

Floraville: Where history meets grace and comfort

Tommy Barker visits a fine, venerable Bandon property, once home to a swashbuckling adventurer, now home to a doyenne of cafe business

Bandon’s fine, and venerable, family home Floraville has roots as old as the West Cork town itself. The property has been owned for nearly 30 years by an entrepreneurial Irish legend, Mary Rose O’Donovan, doyenne of the personalised coffee and cake shop and who at one time had 10 Mary Rose cafes under her name, in Ireland and England.

The house’s earliest section was built by a colonising, swashbuckling adventurer on both sides of the Atlantic, Capt William Newce, one of the warring Elizabethans who back in the early 1600s formed the drive known as the Plantation of Munster, when he was ceded lands in Cork for services rendered in the Nine Years War. Some of his Munster lands were leased from Sir Walter Raleigh, and apart from settling temporarily in fledgling Bandonbridge, and establishing the village of Newcestown 10 miles away, he soon afterwards upped sticks for the New World. Capt Newce passed on much of his extensive Bandon holdings to Lord Boyle, Earl of Cork, and died in Virginia in the Americas in 1620 after bloody battles between colonists and Indians.

Newce’s was a busy, quite brutal and bloody life — quite out of keeping with the tranquil Bandon town centre spot (despite the foaming weir’s sounds each winter) that still recalls his presence.

When he first arrived at Bandonbridge, he initially built a small two-roomed cabin overlooking corn mills, whilst supervising the building of a more appropriate manor home to match his granted wealth. Fast-forward 410 years (and a lot of intervening history and owners) and his original cabin is today the coal store for the impressive Floraville; his ‘manor’ now is its rear annexe,

home to a kitchen and overhead characterful bedrooms, while Floraville’s face to the world today is of a pleasant, genteel Georgian residence in wooded grounds - in the very heart of the town. To get to Floraville, you duck off the main Kilbrogan Hill routes towards Enniskeane and points beyond, or toward Macroom, and instead drive down a olde worlde lane between the Town Hall and the Courthouse. Spot those

impressive, tall wrought iron gates and lantern market on sturdy, even taller pillars? Here starts Floraville, and with its sale beckoning, here also starts its next chapter of ownership. It could not be in finer fettle for a handing on, and joint agents Malcolm Tyrrell of Cohalan Downing in Cork City and Sherry FitzGerald Brennan Busted in Bandon guide it all at €675,000 — one of Bandon’s best houses and buys. “A house needs people,”

reasons owner Mary Rose O’Donovan, whose two children Orla and Johnny have since departed this well-feathered nest, with 3,600 sq ft of immaculate, period-respecting accommodation, on a walled and wooded town acre. Dubliner Mary Rose fetched up here in the early 1980s as her restaurant business (mini empire) was in its heyday, feeding coffee and cake to the insatiable masses in five cities, back in the days when coffee came iced with cream, and prawn sandwiches were like manna from the ocean heavens.

Born a McGrath in Dublin, business was already in her blood: her father Kevin had been the manager of Woolworths, and he gave her his house deeds, and Ulster Bank gave her £10,000, to start up her first restaurant with Cork property mogul Robin Power in the Savoy cinema conversion to shopping mall.

A talented piano and harp player, and as good with people, Mary Rose at that stage was an ESB cookery demonstrator having trained in catering in Cathal Brugha Street, and her Savoy cafe opened pitch-perfect, decked out in mahogany, polished brass and grass — modelled a bit, she says, on the Lido in Paris.

It was a roaring success, so much so they had to stop the queues on some days as the aisle-set venue in Cork city centre oft-threatened to engulf other traders’ units. (Mary Rose recalls filling 50 loaves of bread a day with egg-and-salad sandwich filling — pre-panini and even pre-prawn days, clearly.) She later took on Julia’s Hot Bread shop, the Queen’s Old Castle, and Powerscourt Centre in Dublin, followed by Mary Rose cafes in Limerick, Galway and Manchester.

Today, her daughter Orla runs the Fig Tree and Olive cafe in Clonakilty, and Mary



Location:	Bandon, West Cork
Price:	€675,000
Size:	335 sq m (3,600 sq ft)
Bedrooms:	5 plus 1
Bathrooms:	5 plus 1
BER rating:	E2
Best feature:	Easy living/ period grace



Rose keeps her hand in with a cafe under her own name in Bandon’s shopping centre. A pedestrian bridge over the River Bandon, by the heron-stalked weir, links that cafe with her home, Floraville.

The business chain was sold off in good times, around the year 2000 and for a while the outgoing Mary Rose ran a corporate-level guesthouse in Floraville, having fully upgraded and updated it back in 1986, and more or less doing a room renewal every year ever since as a hobby/project, with input en route from architect Billy Wilson, who’d also been

part of Robin Power’s team of professionals back in the day.

Floraville was re-roofed in that major 1986 big job, with its broad hat-rim soffits retained, its front sash windows immaculate, and its slender fan-lit front door up three smooth-worn limestone steps, and deep-set under a pediment and columns.

Classical urns, filled with flowers, and cast iron garden seats dot the front approach and once inside, all’s grace, elegance, and beeswax polish. It gleams. There are formal reception rooms left and right of the hard-wood floored hall,

each with imposing chimneypieces, heavily draped windows and ceiling plasterwork and, naturally enough, ‘merry’ roses depicting swirls of acanthus leaves.

Home to a baby-grand piano and a harp, the drawing room has especially good plaster friezes, a mahogany and black marble fireplace, and this double aspect room then links back to a study/family room with simpler fireplace; there’s access from here to a west-facing raised terrace/patio, overlooking pristine lawns and tiered grounds, with the town of Bandon kept in check all

around, beyond its secure boundaries and ancient trees.

Floraville’s real heart is, of course, its kitchen, and this very large space to the house’s back (it was Capt Newce’s original manor section, remember) is lower-ceilinged, more intimate, despite its large floor area and enormous island, and is almost incidentally home to a yet another piano: this is a party kitchen, and a party house — so sing for your supper.

This double aspect room has cleverly splayed window recesses or reveals around square hardwood frames,

there’s a ceramic sink, Merbau hardwood flooring and matching thick hardwood worktops — ideal for knocking out quick snacks, dinner for two or 12, or 50 loaves of sandwiches, Mary Rose style. Behind is a rear hall redolent of far earlier times, complete with six servants’ bells in a row, there’s a utility room leading to a rear yard, and a second, very old staircase.

But, go up the hall’s gently curving formal staircase, with its new mahogany hand rails a match for what would have been here originally, and the house again slips

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