

Arthur remembers "She was a fantastic baker and had a special wheaten bread recipe that we still use in the hotel even today. She made all the jams and marmalades and I still remember vividly what it was like being in the kitchen when the scones came out of the oven. The smell of them and the taste as you took a bite and the melting butter ran down your chin. Impossible to beat."

#### Brown Bread

10oz Plain Flour  
6oz Wholemeal Flour  
Pinch of Salt  
Teaspoon Soft Brown Sugar  
2 1/2 Teaspoon Bread Soda  
1/2 Pint Butter Milk

Place dry ingredients in a bowl, mix to a loose dough with butter milk. Turn into floured tin.

Bake 40-45 minutes in an oven at 210°C

**B**ut 1969, when The Troubles broke out in Northern Ireland, marked the beginning of the toughest period of survival that Kee's Hotel had ever endured, a challenge that lasted almost 30 years. Traditional holiday business disappeared overnight with visitors to Ireland choosing to remain in the southern part of the country. It was the same for all the border counties who experienced dramatic and immediate trading losses. Many hotels could not cope and had to face closure, with new hotel developments cancelled. Bookings spiralled downwards and bedrooms lay empty.

**T**he only custom that remained constant was short-break business from Northern Ireland and, more importantly, the dining, banqueting and entertainment needs of local communities, especially sporting organisations. Recognising this opportunity, Arthur and Claire created 'The Barn' which quickly became a favourite place to meet. It was here that the local GAA Club organised fund-raising Sunday nights dances to help realise their dream of building a new sports facility for young people of the area, known today as the Sean MacCumhaill Centre. All the dancing and romancing led to an increased demand for weddings and dinner dances. Subsequently, the Tapestry Room Restaurant was created and with increased revenue, the hotel's business grew and new facilities expanded to include leisure facilities, meeting rooms, bars, car parking and gardens – with The Barn finally evolving into today's elegant Terrace Ballroom.

**A**rthur and Claire share 'interesting', but not necessarily similar, memories of working together over a most challenging 50 year period after which they enthusiastically handed the responsibility of running the business over to Vicky, Richard and Jayne, the fourth generation of this remarkable family. The history of Kee's Hotel is one of joys and sorrows, trials and tribulations, dramas and huge challenges but it is noteworthy that the same core values of family and hospitality that lie at the heart of the hotel's success today are as apparent as they were for over a hundred and twenty five years. The present generation of the Kee family will carry on the proud tradition of hotel-keeping as they take the business through the 21st century, a family for whom the welcome to every guest will always be '**Cead Mile Failte**'.



# Kee's HOTEL

## A Donegal Hotel in the Making



Stranorlar/Ballybofey, County Donegal Ireland.

**I**t was 1892 when William James Kee paid the princely sum of £400 to buy a hotel in Stranorlar. The first Kee family had settled in County Donegal around 1600 and three hundred years later were a notable local family. So too were the hotel's previous owners, The Millars, related by marriage to writer Frances Browne, more widely known both at home and internationally as the Blind Poetess of Donegal. Blind from infancy, she was largely self-educated but her great literacy skills and prolific writing were recognised from an early age.



William named the hotel the Queen's Arms Commercial Hotel and Posting Establishment. He was already a successful businessman with an undertakers and posting business, hiring out horse-drawn vehicles to visitors and commercial travellers who travelled by train to Stranorlar for holidays and to conduct business. The railway had arrived in the town in 1862 where the headquarters of the County Donegal Railway Company was headquartered for some 100 years. With nine rooms offering bed and board, as well as extra space for stabling, guests and business

travellers came to the County from all over Ireland where they would be driven around in the sidecar of a horse drawn wagonette.



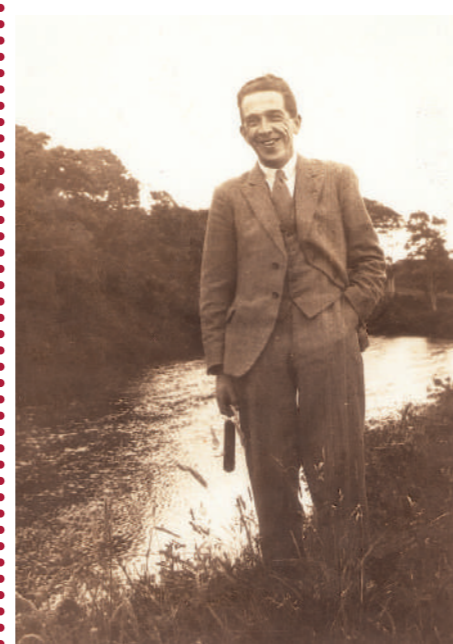
Issac Butt, a well-known local personality with a brilliant legal intellect, was a guest at the hotel. Born in 1813 at nearby Glenfin, he swiftly moved from the bar into politics, becoming a Member of Parliament and founder of various Irish nationalist parties and organizations. He died in 1879 and is buried in Stranorlar, in a corner of the Church of Ireland cemetery beneath a tree by which he used to sit and dream as a boy. His article, 'Ramblings in the North West', appeared in the Dublin University Magazine in 1858 and specifically mentions the hotel with great fondness.

*As we approach Ballybofey, the landscape waxes rich and cultivated. Here Sir Edmund Hayes has a handsome place; and now comes Stranorlar, well backed with waving woods and envired by a laughing and highly cultivated country . . . With a broken back but a thankful bosom, we enter Miss Miller's most neat little hotel in Stranorlar. We question if Queen Victoria herself could not enjoy, after a mountain journey, a night's rest in a bed 'so lovely bright and snowy white' as Miss Miller's well kept hotel produces.'*

**B**y 1920, the hotel had five more guest rooms and business was booming. The motorcar was the up-and-coming mode of transport. William bought a second hand Model T Ford from the nearby Hayes estate.

With the registration IH 207, this signified that it was the 207th car registered in the country when first brought to Ireland in 1914. The idea was to run it as a hackney cab but, as Arthur Kee recalls, the question was who should drive it?

*"My father Harry would only have been about sixteen at the time, but I'm pretty certain the car was bought for him as my grandfather really wasn't interested in driving. On the one occasion he attempted to do so it, he accidentally put the car into gear and when it started moving forward on its own, he was stamping on the running board, pulling back on the steering wheel for all he was worth shouting "Whoa, whoa!" The car hit the stable wall and from then on my grandfather stuck to horses."*



**I**n 1857 the hotel provided hospitality for another famous guest, Prince Napoleon of the French royal family. A close advisor to his uncle Napoleon III, the Prince had a personal desire to visit Donegal as his mother was Elizabeth Patterson, whose family had emigrated from East Donegal to Baltimore. The Londonderry Sentinel reported:



*'Prince Napoleon, after visiting our city, made a rapid tour through a portion of the County Donegal. On Tuesday evening he*

*slept at Mr Millar's hotel Stranorlar and expressed himself highly gratified with the comfort and accommodation of that establishment. The testimony of Prince Napoleon, in this instance, is nothing more than Mr Millar's excellent and well-conducted establishment deserves, a fact that can be attested by every person who has had occasion to sojourn in Stranorlar.'*

**T**he Queen's Arms may seem an unusual name for a Donegal hotel, but at that stage Ireland had yet to become a Republic and the country was still under British rule. Subsequently there was a lot of political unrest and garrison troops were stationed nearby at Drumboe Castle and Clady. Daily life in the hotel reflected the changing social and political times. In 1922 the Anglo Irish Treaty was signed and the Irish Free State came was declared in December. While British troops withdrew, fighting had broken out between Irish government forces, who now occupied Drumboe Castle, and anti-treaty rebels who were headquartered at Glenveagh estate. But for the Queen's Arms, it was business as usual.

Famously though, the events around Stranorlar at the time did inspire a very well known Irish rebel song, recorded over the years by many artists including the Dubliners and the Clancy Brothers. Again it's all about cars and the

hijacking of one belonging to the local GP Dr Johnston:

*Twas down by Brockagh Corner one morning I did stray When I met another rebel bold, who this to me did say: "I've orders from the captain to assemble at Drumbar But how are we to reach Dungloe without a motor car?"*

Arthur recalls "The rebels called out Dr Johnston on a fake medical emergency so that they could commandeer his car. The plan worked like clockwork and at Reelin Bridge they flagged him down and took the car. But hey needed a second car, so they rang James McClay in the village, told him that Dr Johnston was stuck and needed a lift. Of course, when he turned up, his car was taken as well. When the coast was clear, my father was called to pick up the two boys and drive them back to Stranorlar. They finally got their cars back, complete with a few bullet holes for souvenirs."

**I**n 1932, the Queen's Arms was renamed Kee's Hotel. Harry took over the business from his late father and married Sue Lee from Wexford who had arrived in Ballybofey to help her sister run a pharmacy business. But even before the Second World War in 1939, business was difficult. The undertaking trade kept the Kee family afloat. Severe fuel shortages meant cars were of little use. Horse-drawn funerals continued in the area until the late 1940s. Indeed, it wasn't until the end of that decade, when rationing restrictions were relaxed, that a new, motorised hearse was added



to the fleet. Throughout this period, Sue Kee proved to be a tower of strength, taking over the running of the hotel while Harry oversaw their other business interests. Not only was she a fabulous baker but she also bred pigs and cattle, and kept hens. She grew potatoes, vegetables and fruit, thus providing the hotel with all its raw ingredients, from meat, milk, butter and eggs. In those days, it wasn't an unusual sight to see Sue's cows being driven down the main street twice a day for milking. Another part of her legacy was the beautiful hand-woven tapestries, still displayed throughout the hotel today.



**B**y 1949, rationing restrictions were relaxed and a new motorised hearse was added to the fleet. The salesmen returned and business recovered. New rooms were added and hot and cold running water was installed in all guest rooms. Expansion continued into the 1950s and new rooms were added, including single rooms and those with their own 'private facilities'.