Royal Indian Medical Service, he came from a medical family which had practised in the district since 1836 (the last of whom retired only four years ago).

Among his tenants at Inchiquin was the bee-keeper Turlough O'Bryan and when James died in 1932 his wife Gertrude McDermott carried on the farm at Inchiquin House with the help of her nephew Desmond McSherry. When she died in 1967 the house was bequeathed to Desmond's sister, Sheelagh, wife of James Austin Harbison. Their sons are John, the former State Pathologist, and Peter, archaeologist, art historian and author. It is with Peter's sons, Ronan, Maurice and John that the management of Inchiquin House now rests.

Like their parents and grandparents, these young men have been familiar with the house all through their childhood. As Peter Harbison strokes the fossils embedded in the polished limestone of the dining-room fireplace he recalls that this was where he first became fascinated by archaeology. He remembers the gardener Tom Kearney and Mattie Keane who ran the farm and kept the house dry and warm.

He remembers his first attempts at fishing on the lake across the fields — from the padded window seat of a bedroom he looks across to the woods of Clifden Hill and remembers what it was like to be a boy with all these summer acres to explore, the Burren outside the door. The hill, the woods, the acres and the lake are all still here. Fishing visitors can have the services of Toddy O'Loughlin as ghillie.

At the house Kathleen Cahill, wearing the green shirt with its Inchiquin House logo, is at hand as housekeeper, advisor and guide and then she goes off to run her own farm.

■ Inchiquin Country House, Corofin, Co Clare, 085-2118835/086-8231675