



*“I don’t do
DRAMA!”*

Practicality, punctuality and no tears on TV — that’s the recipe that has made 83-year-old Mary Berry an international treasure, as **ORLA NELIGAN** discovers

A pair of wellies. Fantastic, I’m going to write that down,” says Mary Berry. We are discussing her impending visit to the National Ploughing Championships in September as a guest ambassador with The National Dairy Council. I advise her to come prepared.

“I gather it’ll be much like going to one of those muddy festivals,” she muses. Now, there’s a thought: Mary Berry knee-deep in mud, loud music and hedonistic youngsters; not your average weekend jaunt for an 83-year-old but then, we’re not talking about an ‘average’ octogenarian.

An international institution, Berry is the doyenne of family cooking and domestic values and, like a good sherry, only improves with age. She is, it turns out, exactly as you’d want and imagine her to be from her on-screen persona: polite, youthful, friendly, sharp, self-effacing and delightfully unfussy, with a busier diary than most people half her age.

“You know, I’ve ploughed too,” she says proudly. Really? “Yes, on my last television series *Mary Berry Classic*, I learnt to plough with Percheron horses. I was stuck in there, in a field in my wellies,” she laughs.

Where does she get the energy? “I’m quite lucky really,” she answers, somewhat modestly. “I have good genes, my mother died at the age of 105, but I do look after myself.” I’m wondering how, after sampling so many of those cakes on *The Great British Bake Off*, she manages to stay so slim. “It’s quite simple, I just make sure the next meal is small. I don’t believe in cutting out certain foods, a little of everything is good for you. There’s nothing wrong with a slice of cake with tea, which I enjoy most afternoons, or strawberries with a big dollop of cream, but just don’t be dipping into the biscuit tin all day. Moderation is key,” she adds in that no-nonsense manner we have all come to know, love and rely on.

The good cop to Paul Hollywood’s bad cop routine, Berry was the caring grandmother, shepherding contestants through seven series of *The Great British Bake Off*. As much as she ‘loves and respects’ Hollywood, her decision to stay with the BBC after the show moved to Channel 4 earlier this year was one of principle.

She grew up with the BBC and was determined to remain loyal to the broadcaster. *Bake Off* was wonderful as it got

people baking she tells me, but is quick to champion her new BBC show *Britain's Best Home Cook*, which invites amateur home cooks to test their skills against one another through a series of challenges.

"I'm really enjoying it," Berry adds enthusiastically. "It's different from the *Bake Off* because the contestants can cook anything from sweet to savoury, desserts to mains and they have no ambition to open a café or shop; they're simply good home cooks."

Has there been any outstanding dishes, I ask? "Lots. One of the challenges was to create the 'best burger' and I was blown away by what was created: there was beef, of course, but lamb and even game." And, what of the kitchen disasters? On this she's reluctant to critique. In that genteel and modest manner, she sidesteps the subject.

It would be hard to imagine the even-keeled, measured Berry losing her cool and I'm intrigued as to what irks her. "I don't do drama," she answers quickly. "Occasionally contestants will get upset, I don't really want to see tears."

And, beyond the TV screens is there anything that gets under her skin? "I don't like being late or people being late," she says emphatically. "We all have busy lives and it's a great help to everyone when you're on time. I'll admit I'm not very tolerant when someone says the traffic was terrible. Well, why didn't you leave earlier?" And, now that we're on the subject, she can't stand selfies. "Do you like them?" asks Berry. They are a vagary of modern life that I try not to indulge in, I answer. Unfortunately being as well-known as she is, they come with



Tea break: Mary with *Britain's Best Home Cook* presenter Claudia Winkleman and fellow judges Chris Bavin and Dan Doherty

the territory. "Yes, and people are really very nice, and kids, especially, love taking them. But, they do take time and, anyway, isn't it just another way to boast?"

It's clear Berry doesn't do social media. She'd much rather spend her time gardening, or playing tennis, although, she admits, she's not very good at the latter. What else is she not good at, I wonder. She pauses, reassures me that there's plenty and then shouts to her assistant Lucy Young who is busy organising her wardrobe for the latest series.

"What am I not good at Lucy?" There's chuckling. "You're good at everything Mary," laughs Lucy. Berry calls her a "creep" and then, sheepishly, Lucy admits

she can be impatient. "Oh, how rude," giggles Berry. "She's also terrible at saying no," declares Lucy. Their relationship is less boss/assistant, more friend/collaborator.

Young has been by her side for over 25 years, co-written more than 20 of her 70-plus cookery books and has helped her launch her Aga cookery school. Lucy came on board following the death of Berry's son William, who died in a car crash in 1989 at the age of 19, when Mary decided she wanted to be at home more with her other two children and needed some help writing and recipe testing for her books.

Coping with William's death has given her a steely resolve, the ability to remain

unruffled in pressured situations. She doesn't do stress, even if faced with kitchen calamities.

"When I was starting out on television I baked a tart blind and the middle cracked. I asked the producer could I remake it and he said no and told me to do what I would do if I was at home. So, I brushed the crack with egg white and put it back in the oven. From that moment on, if things go wrong I just find a way to work through or around it."

Berry has always forged her own way. Throughout our interview, I'm struck by both her guileless, easy-going manner and her ability to deliver her opinion in that slightly brusque, no-nonsense way, which informs her attitude towards food.

She is not a fan of fads, preferring easy-to-prepare classics. She owns a spiraliser but admits it's gathering dust at the top of her cupboard, and she doesn't 'do smoothies', preferring to taste the textures of vegetables and fruit instead. "It's nice to try new trends but ultimately you always come back to what suits you. For me, that's good classic home cooking."

As a child, she spent some summers travelling around Ireland and returned later to give some cookery lessons while running her Aga cooking school but hasn't been back since.

"I'm looking forward most to meeting people and food producers and tasting some good Irish food. Irish stew is one of my favourite dinners, even better with a chunk of soda bread. My mother used to make it when I was young and I still make it for my children and grandchildren." She likes travelling but is happiest at home. British food is >>>

Advertising Feature

TIME TO TEACH CHILDREN SOME GOOD MONEY SKILLS

Leading experts recommend that children from an early age should receive financial education. And research shows that children as young as 7 can develop money habits that can last a lifetime.

Despite this, a recent global financial literacy survey found that just 55% of Irish adults demonstrated an adequate level of financial literacy compared to 71% of Swedes and 66% of Germans.

As part of their Financial Wellness Programme, Bank of Ireland supports a comprehensive financial education programme and a youth business skills initiative. The various life skills modules are available free of charge to schools and have been developed to promote positive life skills and foster an entrepreneurial spirit.

Two unique programmes are available to Primary schools across Ireland from Bank of Ireland which promote life skills learning at primary school level. *Talking Cents with Ollie* is a financial education magazine for children aged 7 - 12 and *Bizworld @ Bank of Ireland* is a business innovation programme.



Talking Cents Financial Education

Talking Cents with Ollie (Ollie is the wise money Owl) is a money magazine designed specifically for children aged 7 - 12 and is available free of charge to primary schools with the support of Bank of Ireland. Developed here in Ireland with independent financial literacy expert Frank Conway at MoneyWhizz, it incorporates a range of dynamic learning features and includes free teacher and parent guides.

Each edition of *Talking Cents with Ollie* has been specifically developed to help promote essential money skills across a range of topics, including saving, spending, earning and planning. A brief history of money promotes discussion and identifying the difference between needs and wants promotes a lot of debate. Upcoming editions will examine how adults actually earn money as well as some novel ways kids can do the same. And there is a

lot of fun too. Stories, money quizzes and various fun activities are all included as part of the free programme.

Talking Cents with Ollie encourages kids to think critically, especially about how money works. And the initiative is working: with 10-year old students now asking tough questions like, "can other people check what's in your bank account if you give them your account details so they can pay you?" and "how does your work know how to put money into your bank account and not somebody else's?". It's clear that kids are ready to ask the smart money questions when they are encouraged and shown how. In fact, kids can even ask surprisingly complex questions as was demonstrated at one primary school recently. During a discussion about 'cash versus cashless' payments, one student pointed out "...cashless payment are restricted where merchants lack the cashless-reading technology!" Even adults might not have thought of this one.

Since launch in 2017, teachers in over 500 primary schools from across Ireland are now using *Talking Cents with Ollie* to teach over 30,000 7-12 year olds about how money works.

Primary schools can order their free 'Talking Cents' magazines and teachers guides here www.bankofireland.com/talkingcents

Bizworld

19,000 schoolchildren have also taken part in *Bizworld @ Bank of Ireland*, which supports children in the local community to develop their entrepreneurship skills and learn about money management and enterprise through tailored workshops for 10 to 13-year-olds.

During a typical 2-day *Bizworld* event at a school, children work together in small teams to form their own company and to come up with a new business idea. Each of the children takes a specific role in the company from Director of Marketing to C.E.O. They then share the responsibility for coming up with their new



product or service, communicating its benefits and, finally, securing the investment (*Bizworld* uses fictional Bizbucks as a currency) that will allow them to develop and market it.

They present their finished idea in a pitch to a panel of venture capitalists which can feature local business owners. During the 'Dragon's Den'-style finale, they passionately sell their companies and answer questions like 'who will buy it?' and, importantly, 'how will you make a profit?'

Each team comes up with a name for their business and a slogan which they display on a promotional poster. The business ideas range from creative apps to socially minded enterprises like *Kool Kiddies Packs*, developed to entertain children in hospital waiting rooms. When pitching to the venture capitalists, the teams have to find the confidence to stand before a panel of adults and articulate how their idea will work.

They then have to answer probing questions on their pricing, profit margins and how they intend to reach their target market. When the investors make their offers of investment in return for a share in the companies, the schoolchildren often huddle together to discuss whether or not to accept the offer. Often, they make counter offers with a target amount in mind and then have to decide amongst themselves when to settle.

BizWorld@Bank of Ireland started in 2015:

- More than 550 schools have hosted a *Bizworld*
- More than 200 staff have delivered the programme
- Over 19,000 5th class children have completed a *Bizworld*.

In addition to sowing the seeds of enterprise, creativity and innovation, our *Bizworld* tutors help primary school children learn skills such as critical thinking, decision making, risk analysis, teamwork, resilience and adaptability, active learning, entrepreneurship and leadership. Most importantly, they have fun in the process!

Kathryn Corbett, Principal Bishop Galvin National School commented after a recent *Bizworld* workshop "The workshops are well organised with a clear structure, whilst providing the opportunity for pupils to be creative and independent in developing their ideas. The facilitators work collaboratively with the class teacher to present the information in an engaging manner, and encourage the groups to work together as a team, valuing each individual's role in the process. The innovative programme provides an opportunity for our pupils to develop a wide range of life skills, essential for the 21st century."

If you would like to register your interest in having a *Bizworld @ Bank of Ireland* programme delivered in your school, please visit bankofireland.com/bizworld



PICTURE: GEORGIA GLYNN-SMITH



In the kitchen, and (right) with her daughter Annabel Hunnings and grandchildren, (below) reacting to winning the 2017 Best TV Judge award

» her favourite. “We have such wonderful produce here: great dairy, vegetables, fruit and meat, all homegrown so we know where it comes from which is hugely important. You just can’t beat a good crumble or pie with homegrown berries or a stew with neck of lamb,” she remarks excitedly. And of course, the afternoon tea and slice of cake.

“You should be able to stop and treat yourself, shouldn’t you?”

No guessing what her dinner-party menu might include: plenty of British, easy-to-assemble dishes, and prepared ahead, so she could spend more time with her guests. “I’d probably do a gravdax for starters and maybe a chicken casserole for mains and probably a lovely boozy trifle that could all be made the day before.” She has a few shortcuts that she likes to adopt when pressed for time. There’s nothing wrong with shop-bought puff pastry, she admits, but prefers to make her own short crust.

“Another good tip is the all-in-one-method for baking. If you have a mixer, put everything in there and beat, it’s quick and easy.”

Apart from her family, Judi Dench would be her ideal dinner guest. “She’s got such a lovely chuckle and is so brilliant at what she does. I think she’d be super company.” I’m surprised to learn that if she had to choose, it would be savoury over sweet.

“You can’t beat a good omelette,” she muses. I’m also a little surprised to learn that she’s very good at cleaning drains.

“When people are COOKING my recipes, I want them to FEEL like I’m there holding their HAND

“Maybe that’s not that surprising,” she laughs before adding, “but I kind of think it is.”

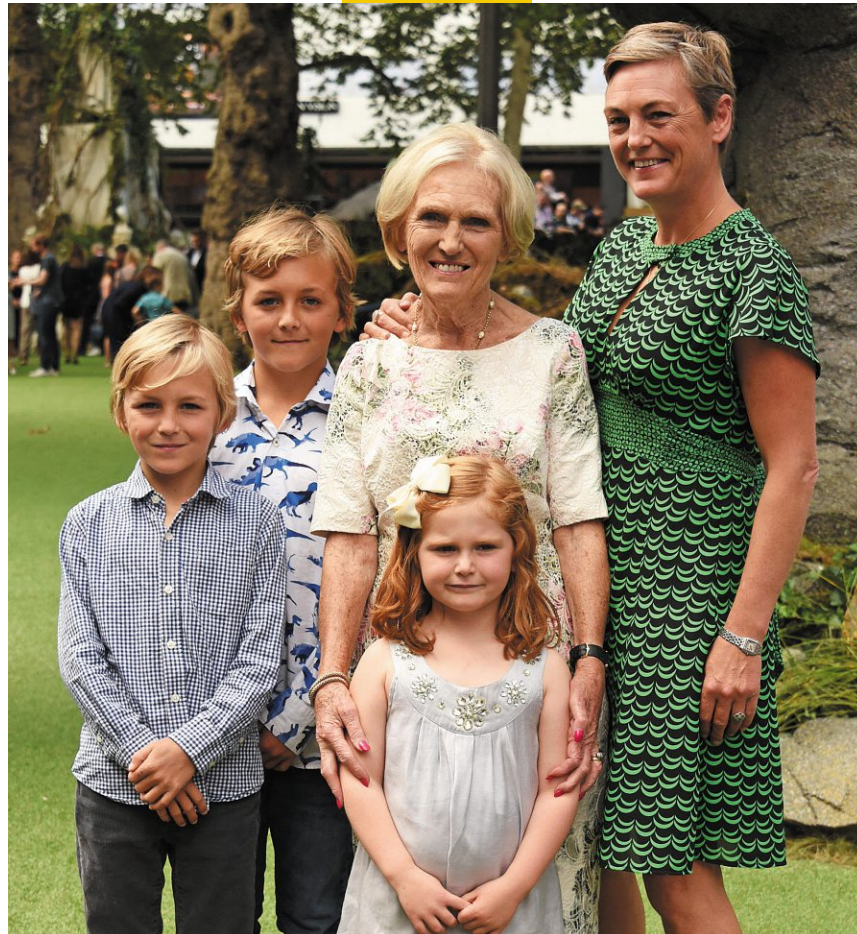
On the subject of her strengths, she is evasive, preferring to give her ‘team’ the credit but adds, without much pause, that she is a very good teacher and a great grandmother.

In her role as ambassador for the National Dairy Council, she is heading up the ‘Dare to Dairy with Mary’ competition, a chance for people to bake an ‘afternoon delight’ that could be showcased at the National Ploughing Championships.

Entries can be sweet or savoury, as long as they contain dairy produce, and the judging panel will also include Chandima Gamage, Head Pastry Chef at Dromoland Castle, and food writer Lilly Higgins. Three finalists will get to meet the queen of bakes herself and win a voucher for Ballymaloe Cookery School.

Practical and to the point, Mary advises anyone entering to “practice the recipe.” “It must be the very best of Irish dairy produce and the best of its type, whether that’s a quiche, tart or cake — we don’t want to see curdled custard or separated filling, the pastry must be beautifully done, it has to have great flavour and look appetising. No soggy bottoms,” a Mary Berry-ism that is synonymous with her *Great British Bake Off* mantle, prompting me to raise the question, somewhat tentatively, of my own soggy bottom.

I pre-empt it with the fact that I believe my oven is “on the blink” — that classic



workman blaming his tools excuse — since most of my sponges and cakes seem to sink in the middle like a melting Baked Alaska (just for the record, my oven *is* on the blink). Do it at a lower temperature for longer, she advises me.

“If it’s a Victoria sandwich set your oven at 160°C fan for 25 minutes. A good recipe, the right size tin and digital scales for accurate measurements are all important when you’re starting out.”

Mary’s own greatest coup is winning the Best TV Judge award at the National Television Awards last year but she’s even prouder of her grandchildren who “work very hard at school”, she tells me. There is no disputing her love for her family.

A perfect Sunday involves sitting around a table enjoying lunch with her family, hearing about their day. When I ask her what advice she might have for her grandchildren, she recalls something her headmistress at school once said to her that has stayed with her all these years. “I tell them to remember that money is a representation of somebody’s work, maybe your own, or your grandmother’s or a gift but somebody has worked for it, so respect it.”

That respect and willingness to en-

courage is what has endeared us to Berry. When prompted on what motivates her, a desire for people to be successful is top of the list. “I try to write my recipes in as much detail and easy-to-follow manner as possible. I tell them what size dish to use, whether it should be shallow or deep. When people are cooking my recipes I want them to feel like I’m there holding their hand.” It seems like a particularly practical and encouraging. With that, everyone’s favourite TV grandmother is off to clean the drains, in her wellies, followed by a nice cup of tea and a slice of cake.

To enter the ‘Dare to Dairy with Mary’ competition, send your recipes — including full details on ingredients, method, cooking times and a picture — to competitions@ndc.ie or Dairy Competition, The National Dairy Council, The Studio, 55c Maple Avenue, Stillorgan, Co Dublin by August 10

Mary Berry’s Fast Cakes: 6 recipes to try on page 28



“There’s no having it all, something’s got to give”

TV presenting, radio producing, starting a business, 10km races... 2016 has been Mairéad Ronan’s busiest year to date — and that’s all *before* she gave birth to baby Eliza. But juggling everything involves hard work and sacrifice, as she tells **ORLA NELIGAN**

I am sitting in the plush reception of Iconic offices in Dublin’s Merion Street awaiting the arrival of broadcaster, presenter and producer Mairéad Ronan (née Farrell). I have listened to her over the years on Today FM as D’Arcy’s right-hand woman: that easy charm, that sharp wit, that unmistakable cackle that would rival that of any cockney barmaid — she has become the funny, gregarious girl-next-door that we can all relate to.

On RTÉ’s *The Panel*, she held her own among the male comedians and took on Gráinne Seoige in a verbal catfight. There was playful repartee, some of it cutting, but they hugged it out.

In person, she is exactly the same; her manner familiar, friendly, unfiltered and frank. But above all, she’s smart. Sometimes it’s lightly worn, sometimes masked with humour — but make no mistake, she is a savvy media envoy.

When she arrives through the door with her new husband Louis Ronan and baby Eliza, who was born in September, she gives me a huge hug and hands me her daughter to mind while she gets prepped for photos. I immediately feel like I’m sitting down with an old friend. There is talk of her baby bump and having to ‘squeeze’ herself into some outfits, but just six-weeks post-partum when we meet, dressed in skinny jeans, cowboy boots and a cashmere jumper, she looks incredible, and very svelte. Her hair is remarkable: full, healthy, shiny with serious bounce.

“It’s the breastfeeding,” she laughs. “I’ve also just blow-dried it using my new magical brushes,” she adds waving a brush in the air — on to business straight away. Mairéad, together with business partner Debbie Lawless, launched a new line of blow-dry brushes FARO (half Farrell, half Ronan) in April of this year, which are selling out everywhere, and have become the hot topic of beauty bloggers.

No such thing as taking it easy during her pregnancy then? “I’ve been the busiest this year that I’ve ever been,” she remarks of her hectic schedule that has included producing *The Ian Dempsey Breakfast Show*, filming *Ireland’s Fittest Families*, travelling and filming *Getaways* for RTÉ and BBC NI, and launching her hairbrush line.

And what of having a baby at 36, nearly 10 years after her son Dara was born? “Bizarrely, it was much easier this time around, probably due to the fact that I’m much fitter now than I was in my 20s,” — Mairéad is a self-confessed fitness junkie. Who can forget her taking on the world’s fittest woman in a cross fit challenge for *The D’Arcy Show*? She joked about her tired physique due to her ‘6am gym start’ and her ‘weak wrists’ but kept pace nonetheless.

This year she ran a 10k race when she was 19 weeks pregnant. Running is her thing, she ‘hates’ it sometimes but it’s the best option when you’re time-poor. “You can throw on your runners and slip out the door for 20 minutes, there’s no driving to the gym.”

Her passion for fitness made her the perfect choice for RTÉ’s *Fittest Families*, her favourite gig to date. “There are so many reality shows on TV at the moment that have a mean element. Take the *X-Factor* and the early auditions where people embarrass themselves and they’re ridiculed. I think people are tired of that

now. *Fittest Families* doesn't have that mean element, families may be killing each other but they do the work and the winner is the winner. It's also almost live which means it can't be done again so, if someone falls flat on their face, that's being filmed, it's not scripted or fake in any way."

But does she think our fixation with health has gone too far? "I do think we're a little obsessed but there are worse things to be fixated on. Where we have lost our way is in cooking."

She was delighted to see that the menu they suggested for the celebrity version of *Operation Transformation* this year was normal, things she ate in school. "Karl Spain was given a brown bread sandwich with chicken, tomatoes and lettuce. OK, he took it too far by eating that every day for a week, but it's food I had growing up, what's wrong with it?" she says, a little irked. I'm guessing she doesn't own a juicer. "I can't be bothered with food fads, although I do like quinoa. Kale can take a hike, it's horrible," she wrinkles her nose. "I think the point is, just cook from scratch."

Beneath this down-to-earth, easy-going exterior there is a certain steeliness, a hard-working ethic that has catapulted Mairéad from coffee maker to producer of *The Ian Dempsey Breakfast Show*, one of the country's most popular morning radio slots, with TV appearances in between. She seems to achieve her dreams by sheer force of will — it makes you wonder if there's any room for self-doubt.

"I was riddled with self-doubt up to two years ago," she admits. "I remember sitting in a hairdresser's and reading this article about a woman who claimed she had imposter syndrome and thinking 'that's me'. That, at any moment, someone was going to come up to me and say, 'You've been caught out, you're not as



PHOTO: COLIN KEEGAN

TV star: Mairéad, two weeks before her due date, at the launch of RTÉ's new season's shows with Seána Kerslake (left) and Vogue Williams (centre)

good as you said you were, or we thought you were. Please clear out your desk and leave. I'm confident now, but years ago, I didn't take risks or chances because I was too afraid to rock the boat."

Nowadays, she doesn't really care what people think, despite being on the sharp end of public opinion about her weight, and she has a good attitude to the whole circus and happily laughs it off. A few months ago, while filming RTÉ's *The Farm*, she revealed she was 'not fat but pregnant' after receiving unkind opinions about her weight. "I hadn't told anyone I was pregnant and that evening I saw a thread online saying I should be the presenter of Ireland's Fattest Family not Fittest Family, they even included a pig emoji at the end," she hoots with laughter.

"But the best was a chat I saw where one person tried to defend me saying, 'She's obviously pregnant and hasn't told anyone, lay off'. The reply was priceless: 'Well

her face isn't pregnant.' I can't wait to use that line with friends, it's just brilliant."

She does feel the pressure to get back in shape post-baby, but only from herself. "I pinch my muffin top and whinge to Louis who tells me to zip it," she smiles. "Just yesterday I was delighted with myself, I hoovered the house, changed the sheets, fed the baby. I felt like I'd climbed Everest. Then Louis and his dad came by and gave out to me for trying to do it all, they told me I should be resting."

I empathise with her. It's the age-old female dilemma of multi-tasking, or if we're honest, having high expectations of ourselves. Is it really possible to have it all? "No," answers Ronan emphatically. "It's crap but there's no having it all, something's got to give."

She's clearly frustrated by the injustice of it. But what really annoys her is the excuses and justification we make for our choices. "Why do we have to make excuses for working, having a career or staying at home? We should do what suits us best at the time.

"I took my husband's name last year when we got married and you wouldn't believe the stick I got for it. Why should

I have to justify that decision and choice I made?"

Her husband Louis works but was a stay-at-home dad for five weeks while she was away filming for *Getaways*, which airs this January. "It worked because he's so hands-on and it wouldn't bother me if he was to be a stay-at-home dad long-term."

Mairéad met Tipperary man Louis at a singles event that neither of them was attending. "I had the *Republic of Telly* wrap party the night before and would never drink because of the early morning show, but this time I did and was horrendously hungover. We were hosting a singles event in Punchestown the following morning and Louis was down watching the races.

"He is good friends with D'Arcy's wife Jenny and popped in to say hello. Jenny was so busy doing my job as well as her own she left Louis to look after me. He brought me drinks and food. I remember that he smelt nice but not much beyond that.

"After that we kept bumping into each other. He's wonderfully old fashioned, sometimes it feels like he's from a hundred years ago," she laughs, rolling her eyes, "but he's a gentleman to his



Mammy's boy: Mairéad and her son Dara at age five

» fingertips." It is clear she is blissfully happy with Louis but as the conversation segues into personal territory and the subject of her first marriage, she is evidently uncomfortable.

It was right after the death of her mother when she was 21 and she was, in her words, 'grieving', 'very young', and 'filling a painful hole in her soul', but is quick to add that she has lots of happy memories and has her wonderful son Dara from her first marriage. Relations with her first husband are good. Subject closed.

The mere mention of Dara, on the other hand and her face is alight. "He is such a good kid. My dad used to say you could rear him on a mountain — he just rows in with everything. And, he loves Eliza. Just yesterday I was calling him to put his shoes on. I got so frustrated I went looking for him, only to find him lying on the bed with her, cooing."

Ask her what makes her angry and her answer is anything or anyone who upsets Dara. Said with tense angry eyebrows. That, and passive aggressiveness. "Just bloody say what you're thinking."

So, what is Mairéad herself thinking? What are her thoughts on the campaign to



Just married: Mairéad and Louis Ronan on their wedding day

PHOTO: JOHN DARDIS

repeal the Eighth Amendment, for instance? She's not sure; she's all for choice but being recently pregnant has toyed with her emotions. Ask her again in six months, she offers.

As a mother of twin girls and a little boy myself, I worry about the digital landscape and the pressure it puts on children and teenagers. It's hard to avert your eyes from a half-naked Kardashian since

they occupy practically every social media platform out there. There seems to be huge pressure to be perfect on every level. It's a worry that Ronan shares, having just welcomed her own daughter into the world. But she holds the same worries for her son Dara who is not allowed use social media.

"He's too young. He has an iPad but it's registered to my email address so he can't use anything without asking me. I'm very aware of what's out there, you just have to be vigilant and be able to communicate with your children."

Her opinion on childcare costs is one most of us share. "Prohibitive. It's another mortgage. I love my work but I'd prefer not to have to work as much." Just two years ago Mairéad made the decision to change jobs within Today FM and admits it was like 'wiping Vaseline from her eyes'. "The fog lifted. I used to have a 5am start and, while I was home to collect Dara from school, I found myself shouting at him about trivial things. I changed my hours and everything got better, even my cooking," she laughs.

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Her foray into radio was one that took several detours. I'm surprised to learn that growing up Mairéad was incredibly shy. She would listen to Tony Fenton's hotline list doing her homework every night. She'd regularly ring the number and when she got through would hang up.

The radio was a constant in her house, *The Ian Dempsey Breakfast Show* a family favourite.

"When I started working for Today FM, Ian Dempsey said hello to me one morning and I texted my sister to say, 'Ian Dempsey knows my name!' And now, as producer of his morning radio show, I get to talk in his ear every day, but not in a creepy way," she laughs.

At 17, Mairéad found herself regretting her decision to study HR Management and dropped out, taking up a media course at Ballyfermot College of Further Education where they 'threw her into a studio on her first day'. "Baptism by fire," she smiles. "I remember my dad saying: 'But we don't know anyone in radio, how are you going to do that?' He was old-school, where you followed in your parents' careers or you knew someone that could help you. But it was the best thing that could have happened. Ballyfermot really prepared me for what was to come." While studying at Ballyfermot Mairéad held down a job in Arnotts right through her six-week trial at Today FM, six weeks that has never ended.

Today, in her role as producer for *The Ian Dempsey Breakfast Show*, she spends hours locked in a room with Dempsey and Mario Rosenstock, working out sketches and ideas for the show. Sounds like the kind of office day most of us would envy. I'm intrigued as to whether she finds it challenging working with mostly men. "It's true that air time is mostly male-dominated but you'll find it's mainly women behind the scenes, oiling the machine. The head of RTÉ is female, the head of Communicorp, that owns most radio stations in Ireland, is female, my boss is a woman, the producer of *The Anton Savage Show* is a woman."

Does she think women are better behind the scenes than men are? "I think we are. Don't get me wrong, we are great entertainers, too, but I think our attention to detail is better and sometimes," she adds sheepishly in a half whisper, "they need a little bit of mothering and we're better at that."

The public can also be harsher on women on air, she adds. "Hilary Clinton's clothing was constantly being remarked upon, whereas it was never about what Donald Trump was wearing. I'm addicted to *Gogglebox*, just the other night these women were commenting on Claire Byrne's figure. You'd never hear them do that to Pat Kenny."

“
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better

Her radio career has seen a vast array of interesting guests and downright ridiculous scenarios. Her fish manicure springs to mind — Mairéad screaming down the airwaves for a good 10 minutes. "Ugh, that was weird and just so ticklish, I couldn't bear it." All in the name of entertainment.

A favourite guest wasn't a celebrity but a girl who had decided to have a baby on her own. It was very powerful, she tells me. The worst guest, on the other hand, was a celebrity — actress Natascha McElhone who had agreed to come on the show to promote a product she was endorsing on the proviso she would talk about her husband who had passed away tragically. At the last minute she decided she didn't feel like talking about her husband. "It was a disaster and I had booked her so, I felt responsible," she says, putting her hands to her face and groaning.

On her successful transition from radio to TV, she is pragmatic. "There's no such thing as just a TV career in Ireland. Ryan Tubridy and D'Arcy have the biggest shows on TV and even they have radio jobs. I just like being able to move between them because it keeps your perspective fresh."

In a career that has spanned radio and TV for nearly two decades, it's surprising to learn that the highlight has been the launch of FARO this year. "I love what I do but this is really something I did myself, with my own money, and it's proving successful so that's a huge achievement for me."

When asked of her bucket list entries, Ronan pauses, clearly musing over what she hasn't done to date, which, it seems, is very little. "I never took a year out like all my friends," she answers. "I was too busy working and I said I would do it when Dara is 10. That's next April," she remarks, glancing at baby Eliza on her lap and pulling a dubious face. "But the best advice I ever got was to trust your gut. I've had so many of those feelings and never acted on them. Six months," she pauses, "I better get my skates on." **W**

Potrains by Fran Veale.
Mairéad wears, this page:
pink Katelyn jumper, €75;
Page 10: Sevanti embroidered
yoke blouse, €75; Page 11:
Alexis blouse, €54; all from
Monsoon. See monsoon.co.uk
for store locations nationwide.
Shot at The Merrion Building,
18-20 Merrion Street, Dublin
2. With thanks to Amy, Gill
and the team at Iconic Offices,
(01) 905 3508, iconicoffices.ie



Kings of the castles

PICTURES: JAMES FLYNN/APX

It's not all lavish banquets and grand balls being custodians of Ireland's famous castles — it takes some commercial imagination to ensure their survival, as **ORLA NELIGAN** finds out

They say a man's home is his castle — and for some lucky people that can be taken quite literally. It's a bit of a fallacy, however, that people who live in castles or stately homes are rolling in it.

In fact, living in a national treasure is quite the balancing act. On the one hand it's living history, on the other, a family home with all the travails of one except perhaps more rooms to clean, bigger lawns to mow and an annual electricity bill equivalent to a small country's GDP. Most owners see themselves as stewards of history, continuing family legacies and maintaining ancestral homes.

But ownership often brings pricey renovations and tourists on the manicured lawns. Highclere Manor,

the location for the much-loved *Downton Abbey* TV series, draws 1,500 visitors a day, a relief to the owners since it's annual running bill is €2m.

In Ireland, big houses and castles must similarly find a way to survive the 21st century and sharing their public space or selling some rolling acreage may decide their continued existence. Many custodians, having grown up in these grand homes, are unsentimental about what could be seen as a massive intrusion.

By their very nature these homes are large enough to accommodate the family in private quarters, and visitors, while becoming a revenue stream, also prevent these historical piles becoming dusty museums. Here, we meet four castle-dwellers from around the country...

TULLYNALLY CASTLE CO WESTMEATH

Tullyally Castle has been the home of Thomas Pakenham (81), his wife Valerie and their four children for over 50 years. Thomas has been a writer since leaving Oxford University in 1955 and has published nine books, including four bestsellers and, in his own words, “two flops”.

The Pakenhams have a history of storytellers in their ancestry; Thomas’s sister Antonia Fraser was the wife of the late playwright Harold Pinter and a bestselling author, and their mother Elizabeth Long wrote a biography of Queen Victoria, which can be found in libraries around the world, and current owner Thomas and his wife Valerie — now the 10th generation of Pakenhams to live at Tullyally — are both published writers.

“One of the greatest advantages of a big house is that when writing my book on the Boer War, I was able to spread out all 39 chapters on the library floor,” laughs Thomas. And what of the challenges? “We’ve overcome the challenge of living in a big house by creating a small house within it.”

The family live in just five rooms and the big hall is reserved for public concerts, which take place four or five times a year.

They have kept the original laundry and Victorian kitchen intact and Thomas, an expert on

trees having written five books on the subject, has spent much of his time maintaining and planting the grounds.

Thomas is positive about the commercial angles to his palatial pad and says he doesn’t regard it as a “sink into which all our money goes”. Tullyally has both a working farm with 500 dairy cows and has managed to convert old stables into apartments for long-term lease. “We’ve made a community on the grounds which has made a big difference, both financially and personally. Otherwise, it might be very lonely up here in the demesne.”

However it’s the library, replete with thousands of books dating back to the middle 16th century (including two tomes inscribed by Yeats), that is his favourite room.

“Yeats was a guest of my grandfather, Edward Long, in 1931 and left the books as a parting present.” His grandfather drove him to Connemara and Yeats was curiously silent the entire way. Years later Thomas discovered an entry in Yeats’ diary from that very day in 1931, which described the journey as “the most terrifying drive of my life” and Edward Long as “a terrible driver”.

The family history is one of the estate’s trump cards, as is the view.

“If money wasn’t an issue, I’d knock a wall down on the first floor so I could enjoy the beautiful vista south and east but then, the whole place might crumble.”

tullyallycastle.ie



CARIGEEEN CASTLE CO TIPPERARY

When David Butler (38) isn’t greeting guests at his family’s B&B at Carigeen Castle alongside his mother Peig (75), he teaches Geography and Genealogy at UCC.

“The only prison in Ireland where you can stay without having committed a crime” was how one guest described Carigeen Castle when it first opened as a B&B in 1976. A former bridewell (small town prison), Carigeen Castle in Cahir, Tipperary has been owned by the Butler family since 1919 and still bears the hallmarks of its penal past in etchings on the former walls of the exercise yard and the iron gates that were used as prison cell doors.

“It was certainly a novelty growing up here,” says David, who now manages Carigeen with Peig. “My school friends were eager to hang out in a castle. You just had to remember to make your bed in case a guest opened the door.”

Converting the former prison into comfortable lodgings had its perils. Apart from beds getting stuck in the spiral staircase, most of the furniture was installed by removing windows and lifted into place using a pulley system. According to David, owning a castle means you have to be commercially imaginative. “No two days are the same and that’s wonderful, but also challenging. Unless you have a comfortable nest egg, you have to be able to convert your premises to make money and that can be a slow grower.”

But living in an historic building in the town centre has its perks. “You can pop next door for your shopping and still be inspired when you arrive back. Freestanding with so many viewing possibilities, its silhouette still moves me.”

thecarigeencastle.com



PICTURES: PATRICK BROWNE



HOWTH CASTLE CO DUBLIN

Julian Gaisford-St Lawrence (58) is the 30th generation of his family to inherit Howth Castle where he resides with his father Christopher, two children Thomas (22) and Alix (20) and his fiancée Anne.

When Julian's son Thomas was in kindergarten, he told his teacher he lived in a detached terrace house. He wasn't exactly wrong. Howth Castle, which has been the seat of the St Lawrence family since the 12th century, is the sort of rambling Gothic pile where, on account of being lost, you may not be found for a week.

Large rooms and wings made it easy for the family to divide up the house, creating private spaces within it. The contents of the castle have never been sold, making it a real museum for the public who are invited to take a tour by appointment only, but the grounds are free to roam.

The golf course, which was the first to be established in Ireland, cookery school, founded by Julian's sister Edwina and his late wife Christina, and festivals keep the estate on its commercial toes, as does its popularity with film and TV crews. Queen Victoria, George V and Bing Crosby are noted on the guest list.

"Joan Rivers was probably the most memorable. She came for afternoon tea but ended up staying well into the night — we got treated to a private show. It was one of the more entertaining evenings I've had at the castle," notes Julian.

And on the drawbacks of living there? "Living here in winter is a little too close to the elements for comfort — there's no double glazing and the place is impossible to heat. But we have a lot of logs thanks to the woodland surrounding us, so there's always a fire lit." Every little helps when you're running one of the oldest family homes in Ireland.

howthcastle.com >>





PICTURES: PATRICK BROWNE



HUNTINGTON CASTLE CO CARLOW

Together with his wife Clare and sons Herbert (4), Esmonde (3), Freddie (1) and five dogs, Alexander Durdin-Robertson (36) splits his time between running Huntington Castle, the family farm and his day job as an environmental consultant.

“Owning a castle is a bit like painting the Golden Gate Bridge,” says Alexander. “As soon as you finish fixing one thing, you start again. It’s a constant mistress.”

His “mistress”, a Gothic pile built as a military garrison in 1625, has been a family home since the 17th century, something Alexander confirms is paramount to its success. “These buildings have a future

and they need custodians who are passionate about them to prosper. That emotional attachment is important, especially when you watch all your cash being swallowed up,” he laughs. “If I won the EuroMillions tomorrow, it would probably only pay for a new roof.”

The heating alone costs €10-€15 an hour and there are regular leaks in the roof, but on the plus side, there’s rolling parkland and rambling battlements for his three children, Esmonde, Freddie and Herbert, to explore and, of course, the public who are welcome to visit during holidays.

Tours of the house and historic gardens contribute to the upkeep, as does the working farm and Alexander’s day job as an environmental consultant. “It’s a 24-hour job but we have a lot of fun doing it,” explains Alexander, who manages the castle with his

artist wife Clare. Christmas, Easter and Halloween are big events at the estate where the whole family take part in the theatrics.

“Huntington is supposedly one of the most haunted buildings in Ireland, so Halloween is my favourite time of year, the gloves come off.”

Noises in the attic and lights turning on and off hasn’t, however, deterred celebrities from overnighting. “My brother Matthew was too busy playing computer games to take a tour one day, it turned out to be Michelle Pfeiffer who was the guest. He was pretty depressed all evening. My great aunt Olivia once asked Mick Jagger what he did for a living. When he told her he was a musician, she replied: ‘Oh wonderful — do you have your own band?’” **W**

huntingtoncastle.com