On Saturday 19 October 2019 at 18:30, the Patrick & Joan Leigh Fermor House at Kardamyli, Messenia was officially inaugurated by H.E. the President of the Hellenic Republic Mr Prokopios Pavlopoulos.

‘[Living in England is] like living in the heart of a lettuce. [...] I pine for hot stones and thorns and olive trees and prickly pears,’ wrote British author and traveller Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor. In the ’60s he adopted the Mani as his homeland and Kardamyli as his home.

It was this home that Patrick and his wife Joan decided to donate to the Benaki Museum in order to contribute to the Museum’s mission. Their expressed wish was that the House will always remain open to the public and will play host to authors and researchers from around the world.

Thanks to the generous support of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, repair works at the Leigh Fermor House have been brought to fruition and necessary equipment has been installed. It is now ready to operate as a hospitality venue for notable figures from the worlds of scholarship and art as well as a centre for educational activities in collaboration with institutions in Greece and internationally.

The Leigh Fermor House legacy is one of the most important donations that the Benaki Museum has received in recent decades and its development and operation have been paramount among the Museum’s priorities.
A HISTORY OF THE DONATION

The connection between Patrick Leigh Fermor and the Benaki Museum goes back to World War II, when he became a friend of the Museum’s founder, Antonis Benakis, who offered Leigh Fermor a space in the Museum where he could write, and of his daughter, Irini Kalliga. Leigh Fermor was later connected with the Museum’s long-standing director, Angelos Delivorrias.

On 2 August 1996 Patrick and Joan Leigh Fermor signed the deed that would transfer the Kardamyli house’s ownership to the Benaki Museum after their death. This particular choice had been suggested by Tzannis Tzannetakis, their dear friend and translator of Patrick’s book Mani, who would later become Greece’s prime minister. In the donation contract, the Leigh Fermors appointed Tzannetakis and their lawyer Antonis Masouridis as supervisors for the implementation of the terms of the donation; today, the late Tzannetakis’s role is being fulfilled by his two children, Tonia and Petros.

The Museum acquired full ownership of the property in autumn 2011 after Patrick Leigh Fermor’s death on 10 June 2011. The executors of his will granted to the Museum the largest part of the House’s library and furnishings as well as some of the works of art that decorated it.

A Summary of the Donation Terms

According to the donation contract:

- The donation’s aim is to transfer ownership of the property to the Benaki Museum towards the fulfillment of its mission statement through the property’s use. According to the expressed desire of the donors, the property can be used by the Museum to host researchers or other persons connected with its varied activities. They will be residing there as the Museum’s guests. Their selection and the duration of their residence are at the sole discretion of the Board of Trustees of the Museum.

- The Museum cannot sell the property or change its use, its shape or its aims for a period of twenty years. If after twenty years the Museum’s Board of Trustees can justifiably decide that circumstances necessitate the sale of the property or the transfer of its ownership or the alteration of its use, shape, or aims, it can do so with the approval of the Legacies Committee of the Hellenic Ministry of Finance. In this case, all funds generated by the sale of the property will be exclusively used towards the Museum’s mission.

- In order to cover running expenses of the House and to fund its hospitality programme, the Benaki Museum has the right to lease the property for three months per year.

- The Museum is obliged to employ full-time staff for the upkeep and safety of the property.

- If the Museum does not meet the terms of the donation, the property is transferred to the British School at Athens.
THE PROPERTY

The property is located in the Kalamitsi area of Kardamyli in Messenia and extends over approximately nine acres. The three stone buildings within it were designed by the architect Nikos Hatzimichalis in close collaboration with the Leigh Fermors and were completed in the mid-'60s. By general consensus, this is one of the most beautiful properties in Greece. With a set of narrow stone steps leading down to a small pebble beach hidden from sight, the house is in direct contact with the sea, and the low, discreet, stone buildings and beautiful Mediterranean garden descending to the water’s edge make this an ideal place for concentration and creativity. The property includes the main house, a building used by Patrick Leigh Fermor as a studio, an auxiliary house and another building which was used as a hencoop.

REPAIR WORKS

Following the Stavros Niarchos Foundation’s resolution to fund all repair works and equipment for the Leigh Fermor House, all contents were moved to Athens from May 2017 onwards. Benaki Museum Library staff undertook the laborious recording of approximately 6,000 volumes, which were incorporated as ‘The Leigh Fermor Collection’; some books remained in Athens, mostly for security reasons, while the rest returned to the House. The cataloguing of the books was supported by the Friends of the Benaki Museum.

The Benaki Museum Conservation Department undertook the restoration of the largest part of the House’s furniture, light fittings and other objects. Their brief was to preserve the ambience of interiors and reposition as many pieces of furniture as possible in their original places. To better fit the new use of the House, some furnishings were replaced with modern versions. Many of the original paintings were returned to the House while important works of art (by Edward Lear, Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghika and John Craxton, among others) were replaced by facsimiles. High-quality prints sourced from the Benaki Museum collections were used to complement original furnishings throughout the property.

Shortly after Patrick Leigh Fermor’s death, Angelos Delivorrias ordered a bronze bust of him be executed by Greek sculptor Praxiteles Tzanoulinos; it has been placed in the House’s garden.

The repair works team consisted of:

- Architects: Andreas Kourkoulas and Maria Kokkinou
- Mechanical / electrical engineer: Pantelis Argyros
- Civil engineer: Dimitris Pastras
- Landscape architect: Helli Pangalou and partners
- Contractor: Ballian Techniki (onsite engineer: Thanasis Mekkas)
The form of the buildings, allowed for the creation of five independent guestrooms, each consisting of a bedroom, a working area and a bathroom, with very few interventions necessary to its original fabrics and interior arrangement. Three guestrooms are located at the main house, one at the studio and another at the auxiliary house. Each guestroom provides all facilities necessary for comfortable accommodation combined with conditions conducive to isolation and concentration; communal spaces at the main house will be used as places of gathering and relaxation.

The electrical, plumbing and sewerage systems were fully replaced; all roofs were insulated and partially or fully repaired; all external walls were repointed and, in order to maintain the rough texture of internal walls, the same mixture the Leigh Fermors applied in the ‘60s was reproduced and applied; timber doors, windows and shutters were either repaired or replaced with exact copies of the originals; and bathrooms and the main kitchen were fully refurbished. Since none of the buildings had a heating provision apart from fireplaces, a heating and cooling system was installed throughout the property.

Work on the estate concentrated on repairing and plastering boundary walls, filling-in dry stone walls and levelling the ground in selected areas. The garden has been renewed; damaged plants, where necessary, have been replaced and additional ones have been planted. At a low terrace within the estate a relatively small swimming pool was installed, necessary for rentals.

FUTURE OPERATION

The operation of the Leigh Fermor House will include: fellowships; honorary hospitality of notable figures from the world of letters, the arts and scholarship; higher-education activities in collaboration with universities and institutions in Greece and internationally; educational and cultural events for the wider public as well as the local community; and guided tours throughout the year.

The fellowship programme will be organised in partnership with the following universities: Freie Universität (Institut für Griechische und Lateinische Philologie), Princeton University (Stanley J. Seeger ’52 Center of Hellenic Studies) and UCLA – University of California Los Angeles (Stavros Niarchos Foundation Center for the Study of Hellenic Culture). Two fellowship periods are being envisioned per academic year, one 1.5-month-long in autumn and another 2.5-month-long in spring.

The programme will operate in pilot mode over the first five years of the Leigh Fermor House operation. The fellows’ fields of expertise will be connected to Benaki Museum collections as well as disciplines covered by the curricula of the aforementioned departments in partner universities.
Fellowships will be awarded to tenured academics, research associates, emeriti faculty members and independent scholars with a distinguished record of publications.

The Leigh Fermor House can accommodate up to four fellows at any given time while the fifth guestroom will be allocated to a coordinator. Each partner university will nominate one fellow per season and the fourth fellowship will be awarded through an open call process organised by the Benaki Museum. For this Benaki Museum fellowship, an academic committee has been created, including scholars employed by the Museum and its partner institutions. There will also be a pool of reviewers, consisting of 5 to 6 members per discipline, who will evaluate applications.

Two-week honorary hospitality residencies will also be awarded by the Board of Trustees of the Museum to notable figures from the world of letters, the arts and scholarship.

According to the donation contract, the property can be rented for 90 days per year; to this end the Benaki Museum has selected Aria Hotels as its partner.

The unique location of the Leigh Fermor House, its special architecture and the reputation of its original owner, in conjunction with the management of the Benaki Museum and the support of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, ensure the creation of a special centre which will soon gain a place among the most important similar institutions in Europe and the Americas.

Beyond promoting Greek culture through a novel operational model, the Leigh Fermor House will contribute to intercultural dialogue and the cultivation of deep connections between guest academics, researchers and creators on the one side and the Greek natural and cultural landscape on the other.

Finally, the heightened flow of distinguished visitors and the increased publicity generated by the Leigh Fermor House will undoubtedly contribute to the touristic and economic development of Kardamyli and Mani in general.

USEFUL INFORMATION

Since July 2019 the Leigh Fermor House has been open to the public with guided tours every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at 11:00. Prior booking is absolutely necessary, please contact leighfermorhouse@benaki.gr or call +30 210 3671090 (Monday to Thursday, 10:00-18:00).