



**LOVINGLY RENOVATED** Shieldhill Castle, near Biggar in Scotland, which has been revamped by owner Mary Yuill and her family

# 'Haunt' for the weekend

**R**ENOVATING your own castle hotel may sound romantic, but as owner Mary Yuill reveals it comes with a hefty price tag and its fair share of horror stories!

A dilapidated castle ruin in the middle of the rolling countryside, complete with ghosts, would put even the most hardened hotel owners off - but not Mary and her family.

The mum-of-three fell in love with Shieldhill Castle Hotel, near Biggar, as soon as she saw the grand 800-year-old building.

Although it was in a sad state of repair, she saw past its plethora of problems, and the challenges of cracked windows and rotting timbers became part of the attraction.

**ARANDA RAHBARKOUHI** makes Shieldhill Castle in Scotland her 'haunt' for a one-night stay with a difference.

"The castle was only six months from being condemned. It had dry rot, and the roof was leaking," said Mary, who bought the castle in spring 2011.

Not someone to let things get the better of her, Mary opened for business earlier this year after replacing the roof, battling the dry rot and lovingly restoring the accommodation back to its former glory.

Despite daunting maintenance costs, renovation of the castle took just a year to complete and was a real family affair. Most of the work was

carried out by family members and trusted contacts. Mary's partner, Brian Higgins, her daughter Katie and fiancé Michael McGeorge, and two sons Daniel and Jack, all helped out with the refurb - and still do.

"Restoring the castle was a way of bringing life back into the area. Local people just weren't using it before, but now they are coming along, bringing their families and we've had plenty of bookings for weddings. They love it. We have everything on site, including a chapel and zumba sessions!" said Mary.

From heavy wooden doors, to

creaking floors, high ceilings with ornate carving and cornicing, huge mirrors and oil paintings on the inside, and manicured lawns, a gurgling garden fountain and long sweeping driveway outside - it all evokes a bygone era, as does the hotel's activities such as hot-air balloon rides, clay-pigeon shooting and game shooting.

We were welcomed excitedly on arrival by Mary who was keen to show us the revamped building and its grounds.

As it was our wedding anniversary, my husband and I were treated to a

stay in the four-star hotel's luxurious 'Chancellor' honeymoon suite, which boasts a golden French-style Rococo bed, sunken Jacuzzi-style bath, and stunning views over the Clyde Valley. A bottle of Champagne was simply a must for our special occasion. The room can be booked at the cost of £280 a night.

Famous faces who've stayed at the castle over the years include Nelson Mandela, who also planted a tree which can be seen in the castle grounds, and TV chef Egon Ronay.

Rumour has it that Madonna also stayed at the castle.

Mary said: "We were inundated with phone calls from people and the Press all wanting to know



**FRENCH ELEGANCE**  
The Chancellor Suite at the castle. Inset below, the sunken Jacuzzi-style bath

whether it was true and what room she was staying in. Our bookings went through the roof and we thought people were going to start camping out in the grounds. Sadly she wasn't staying here. We did have Dean from Black Lace staying though!"

Opting for candlelight over electricity, and dare I say it, the odd cobweb or two, Mary has brought character, charm and years of tradition flooding back to the Oak lounge and Chancellor's dining room.

During our stay we enjoyed a fabulous three-course meal in the hotel's award-winning restaurant which uses locally-sourced fresh ingredients, including fish, meat, game and vegetables.

I had smoked salmon, followed by venison to die for, and a cheese platter, while my husband, Hossein opted for an oatcakes and paté starter, followed by a superb medium rare steak (he always has steak), washed down with a fine bottle of Shiraz. It was the perfect romantic evening in beautiful surroundings and our ever-so-friendly waiter Jim truly spoiled us.

Of course no castle stay would be complete without a ghost story or two, so before we headed to our beds, we treated ourselves to a nightcap in the hotel bar where Mary's son, Daniel, gave us the lowdown on Shieldhill's spooky goings-on.

He was keen to show us a picture on his phone taken by Jim at a wedding. It's fair to say that the ghostly apparition in the photograph gave me the chills - and a stronger drink was ordered.

The castle itself dates back to 1199 and is said to be haunted by two ghosts. The first being a butler, while a Grey Lady is said to haunt the top floor of the building.

She is said to have been a member of the Chancellor family who owned the building until the 1950s. It's rumoured that she killed herself in the 17th Century after her father stopped her marriage to a commoner.

And the Lady, wrapped in a grey cloak,



**CANDLE-LIT DINNER** Hossein in Chancellor's restaurant

apparently still sleeps in her own room - which has since been turned into the luxurious Glencoe suite for guests.

Mary said: "The ghost apparently resides in one of our rooms but I think she haunts the whole of the top floor. When you go there you just feel as though there is someone there with you."

"There is also supposed to be a butler downstairs and the kitchen light will sometimes flick off by itself and then turn back on hours later."

"As a family, I think we've tried out all the rooms now however, and they're all lovely."

And despite my initial cries of 'leave the light on please' to my husband, my slumber was uninterrupted and I slept like a log.

It is clear from our stay that Mary's emphasis is on service and homegrown hospitality.

Her work at the castle is 24/7, from manning the reception area and welcoming guests, to showing them their tables for breakfast and



**COSY FEELING** The traditional lounge area within the castle

dinner.

This hotel owner takes great pride in providing whatever her customers want. And to prove it, she even arranged for some guests to be picked up from the castle in a horse-drawn carriage. It was one of the more unusual requests, but nothing is too much trouble for Mary.

The staff have such affection for her, that a couple of them even travel to work at the castle from Glasgow each day.

As well as 16 individually designed castle rooms, named after Scottish battles, there are another 10 rooms with a more modern contemporary feel to them in the stable block at the back of the building.

Set in a small courtyard next to the 500-year-old chapel, the rooms are very popular with families.

Although only a half-hour drive to Edinburgh and about 40 minutes to Glasgow, the castle is a world apart from its neighbour, Biggar.

Although Biggar town has six museums, we found its best asset to be the Cones & Candies sweet shop in the high street. I've never had



**SUIT'S YOU!** Aranda with a suit of armour in the reception area of the castle

chocolate violets as good as that anywhere, and my other half said his rum and raisin ice-cream was just as delicious.

Nothing was going to compare to Shieldhill's ambience however (complete with a suit of armour at the door). It is formal without being stuffy and you could definitely say, there is just something about Mary!

#### INFORMATION:

Address: Shieldhill Castle, Biggar, ML12 6NA. Email: enquiries@shieldhillcastlehotel.co.uk, or tel: 01899 220035, or 07531 268090.

Visit the website at [www.shieldhillcastlehotel.co.uk](http://www.shieldhillcastlehotel.co.uk). Castle rooms per room, per night are inclusive of bed and breakfast and are from £95 to the Chancellor Suite at £280.

The Stable Block and Courtyard rooms are all double rooms with en-suite. There are 10 rooms in this area. Stables rooms cost £125 a night. There are a maximum of five additional beds which can be added to selected rooms, breakfast basis. Children (up to 12 years), £20. Adults (13 years and over), £40.

● Prices quoted are inclusive of VAT and are correct at date of publication, the hotel reserves the right to change prices.