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A-haunting we will go



With our castles' bloody histories, it is little wonder that many of us believe the spirits of unsettled souls reside in them. **Eleanor Fitzsimons** takes a tour of Ireland's spookiest spots

ANCIENT DOORS slam shut without warning as a chill wind whips up where all was calm before. Windows of long-abandoned rooms are illuminated by mysterious lights in the dead of night. Heart-wrenching wails tear the silence of a lonely keep. Could it be that our castles are haunted? With their horrible history of bloody battle, siege and occupation, it is little wonder that many believe the spirits of unsettled souls reside in and around the walls of Ireland's castles. Some have been reduced to ruins, frequently falling victim to fire as our predecessors sought their freedom. Others, restored to magnificence, welcome wandering ghost-hunters into their well-stocked gift shops and chichi cafes. We Irish invented Halloween. Why not mark the occasion by touring some of Ireland's spookiest castles?

Malahide Castle

With the exception of the period from 1649 to 1660, when Oliver Cromwell granted it to Miles Corbett, the Talbot family continuously occupied Malahide Castle from the 12th century right up until 1973. The castle, now open to the public, is said to be haunted by a series of ghosts. The magnificent Great Hall, built in 1475, is home to Puck, a negligent 15th-century castle sentry with a fondness for a tippie who fell asleep at his post. Distraught, he hanged himself from the minstrel's gallery. Puck, whose spectre has reportedly materialised in several photographs, was most recently sighted in 1976, when the castle's contents were being auctioned. Another spectral occupant is Corbett, who was hanged, drawn and quartered for his atrocities during Cromwell's reign of terror. His ghost appears as an armoured soldier, then separates into four pieces. Sir Walter Hussey, killed in battle on his wedding day, wanders the corridors venting his resentment towards his young bride, who later married his rival. Lastly, the shrewish Lady Maud Plunkett has been spotted chasing her hapless husband through the castle.

■ Malahide Castle, Malahide, Co Dublin, 01-8162184, malahidecastle.com

Leap Castle

Reputed to be the most haunted castle in Ireland, this former bastion of the powerful O'Carroll dynasty harbours many dark secrets. A deadly power struggle in the 1600s resulted in one of the clan, a priest, being run through and fatally wounded by his brother as he said Mass in what is now known as the Bloody Chapel. Many poor souls were imprisoned and executed in the castle.

In 1900 workers discovered an oubliette, or hidden dungeon, next to the chapel, its floor replete with treacherous spikes. Three cartloads of human bones were finally removed from this hellhole. Little wonder that the castle is said to be haunted by several spectres, the most terrifying of which is a tiny hunched creature whose apparition coincides with the stench of rotting flesh. Locals steer clear and are adamant that in the dead of night the windows at the top of the castle “light up for a few seconds, as if many candles were brought into the room”. Gutted by fire during the Civil War, the castle lay ruined and abandoned for decades, until it was acquired, in 1991, by Sean Ryan, who is undertaking restoration work.

■ Leap Castle, near Roscrea, Co Offaly, 057-9131115. Open to visitors on request

Kilkea Castle

Built in 1180, Ireland’s oldest inhabited castle is now a characterful luxury hotel with a leisure centre and 18-hole golf course. Although calm and tranquil now, the building is infamous for its turbulent history. You can still see an early attempt to ward off evil, in the form of an Evil Eye Stone, a roughly carved depiction of grotesque half-human figures set high in the wall of what was once the guard room. Perhaps the darkest period occurred when the castle was in the possession of the 11th earl of Kildare, a 16th-century nobleman and half-brother of Silken Thomas, who pursued an interest in alchemy and dabbled in black magic. The earl was reputed to be able to transmogrify into bird or beast. His wife, the countess, begged him to demonstrate this skill, but he warned her that were she to show any fear while he took alternative form he would vanish. Persuaded of her courage, the earl became a blackbird and perched on the countess’s shoulder. A passing black cat leaped at the bird; fearing for her husband’s safety, the lady swooned. When she regained consciousness both bird and cat had disappeared, never to be seen again. Local lore maintains that this eccentric nobleman, dubbed the Wizard, revisits the castle on horseback every seven years.

■ Kilkea Castle, Castledermot,
Co Kildare, 059-9145156,
kilkeacastle.ie

Wilton Castle

Although occupied by the Alcock family from 1695 until it was destroyed by fire, on the night of March 5th, 1923, Wilton Castle was mercifully empty on the night that Civil War insurgents arrived with cans of petrol. The caretaker tried to dissuade the men but only managed to save some of the furniture. Various ghostly happenings are attributed to the place. Locals maintain that on the anniversary of the death of Col Harry Alcock a ghostly carriage travels along the driveway. Crowds once gathered in anticipation, and a local shoemaker was adamant that he once spoke with the ghost. Mysterious lights are said sometimes to be visible in the ruins of the castle tower, where an aged actor was killed in a fire. Perhaps the oddest legend of all concerns Archibald Jacob, a neighbouring magistrate and captain of the local militia company during the 1798 rebellion. Jacob was responsible for the flogging and torture of many parishioners. He fell from his horse and was killed while returning home from a ball at the castle, and his ghost was said to haunt both the scene of his death and the castle until a Catholic priest was summoned for an exorcism. When the priest made the sign of the cross Jacob's ghost reportedly materialised in the fireplace before disappearing in a puff of smoke. Now, decades later, only fire-scarred ruins remain, although the castle is being restored.

■ Wilton Castle, Bree, Enniscorthy, Co Wexford

Carrickfergus Castle

Built in 1177 by John de Courcy, conqueror of east Ulster, this imposing fortress was garrisoned until 1928. Besieged in turn by the Scots, Irish, English and French, the castle saw action right up to the second World War; it's now one of Northern Ireland's most popular tourist destinations. A tragic story of love, betrayal and mistaken identity lies behind the tale of the haunting of the castle. Robert Rainey, a young soldier stationed there during the 1760s, constantly courted trouble but swore to mend his ways after he fell in love with a local girl, Betsy Baird. But the fickle Betsy was also carrying on with the brother of Rainey's commanding officer, Col Jennings. Rainey flew into a jealous rage and ran his rival through with his sword before calmly sheathing the weapon and returning to his quarters. Confusion arose when the dying Jennings fingered regimental drummer Timothy Lavery as the perpetrator. Lavery was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death. As the noose was placed around the young man's neck he swore that he would haunt the castle forever. Despite Rainey's confession many years later Lavery's spectre is said still to hover around a well in the castle grounds, beating his drum and shouting out his innocence.

■ Carrickfergus Castle, Carrickfergus, Co Antrim, 048-93351273, ni-environment.gov.uk/carrick.htm

Castle Caldwell

Located on the shores of Lough Erne, near Belleek in Co Fermanagh, this was the seat of the Caldwell family for centuries. The 17th-century castle that sat at the centre of the estate now lies in ruins, its walls a nesting spot for dozens of birds. Local historian John Cunningham tells a tale of a tall gentleman in a black coat and hat hitching a lift on the road outside the estate walls. Should you invite him into your car he'll ask




you to stop at the gates of the castle, at which point he'll disappear. This benign fellow is not the only phantom associated with the castle. Two soldiers, Ward and McGoldrick, were escaping from the Battle of Ballinamuck in 1798 when they sought refuge in a house near

the castle. Its unsympathetic owner ran to raise Sir John Caldwell. The men ran off; Ward headed towards the lake, where he was shot; he was buried on nearby Dead Man's Island. The most celebrated spectre of all is Dennis McCabe, a fiddler who fell off a barge and drowned. The Caldwells erected a stone violin in his memory. Since 1913 the Castle has been owned by the UK Forest Commission; the estate is designated a nature reserve and public parkland.

■ Castle Caldwell, Lower Lough Erne, Co Fermanagh, 048-66323110, discovermorth-emireland.com

Glin Castle

Auspiciously located on the banks of the Shannon, Glin Castle dates from the late 17th century, when it was built as a home for the Knights of Glin, a branch of the great Norman FitzGerald family. The spirits of those killed during its many battles are said still to haunt the grounds. Frequently on the losing side, the Glin FitzGeralds survived the Elizabethan, Cromwellian and Jacobite wars



before joining with the earls of Desmond to oppose the English in the 16th century. Thomas FitzGerald, heir to the then knight, was hanged, drawn and quartered by English forces in Limerick in 1567. Legend has it that his mother seized his severed head, drank his blood and carried his dismembered body for burial at Lisloughtin Abbey. Later, in 1600, the castle was besieged by the forces of Queen Elizabeth I; the then knight's six-year-old son was captured and tied to the mouth of a cannon. When royal troops

threatened to blow him up unless the knight surrendered, he replied that he was virile and his wife was strong and that they could easily produce another son. The troops relented. You can stay at the castle between March and November, and at other times by arrangement. The 15 en-suite bedrooms can be rented individually, or the castle can be hired as a whole.

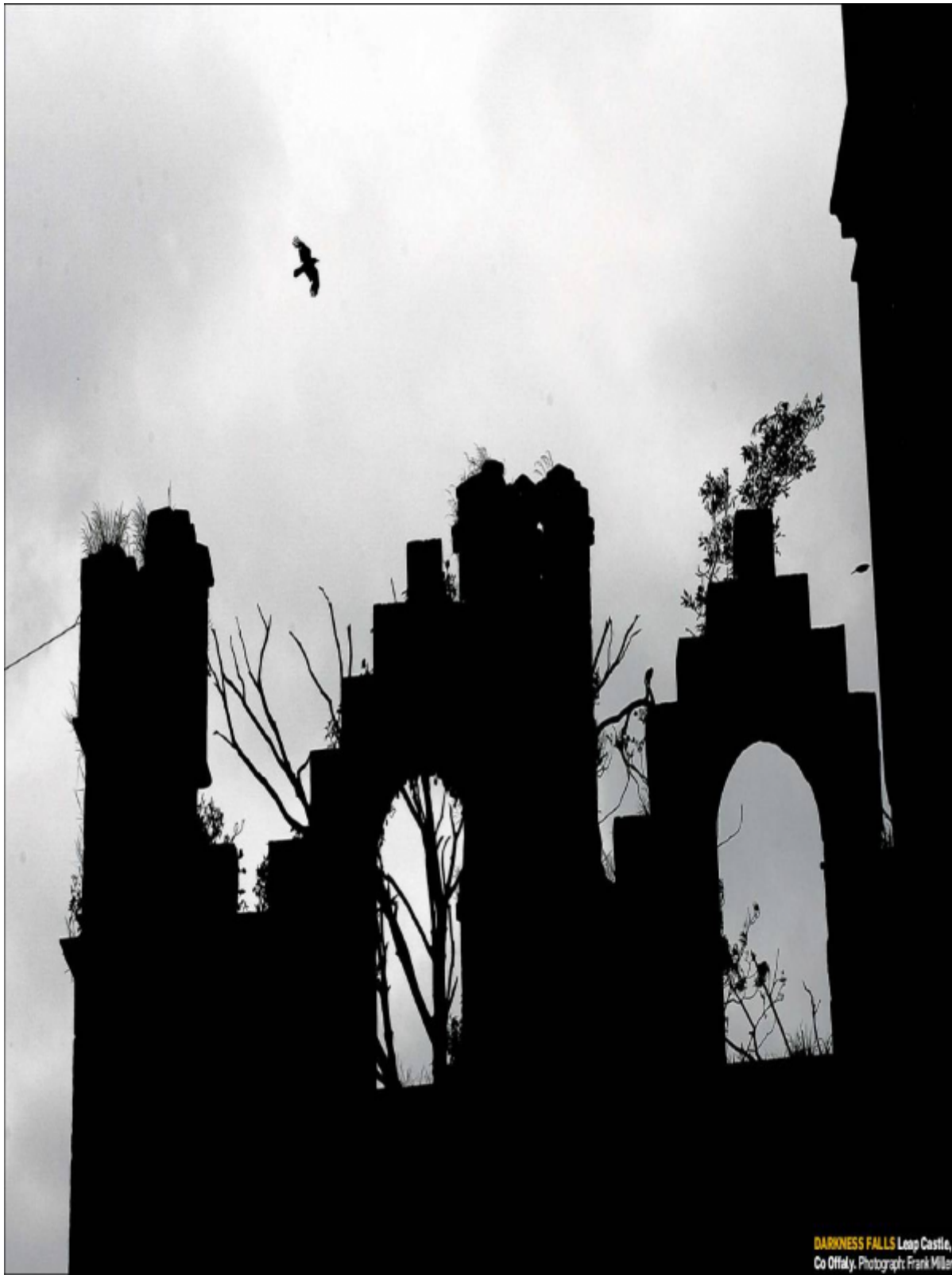
■ Glin Castle, Glin, Co Limerick, 068-34173, glincastle.com

Killua Castle

This atmospheric Gothic-style castle, built in 1780, was once owned by the Chapman family, ancestors of TE Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia. Lawrence was the son of William Chapman of nearby South Hill, close to Delvin. The original Chapmans, cousins of Sir Walter Raleigh, first settled in Cork and Kerry. When Benjamin Chapman became a captain in Cromwell's army he was granted Killua, a property confiscated from the Knights Hospitaller of St John. The castle was abandoned and gutted during the 1950s, but stories persisted of ghostly goings-on. Its perimeter is reputed to be haunted by Jacky Dalton, the 18th-century land steward of Sir Benjamin Chapman. A "cunning little man with weasel eyes" and a strange yellow wig, he would sit at the foot of the dinner table and play the bagpipes for hapless guests. He is reputed to have swindled his master out of a considerable sum of money. Filled with remorse after Sir Benjamin's death, Dalton took to the drink. He eventually killed himself by jumping into a nearby lake. London-based banker Allen Krause and his photographer wife, Lorena, acquired the castle in 2000 and are currently restoring it.

■ Killua Castle, Clonmellon, Co Westmeath

“The knight's six-year-old son was tied to the mouth of a cannon. When royal troops threatened to blow him up, the knight replied that he and his wife could easily produce another son



DARKNESS FALLS Leap Castle,
Co Offaly. Photograph: Frank Miller

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Co Offaly. Photograph: Frank Miller



Ghostly goes on: Malahide Castle (top) and Glin Castle.
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