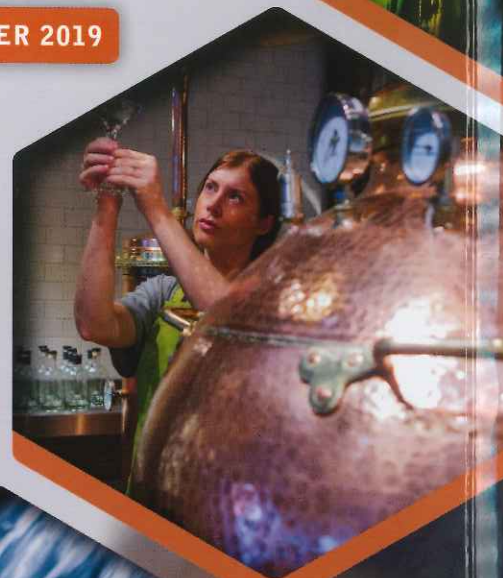




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VOLUME 15 ISSUE 8 AUGUST 2019



INSIDE: WHISKY, MORE WHISKEY ... AND SOME HISTORY



History, heritage, rock and roll – and whiskey

The Slane distillery – a new chapter in a history of innovation

BY GERRY MCGOVERN

Slane Castle and its attached lands have been an imposing part of the north Co. Meath skyline for many centuries. Situated spectacularly at the top of a hill overlooking a large part of Meath, it has been at the centre of many historical events. In more recent years it has become famous for the addition of a whiskey distillery in the castle's former stabling buildings – as well as attractions of a louder nature.

The Conyngham family bought the castle in the year 1703 and over that very long time have taken part in many restorations of the castle buildings and other structures within the walls of the demesne, right up to the present day.

Henry Vivien Pierpont Conyngham, the 8th Marquess Conyngham, is the member of the family currently responsible for the demesne – the land attached to a manor and retained for the owner's own use – and its upkeep. In the late

1970s he developed an idea to use the grounds of the castle as a concert venue for major touring bands and other acts.

The revenue from these large-scale events would help in the maintenance and upkeep of the castle and its grounds, but in his wildest imaginings the Marquess could not have conceived of the overwhelming success of this endeavour.

Since 1981 there have been 32 day-long concerts headlined by such major

acts as Thin Lizzy, The Rolling Stones, U2, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Queen and David Bowie. They have played to crowds of up to 110,000 people, with huge accolades and praise from the international and local music press. A visit to Slane has become a rite of passage for generations of Irish people and many others.

Slane Castle

This year in June the headline act was Metallica, and I arrived at the castle to find a bedlam of activity just four days before the event...not an auspicious time to arrive I admit. Yet the new distillery was an oasis of calm in the midst of the preparations and I was delighted to find that Alex Conyngham, son of Lord Henry, and heir to the demesne and its businesses, could spare the time to talk about the ideas and background leading to the establishment of a distillery in the former stabling buildings of the castle.

Alex told me that his father had spent thirty years of his life developing the Slane 'brand'. This effort was helped

GRAIN HANDLING



Enda Rice in front of the 3 te/hr Bühler dry mill



The Bühler grain screening machine



The two grain bins supplied by CTS Process of Cottingham in Yorkshire



Draff ready for collection by a local dairy farmer. Used as feedstuff to complete part of the sustainability cycle which is part of the ethos of the distillery

enormously by the sheer fame of the bands, the events, and the magnificent venue – a natural amphitheatre facing towards the sun, and sloping down to the north bank of the River Boyne.

Up to 20% of concert crowds have come from outside the Irish State, and the venue has now reached the stage that children of former event attendees are themselves now attending.

The distillery concept

Ten years ago the Conyngham family put their heads together to see if they could broaden the appeal of the castle beyond its current music fame and further bolster 'Brand Slane'.

Father and son hit upon a plan to develop a whiskey and a distillery based on the historical Slane name, rekindling a distilling tradition in the Boyne valley that had all but died out. They set about developing the plans and the designs to make this dream come true, based on a production facility housed in the extensive former stables and farm buildings situated behind the main castle.

Naive at that time, they thought that the whole installation could be housed in the existing building structures, but the detail of design soon showed that their ambitions were bigger than the available buildings. They were also con-

stricted by the fact that the castle and demesne were within an Architectural Conservation Area – indeed the whole Boyne river valley has been declared a Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

To top it all they found that their initial budget of €10 million was woefully inadequate. This final fact brought them to the realisation that they would



Interior of the distillery buildings housing the mash house. A Steele's masher supplies milled grain to either the lauter tun directly or to the mash tun



Alex Conyngham, co-founder of the Slane Distillery, in the courtyard of the historical outhouses and stables that form the bulk of the distillery and the visitor centre

need to partner with someone whose pockets were far deeper than their own. After much family brainstorming and soul-searching, Alex planned a meeting with Garvin Brown, chairman of the Brown-Forman Corporation, one of the largest American-owned companies in the spirits and wine business, based in Louisville, Kentucky USA.

Alex says of the meeting, "Dad and I are a family business and although Brown-Forman is a large distilling player, at its heart you've got the Brown family



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such as Thin Lizzy,
2, Bob Dylan, Bruce
and David Bowie have
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er house, one of the
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– and family to family, we felt we could trust the company on that basis.

“We the Conynghams intend staying involved for the long term. I am the global ambassador for Slane Irish Whiskey and I fully expect the two families will continue to work together for many generations to come.”

This expectation was a key part of the deal that they struck with Brown-Forman – both families have the philosophy that people involved at the head of these businesses acted only as custodians for future generations, and would eventually pass on the family traditions to their heirs.

In June 2015, the American whiskey giant announced that it had acquired the shares in Slane Castle Irish Whiskey. From that time firm plans to establish production could be made, culminating in a 600,000 completed case-potential distillery and visitor centre in August 2018, along with the fill of a sherry cask with its first new make spirit.

It became the 18th distillery to be established on the island of Ireland. The total cost ended up much higher than initial estimates, with Brown-Forman investing \$50 million in the project.

house, where a state-of-the-art wash production unit supplied by Briggs of Burton was on display. Currently one brew per day of 13,200 litres is processed under normal conditions, with an ultimate capability of three brews per day. The system was empty at the time of the visit and was about to undergo a CIP. A wind down ahead of the upcoming Metallica concert was necessitated.

Water is supplied directly from the river Boyne and grain comes from the castle's extensive farmlands in the surrounding countryside. Up to 2,000 tonnes of barley is currently grown on the lands – and should volumes increase to the extent of needing more than that Alex had planned, more local land would have to be purchased.

This is in keeping with the guiding ethos of the business – which is to be self-sufficient and environmentally sustainable. Alex had decided at one stage to go for an MBA at the Graduate School of Business in Cape Town, South Africa, where he developed an interest in renewable energy technologies.

His wife Carina also has an M.Sc. in Environmental Technology and the



The three hand-beaten copper stills, supplied by McMillan of



Enda Rice, maintenance manager, at one of the 30,000 litre washbacks. Given current production volumes the vessels are half-filled only, with a single brew of 13,200 litres

digestion systems are well advanced so that waste-stream by-products of the system can deliver 25 to 30% of the energy needs of the distillery. A large number of energy-recovery technologies are built into the Briggs mash house. Soon the company will apply for accreditation under the Environmental ISO14000 banner, and ultimately it is targeting a full zero-waste concept for the whole distillery.

Washbacks

Alex had told me that as far as was possible he wanted a 'traditional' distillery, and this for him included the use of timber-structured washbacks. These 30,000-litre vessels were supplied by Joseph Brown Vats from Dufftown, north of the Cairngorms in Scotland. After 60 hours fermentation the wash delivers an alcohol level of around 8% ABV.

On the way to the Still House Enda and I passed by the grains handling area, which was supplied by CTS Process of the UK, specialists in grains, powders and spent grains handling. Here we found an ultra-modern Bühler milling and dust-suppression system.

The still house

In the still house we came across the *pièce de résistance* of the distillery – the three hand-beaten copper stills supplied by McMillan of Prestonpans near Edinburgh. Here the standard Irish whiskey triple distillation process was in train, with its wash still, intermediate still and finally the spirit still.

Alex had told me earlier that the stills were designed and sized with a number of parameters in mind. Firstly they had to be dropped via crane without damaging the roof timbers which were a key part of the building's heritage.

Secondly visitors and the general public had to be able to walk past them in safety. Thirdly they had to be capable of triple-distilling the wash from the Wash Backs.

The wash still was sized at 13,500 litres to match the brew size. The intermediate still was sized at 10,000 litres, to allow a second distillation inclusive

of whatever pool of feints that had built up at the time. Finally the spirit still was sized at 5,000 litres, and capable of delivering new make spirit in the mid-80% ABV range.

Distillation columns

Sited in an annex building to the west of the courtyard I found the twin 2,000L/hr distillation columns, also made by

McMillan. I say twin but actually each column was cut in three, again to keep the vertical height of all six parts below the roof height – in keeping with conservation needs.

The system is still not in routine production but had just come through an intensive four-week commissioning phase which had involved Enda in round-the-clock monitoring of the

continuous process.

Both Enda and Alex had mentioned that one of the great advantages of working with a large partner such as Brown-Forman was that technical expertise and knowledge was readily available at times like this, and an American master distiller worked with the distillery team during the commissioning.

In the autumn the plan involves further minor work on the stills, and then a roll-out of grain whiskey production on a routine basis. The unusual feature of this grain distillery will be the routine use of barley as the grain of choice, all part of the 2,000 tonnes grown on the Castle farm.

Blending and maturation

Enda then brought me to the very back of the set of buildings to show me the spirit storage and blending/re-blending area. Here we found the latest in design of cask emptying systems – the Caskmaster 3 from J E Cockayne Ltd in East Kilbride in Scotland. This pumping system has removed a whole series of cask barrel manual handling issues and allowed a much easier certification from the Health and Safety authorities.

Enda explained to me then the rather unique approach that Slane Distillery has taken in producing its whiskey. To get the brand up and running, they acquired malt and grain whiskey from other Irish distilleries, all of which was in bourbon casks. This was then simultaneously filled into three distinct casks for a secondary maturation.

The first was virgin American oak casks, of which Brown-Forman seem to have a nearly inexhaustible supply from Kentucky. Second was first fill American whiskey casks, with a

STILL HOUSE



Traditional spirit safes, but with ultra-modern valving behind the system

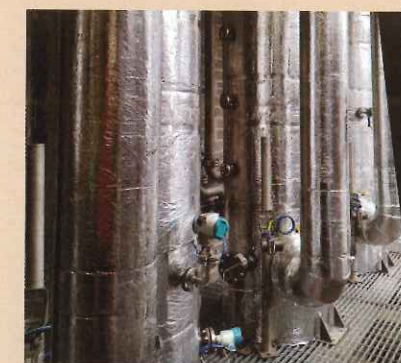
The stills' condensers protruding below the level of the building so as to maintain the line of the roof from the castle-facing aspect of the installation



DISTILLATION COLUMNS



One of the McMillan column stills, made from copper but surrounded by insulation, and soon to be clad in sheet metal



Another view of one of the columns, with the three parts combining into one larger whole



An external view of the column still house with condensers on top



Smooth, complex and robust. Slane Irish Whiskey marries toasted grain and malt whiskeys with the distinctive flavours of each cask. Smooth with notes of oak and spice, each sip represents a journey through the wild countryside and the chance to uncover the subtle layers of the whiskey's complex character. (Photo: Brown-Forman).

CASK FILLING



Enda with the Caskmaster 3 cask emptying system



The small on-site maturation warehouse



Casks awaiting blending

strong focus on Tennessee whiskey, and the third was an Oloroso sherry cask. The Americans were initially dubious about the merits of the sherry cask process, but one visit to the south-west of Spain gave them a full understanding of the benefits of the tradition.

As the new make from Slane Distillery is produced, it will go through the same maturation process and be phased into the blend as and when it is ready. In addition, the distillery is laying stocks of pot still whiskey which for future single pot still releases.

Enda also showed me the small

maturation warehouse on site, but explained that external warehouses were primarily used for the bulk of maturing casks at the moment. The final blend is bulk-shipped to Clonmel in Co Tipperary, to the Robert A Merry Ltd bottling facility.

The surroundings and the environment

Enda then brought me on a short tour of the immediate environs just outside the distillery. To say it was an idyllic country vista would be an understatement. We could see the surrounding farmland of the castle,

and the river Boyne.

Further along we walked down a small hill to the castle's mill pond which had been restored as a storage volume for fire suppression water. We also took in the fish ladder which allows for easier salmonid migration. It had been reconstructed as part of the restoration works. A good place to cast a fly during a lunch break! I thanked Enda for his boundless enthusiasm and interest which he displayed in spades during the day.

Earlier I had asked Alex Conyngham that given the tremendous proliferation of Irish whiskey brands, in what way did Slane stand out from the crowd. He explained that having 300 years of family history behind the brand, plus the ability to supply all the materials necessary for production between barley from the fields and water from the Boyne, was a good lead into explaining its uniqueness.

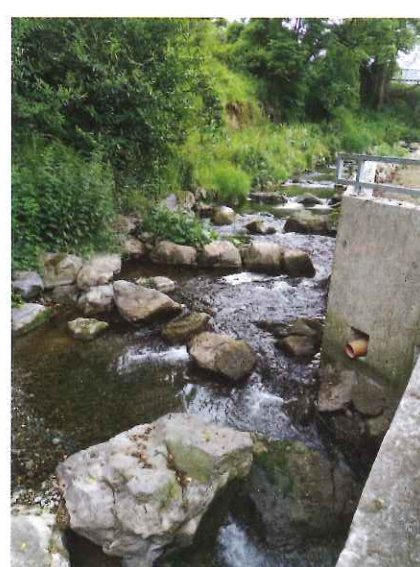
The fact that Slane in more recent times has established roots in rock 'n' roll also helps hugely with brand recognition. Finally the strategic partnership with global player Brown-Forman allows them specialised access to product-specific barrels and casks, and thus they can create their own distinctive flavour-forward whiskey style.

Their marketing and distribution expertise allows for large future growth. This opportunity for future expansion should underpin the ability of the distillery, and thus the castle itself, to be long-term economically sustainable.

With Irish whiskey continuing to grow in double digits the future is very bright for Slane Irish Whiskey and the Conyngham family.



Enda points out the restored mill pond which doubles as a fire water source



The upgraded fish ladder



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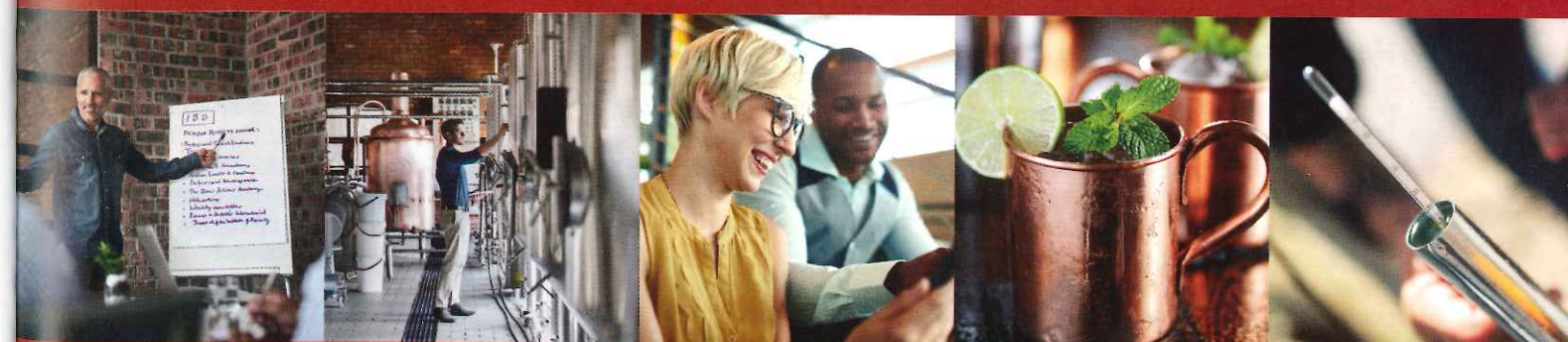
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