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A New Lease of Life

Recently photographer Ruth Kelly had the opportunity to capture the beautiful Quarry Hill Church in Strangford and here she chats to owners Marty and Melanie Hamill.

EDITORIAL AND PHOTOGRAPHY RUTH KELLY/NATIVE IVY

Marty and Melanie Hamill came across a worse for wear looking Strangford Presbyterian Church when they bought the house right next door. Built in 1845, the Church had been lying derelict for many years. Being natives of Strangford, the couple were familiar with it and in January 2017 they began the first phase of restoring, conserving and converting it themselves. They worked together over the course of two years, to complete the incredible task of turning it into the stunning holiday rental that can be found there today. Deciding to keep so many of the original features, they have transformed this Presbyterian Church into a totally unique guest house.

Marty, tell me a little bit about yourselves and the story behind Quarry Hill Church.

We are a local couple with a young family. My wife Melanie was born in Strangford and I grew up on a farm in the countryside nearby, we both went to school in the village hardly 50 metres from the church. We had noticed the church slowly falling into disrepair over the years

but it was when we moved next door in 2016 we saw close up what a bad state it was in. It had been for sale for years, but perhaps the listed status and the scale of the challenge had deterred anyone from taking it on. Whether brave or stupid we decided to buy it and take up that challenge! There was a lot of blood, sweat and tears, but thankfully we didn't regret it.

The inspiration came from the church itself, it is such a graceful building with beautiful classical original features and a rich history.

Where did you get your design inspiration from?

Well, there are not many examples of churches in Ireland that have been converted into homes or accommodation. Melanie is an architect and specialises in conservation, so she gets all

the credit for the design. Really the inspiration came from the church itself, it is such a graceful building with beautiful classical original features and a rich history. Our approach was very much conservation led, every original feature that could be retained and restored was kept in place. The new aspects of the conversion are modern in style but we endeavoured to maintain the volume and light so the spaces still feel very much like a church.



Do you have a favourite room or detail?

It is so hard to choose just one! It might be the fantastic two-metre diameter ceiling rose, the original organ restored to working order by Melanie's dad Tom, perhaps the huge original Georgian arched windows. I can't forget the pulpit which forms the staircase to the mezzanine level – our guests particularly enjoy a go at literally preaching from the pulpit! The Session House is our favourite room, previously used as a meeting place for the church elders, it is fully panelled and converted into the master bedroom.

Have you any advice for anyone else looking to restore a listed building?

Restoration of a listed building is hugely rewarding but go in with your eyes open. Get a good understanding of the state of the building, the necessary repair work and any special restrictions that may apply. It will be very frustrating and slow at times and there will be unwelcome surprises but don't get discouraged! Don't be afraid to mix modern with the original features, but allow the heritage to lead the way. Given that the church is now deconsecrated and no longer a place of worship we felt it appropriate to rename it as Quarry Hill Church for its new purpose of tourist accommodation. It is known locally as the 'old church'.

For guests coming to stay at Quarry Hill Church, where would you recommend visiting nearby?

We are so lucky in Strangford, you can park your car and not get back into it for the rest of your stay. It has become a real foodie destination in recent years with three high quality restaurants to choose from. There are beautiful walks on our doorstep, Melanie and I like 'The Avenue', which is directly opposite the church. It goes in the loop around the peninsula the village sits on through woods and along the shore of the Lough. It's normal to see seals, otters, all manner of birds and other wildlife. Castle Ward sits next to the village, you can spend a day there exploring the main house, or the farmyard, which was the location of Winterfell in Game of Thrones, there are 30 plus miles of trails and an adventure park for the kids. The ferry departs Strangford every 30 minutes and is worth it for the journey alone. Once on the other side in Portaferry the aquarium is definitely worth a visit and a walk up Windmill Hill will reward you with stunning views out over Strangford Lough.

You can keep up to date with all that is happening at Quarry Hill Church via their Instagram @quarryhillchurch and booking can be made via their website quarryhillchurch.com