



Castle Kilbride

Written by Nancy Silcox
Photography by Ryan Moffat

Drivers passing for the first time through the pretty little town of Baden, Ontario, can expect to do a double-take just past the corner of Livingston Drive and Snyder's Road. For there, just west of Kitchener-Waterloo, a stone's throw from well-manicured dairy farms and tidy houses is an architectural jewel - Castle Kilbride.

Built as a private home circa 1877, Victorian industrialist and politician James Livingston's tribute to opulence speaks to a standard

of extravagance seldom seen since. In 1995, Castle Kilbride was designated by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada as a National Historic Site and now welcomes thousands of visitors from around the world each year. But the future for the "Jewel of Wilmot Township" was not always so sunny.

In 1988, my job as an Enrichment teacher at the local high school saw me passing the stately mansion each day. I'd long wished to see inside, but local lore held that the third generation of the family residing in the Castle, Laura Louise and her husband Harris "Hap" Veitch, were anything but welcoming.

Opportunity knocked when two students who had been assigned a project on "an architectural and historically significant building" in their neighbourhood, came to me as a resource.

I jumped at the chance to finally peek inside the mansion, and



placed a call to the home. To my surprise, Hap answered the phone with a warm and welcoming response. "Bring the kids down," he boomed. "I'll be glad to show them around the place."

The Lavish World of James Livingston

Named for the owner's birthplace in East Kilbride, Scotland, the 15-room 'Castle.' Had been artfully designed and constructed in the Italianate Villa style. It joined a handful of other grand Ontario homes with that distinction, including Bellevue House in Kingston, where Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir. John A. Macdonald once resided.

"Look for certain architectural characteristics on the exterior of the Castle," I told the students, as we arrived. "Italianate Villa buildings are said to be 'grandly symmetrical.' In other words, windows, gables, even decorative millwork on the left side will be identical to the right.

"Even the heart-shaped driveway is symmetrical," one of my clever charges piped up. The unusual configuration is claimed to have symbolized the great love James had for his wife, Louise. But leave it to a smart kid to put a new spin on a legend! Here and there. Scharstein was originally from Germany but was living in Preston at the time and was considered to be the best at his craft. That's why James hired him to paint the trompe l'oeil, one of the most difficult and complex painting techniques to master. The subject matter is 'Renaissance-Revival' an art movement that advocated styles and subjects popular during the Renaissance period. The nostalgia was all the rage when James was building Kilbride."

Above the bay window, a pack of putti - better known as cherubs - are playing musical instruments. In each of the four corners of the room, a painting presents Scharstein's interpretation of what the four seasons would look like, had they been human. Above the doorway, Gods of War are fighting and over the fireplace the Gods of Peace are being good. Balance was a key theme in the Renaissance Revival movement. On the ceiling, a rainbow of cerise, indigo, green, violet



and everything in between, was still vibrant after 100 years. In all, Scharstein had employed 38 colours, as well as 24 carat gold paint in creating his own version of the Sistine Chapel. One of my students gestured towards a line of decorative fringed tassels along the cornice of the library walls. "It's more trompe l'oeil."

The Story of a Castle shadows make them look 3-D." I chuckled. Half an hour into the tour and my young friends were throwing artistic jargon around as if they'd known it all their lives! The tour continued in the parlour, a room that had welcomed at least one Canadian Prime Minister, a handful of Cabinet Ministers and the occasional foreign dignitary. The focal point was a magnificent fireplace, gleaming in alabaster and steel-grey tones with a bas-relief carving of a lion's head, holding a ring in its jaws.

"You'll look hard and long before finding Venetian marble to rival the four fireplaces in Kilbride," Hap wagered. We didn't doubt him for an instant. Castle Kilbride's formal dining room treated us to more Victorian glamour. "James admired beautiful wood and fine woodworking," Hap offered, drawing our attention to the intricately carved valances above the two windows. They measured at least fifteen inches in depth and gleamed like burnished gold. "You don't find wood like this every day. These valances were carved from the "sweetest" part of the walnut tree, where two tree limbs join. "Crotchwood," woodworkers call it, because it comes from the 'crotch' of the tree."

The tour lasted almost 4 hours. Our last stop was at the back of the property - a humble two-door brick structure, no more than 12 feet long by 8 feet wide. In design, colour and detailing this miniature building looked every inch the "baby brother" to the Castle.

"Any ideas what it is?" Hap questioned. "A doll house?" One of the kids ventured. "Or a tool shed?" Hap laughed. "Before you stands the only four-seater Italianate Villa privy (outhouse) in Canada." The kids giggled and one said to the other: "I guess only the best would do for the Livingstons." Our tour was the last Hap Veitch gave. A month



were set aside for public viewing of the property, followed by a three-day auction of Livingston memorabilia. Over 1000 lots, including fine oil paintings, furniture, objects d'art, crystal, Victorian clothing and jewellery would come under the gavel. Even Kilbride's Heintzman Baby Grand piano and the family's antique toy collection, including a turn-of-the-century carousel, were there for the right price. Advertisements promised a sale "the likes of which had scarcely been seen before in this province."

Former Mayor of Wilmot Township, Lynn Myers, had first toured Castle Kilbride as a lad of 17 and the property left him dazzled. Twenty years later he visited again, in the spring of 1988, and left with a sense of foreboding.

"Hap told me they were going to have to sell the Castle," said Lynn. "The financial and physical upkeep were well beyond his and Laura Louise's abilities. With no family member to take the house on, they had no choice."

Most of the house was unheated. Only the kitchen and a couple of the former servants' rooms at the rear of the house were livable. The front porch was rotten and the roof leaking badly. Water stains marred many of the price less murals and frescoes.

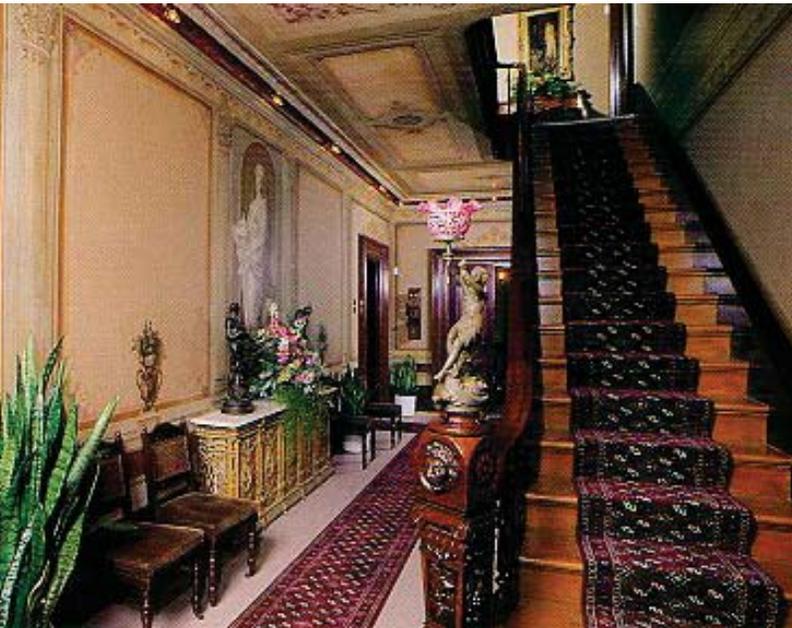
"What I saw just broke my heart," Lynn said. "Thoughts of the auction devastated me. I felt sick knowing that a significant portion of Baden's history would be scattered to the four corners of the earth."

Saving the Castle

Both the public viewing and auctions drew crowds beyond expectation. Treasure seekers, from as far away as continental Europe, flocked into the area. Hotels and guest houses were booked to capacity.

Over the next year, several offers to buy Castle Kilbride were made, but they all fell through. James Livingston's legacy remained vacant and deteriorating for the next four years. Rumours swirled of vagrants living inside and lighting fires in the marble fireplaces to keep warm. Graffiti had been sprayed on the bricks at the side of the house and arson destroyed the historic coach house at the east end of the property.

Ironically, the fire proved to be the saving grace for Kilbride. Lynn recalled the mood the day after. "The fire in the Coach House angered all those who cared about the building. People were phoning me and stopping me on the street saying: "Somebody needs to save the Castle before we lose it."



later, June 1988, the community was abuzz with news that Hap and Laura Louise were selling Castle Kilbride.

Declining and Deteriorating

The original asking price for the Castle was \$849,000, much below its historic value, but reflecting the extensive renovations needed to bring the century-old home up to modern standards. Three days



Eventually, he came up with a plan. "I decided the Township would buy the Castle," the Mayor explained. "We'd restore it to its former grandeur and it would become a heritage museum. On the back we'd build much-needed larger Township Municipal Offices. It would cost big money but I thought it was feasible."

Council members agreed and in late February 1993, the weekly newspaper, *The New Hamburg Independent* proclaimed: "Wilmot Buys Kilbride." The buying price was pegged at \$370,000.

Architectural firm C.A. Ventin of Cambridge began work on the Castle within days of the announcement. As heavy machinery dug footings for the rear addition, scaffolding for exterior restoration was erected at the front and sides of the house. Time was of the essence. Mayor Myers was ambitiously aiming for the official opening to take place in September 1994, within 18 months of beginning the task.

Counteracting many years of 'sprucing up' efforts, several layers of paint were removed from Kilbride's exterior to reveal the pleasing buff-yellow original brick. Wooden windows were scraped, repaired, sanded and repainted. Chimneys were taken down and rebuilt. A new slate roof went on; the belvedere was painstakingly restored and antiquated drainage tile around the property modernized. Sadly, the gracious front porch that had welcomed the elite of Victorian society was deemed "irreparable." It was demolished and an exact replica created. Inside, wooden baseboards, parquet flooring and all interior doors were refinished. Crystal chandeliers were sent for cleaning and restoration. Occasionally, the labour revealed a prize. Under layers of wallpaper in the downstairs formal rooms, additional wall and ceiling murals were found. An army of conservation experts arrived on site and took on the intricate process of restoring the hand-painted murals, including the prized *trompe l'oeil*. Another uncovered

jewel was a bottle of James Livingston's home made wine, dated 1899. This artifact confirmed lore passed down that the "Baron" of Castle Kilbride was a winemaker too. The province of Ontario contributed \$1 million to the Kilbride project. Over the coming months, a local fund-raising group raised \$750,000 more.

The Livingston Treasures Return

Like Lynn Myers, Baden antique dealer and collector Jim Miller's ties to the Castle went back decades. As a boy, Jim had helped in Hap Veitch's antique store and thus visited Kilbride frequently. "Walking into Castle Kilbride for me was like other kids walking into a candy shop. Three generations of Livingston collectings - from the attic to the basement. Nothing had ever been thrown out. Going on an errand to the Castle was like going into the most wonderful place imaginable."

The June 1988 auction was almost too much for Jim to bear. "I'd developed my passion for antiques because of Kilbride and part of me was just not willing to give that up. In my mind this auction sale was going to be a battle. I was determined that I'd try to purchase the furnishings I felt were the most significant, even if I had to go into debt to do it!"

Included in Jim's "must save" list was artist Homer Watson's famed 1879 'Old Mill and Stream' oil painting. Its twin, 'The Pioneer Mill' was purchased by the Marquis of Lorne for Queen Victoria's art collection. The prized toy carousel was a "need to keep" too.

With the 1993 announcement that the Castle was to be saved, Jim hurried to Lynn Myers' office to offer his help. But the canny Mayor was one step ahead. He already had a job for him. Integral to Myers' plan to restore the Castle was his desire to return "home" as

many of the Livingston artifacts as possible. Auction records showed buyers from across North America; some as far away as Europe. Lynn knew Jim Miller was the only man with the heart, persuasiveness and savvy to take on this task.

The Mayor and his “Kilbride envoy” targeted the key pieces they wished to bring back to Baden. These included: the ornately carved master bedroom suite, the Art Deco bronze pendulum clock, the Heintzman Baby Grand piano, the Victorian parlour suite and the Tiffany-style gas lamp, said to have been re-wired for electricity by Livingston friend and former Baden-boy, Sir Adam Beck.

Lynn had earmarked a modest sum of money for the recovery mission, a mere fraction of what the treasures were worth. Undaunted, Jim planned to try to convince the buyers to donate their purchase back to the museum, hoping that once they heard the story of saving the

times. James Livingston’s son J.P., who inherited the Castle when the patriarch died, was a great party-giver. When the men “retired” to the Smoking Room after dinner, Prohibition or no Prohibition, J.P. served Seagram’s whiskey to his cronies. The bars on the doors were to make sure the local Constabulary didn’t party crash the revelry.

Other Baden lore gives a different rationale to the bars and bolts. Some “in the know” report that the hardware was added around the time of the Lindbergh baby kidnapping and murder. J.P. and his wife feared a Lindbergh situation could happen to their cherished child, Laura Louise. So Kilbride was protected like a fortress.

And while the focus is on the past when visitors tour the mansion, Curator Loch and her staff have strived also to present an ever-changing and current display of programs, events and lectures. “Not only does a tour through James Livingston’s mansion allow a

stroll through the opulent past, but it features changing exhibits sure to interest people of all ages and interests,” Loch reports. Throughout the summer of 2011 Castle Kilbride, in partnership with the Stratford Shakespeare Festival Archives will feature “Dramatically Dressed: Victorian and Edwardian Costumes from the Stratford Stage.” Another summer highlight will be a fashion show of wedding dress fashions over the past 100 years. Summer at Kilbride sees weekly outdoor concerts on the mansion’s front lawn. Visitors can set up their lawn chairs and relax while listening to the sweet sounds.

And what does Tracy Loch say impresses visitors the most after their tour of James Livingston’s Castle? The trompe l’oeil and magnificent Laura Louise Livingston and her mother, Laura c.1926 furnishings? Of course. The view from the towering Kilbride

belvedere? Definitely. She pauses and laughs: “Most people are also amazed to see that the two seater 1877 privy outside is an absolute architectural replica of the Castle. Funny what people pay attention to!

Castle they would want to help out. Through his tireless efforts, scores of Livingston treasures eventually found their way “home.” Over one third were donated. Today, the Castle boasts that nearly 65% of the original artifacts dispersed at the auction have been returned to the Castle.

Castle Kilbride Today

Castle Kilbride was designated a National Site by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) in 1995, ensuring its continued upkeep and long-term future. Cited for outstanding significance are the home’s mural paintings, including its trompe l’oeil, and its superiority as an example of Italianate Villa architecture.

Curator of Castle Kilbride, Tracy Loch supervises a dedicated group of Kilbride volunteers who tour visitors through the Castle year round. Some volunteer guides have historical connections to the Livingston family and pass on “Livingston lore” to visitors. Totally factual or not, the stories give a fascinating look at the lifestyle of a well-to-do family of years past.

One urban legend “urban legend” involves the story behind the heavy bars on the home’s front door and the Smoking room. Some locals believe that this security had not been installed to protect the Castle furnishings, but to keep the law out during Prohibition

To plan your own enchanting tour of the Castle, visit www.castlekilbride.ca or telephone 1.800.469.5576, ext. 256.

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