



A pair of Irish landmarks celebrate their 400th birthdays this year: Old Bushmills Distillery, in Co Antrim, and Woodenbridge Hotel & Lodge, in Co Wicklow. Tom Adair and Bernice Harrison blow out the candles

'The Woodenbridge is where Eamon and Sinéad de Valera spent their honeymoon'

CLAIMING YOU'RE the oldest anything in a country full of history anoraks is a tricky business, but Woodenbridge Hotel & Lodge, in Co Wicklow, is sticking firmly to its story that it is the oldest hotel in Ireland. Its claim seems solid enough, as it's based on the licensing of a coaching inn that stood on the spot in 1608 and for a couple of centuries afterwards.

The inn, which was on the original Dublin-Wexford highway, was a stopover for carriages making what must have been an exhausting journey. Later, well-heeled Victorians immersing themselves in the new romantic trend of getting in touch with nature found that it was within perfect carriage distance from Dublin for a day-long jaunt in the countryside.

It still does a roaring passing trade. There's bar food all day and a more formal restaurant. On the rainy Saturday I arrive, the bar is heaving with day trippers tucking into chowder, fish and chips, boxty burgers and toasted sandwiches before they head off to nearby Avondale House or Avoca.

Its current owners, Bill and Esther O'Brien, are hugely proud of their hotel's history – Charles Stewart Parnell and Michael Collins were guests, and it's where newlyweds Eamon and Sinéad de Valera spent their honeymoon, in 1910. There are some old sepia photographs on the walls in the reception area of Parnell and other past residents (although not of the honeymooning de Valeras), but they don't lay it on with a trowel – which in one way is a pity, because the hotel has a fascinating history beyond the roll call of people who stayed there.

Its real heyday was in the 1790s, during the Wicklow gold rush (no, me neither) and, a little later, during the tourist

boom of the early 1800s. Back then, jarveys operating outside the door of the hotel brought day trippers around the Vale of Avoca and up to the Meeting of the Waters to see the beauty spots mentioned in Thomas Moore's melodies, which were the pop songs of the day.

The gold rush is surely worth more attention than it gets. In 1796 Woodenbridge was gripped with gold fever because of a find in the nearby Gold Mines River of a large nugget. Within a few months 2,600oz had been found, and things soon got out hand, with hoards of prospectors descending on the area to the extent that two companies of the Kildare militia were sent to take over the ground and to have the streams investigated by experts.

Maybe Co Wicklow simply has so much history it doesn't quite know what to do with it all. In a less culture-rich county there'd be a shack in them there hills, charging tourists to pan in the river – and I'd be first in line with my wellies and giant sieve.

The biggest surprise in rolling up to the charming black-and-white Woodenbridge Hotel is that it's now a Best Western – not a brand that

Co Wicklow wonders

Where to go

■ You need quite a bit of luck finding things around here: the signposting in Co Wicklow is desperate.

■ Although Woodenbridge is a bit shy about its history, you can't say the same for Avoca. Signs still boast that the village is the home of *Ballykissangel*, the BBC drama that filmed there up to 2001 – time to move on, maybe? Still, it's a charming place, the birthplace of Avoca Handweavers, and it has a shop and weaving centre in a pretty olde-worlde whitewashed complex.

■ Visit Avondale House and Forest Park in nearby Rathdrum (0404-46111), the birthplace in 1846 of Charles Stewart Parnell. It's now a museum to his

immediately springs to mind when you think of 400-year-old hotels. Apparently it's a marketing thing – being part of a huge global chain gets you high billing in internet searches and holiday-booking sites.

This, however, is very much an old-fashioned family-run place. The O'Briens bought it off the famous Irish-American philanthropist and businessmen Chuck Feeney 16 years ago. They have expanded

memory, but even if you don't go into the house, there are beautiful forest walks in the garden, and kids love the freedom of it.

■ Play a round of golf at Woodenbridge Golf Club (0402-35202, www.woodenbridgegolfclub.com). A par-71 parkland course in a beautiful and tranquil setting. The Avoca and Aughrim rivers meet in the centre of the back nine.

■ The unmissable Glendalough Valley with its famous round tower and monastic site. Slightly odd seeing the stalls selling T-shirts, chips and ice cream, but the site is well worth a visit any time, even on the notoriously busy Sundays. About a million people visit Glendalough every year.

over the years, but, with no garden to the front and a mountain at the back, space is limited.

But they did extend to the side (where I had a room on the first floor with a balcony and beautiful sylvan views over the bridge and golf course), so that there are now 22 bedrooms in the main, original hotel and an extra 40 in a modern annex across the road on the banks of the river. This annex, which has its own restaurant, is popular with groups booking in for a weekend of golf at the adjacent club, and it seems like a great spot for small summer weddings.

Bedrooms in the main hotel are old fashioned rather than olde worlde – the sort of rooms that have a tiny portable TV on a high shelf and shower curtains in the bathroom.

Overall the place has a lived-in feel, which could turn off people more used to hotels with smart upholstery in the bar and new plain carpets in the corridors. For others, the slightly worn look will add to the character and charm. I'm somewhere in the middle. . . .

■ 0402-35146, www.woodenbridgehotel.com.



Historic: Woodenbridge's current owners, Bill and Esther O'Brien, are hugely proud of their hotel's past. Photograph: Eric Luke