Episode 1 The Chairman’s Story

(0:02 - 0:19)

Welcome to the Landmark Chronicles. For 60 years, the Landmark Trust has rescued historic buildings at risk and turned them into unforgettable places to stay. To mark this milestone, we teamed up with National Life Stories at the British Library to record the stories of six long-standing members of staff.

(0:19 - 0:57)

The full interviews are now available in the British Library Archive and we've turned some of the highlights into podcasts, giving you a behind-the-scenes glimpse of life at Landmark. Episode 1 – The Chairman's Story In this episode, we hear from Martin Drury, former chair and trustee of the Landmark Trust, with an introduction by landmark historian Caroline Stamford. Martin Drury was trustee of the Landmark Trust for 23 years, from 1988 to 2011, and served twice as Landmark's chairman.

(0:57 - 1:32)

He was also director-general of the National Trust during that time. In this podcast, Martin talks about how his involvement with Landmark's founder, John Smith, came about, and how the Landmark Trust all began. I started working for the National Trust in 1973, and in 1981, when I was out in the regions, in 1981 I was made Historic Building Secretary, which was based in London, the head office in London, and I was responsible, through others, for the maintenance of standards and conservation and curatorship in all the National Trust houses.

(1:32 - 2:25)

Therefore, I used to attend all the meetings of the various committees who were all volunteers who ran the National Trust in those days, and one of those on the Executive Committee was Sir John Smith, he was Mr John Smith then, who was well-known because he was a charismatic character and had a very clever, very funny, wonderful deadpan way of speaking, and famous in the National Trust for having been a disruptor in the middle of the 60s. The National Trust, which is a wonderful institution, but it needed a kick every now and then to get it into the next era, as it were, and John Smith was responsible for that. So he was admired in the National Trust, he was always very funny to listen to when he got to his feet, you know to hear something pertinent and humorous, and like anyone else I admired him.

(2:25 - 2:49)

And I also knew, quite quickly, that he'd founded this extraordinary organisation called the Landmark Trust. And the background to that was that he was a member of a banking family, his ancestor Augustus Smith of Nottingham had founded what became Cootes, and John himself

was a partner in Cootes, and was destined to have a life in banking. What he really wanted to be, as he said himself, was an architect.

(2:49 - 3:19)

So he resolved both that disappointment and an opportunity, we call it both, by setting up two trusts. One he called the Manifold Trust, because it did manifold things, helped manifold causes, and the other he called the Landmark Trust. And the Landmark Trust was founded because he saw, through his involvement with the National Trust, that there were good buildings which the National Trust couldn't do anything about, couldn't save, couldn't give a euster.

(3:19 - 3:39)

Because at that time the National Trust had no money of its own, it had to ask for an endowment every time it was given a building, and there was no way of generating an income from small. However beautiful, however interesting, however romantic the situation, the National Trust couldn't take them on because there would be a drain on the general fund. And there were very few members.

(3:39 - 3:54)

When I joined in 1973 there were 300,000 members, and that had rapidly increased in the previous years. It's now getting on to 5 million. So he saw this as a gap in the National Trust's competence to look after the national heritage, as we now call it.

(3:54 - 4:26)

And so he founded the Landmark Trust on a brilliantly simple idea. It was that if someone could spend money on these places, having identified them, and persuaded the owner to part company with them, which very often was a problem because they were often in farmyards or in farms, and therefore a farmer had an interest in not having people staying there, then if someone had the money to acquire them or take a long lease on them and do them up and then let them for holidays, they would fund themselves. So anyone can see that's a brilliantly simple idea.

(4:26 - 4:43)

And it's proved durable to this day. There are now 200 landmarks, and the smaller ones let about 100% of the time. So it was a brilliant idea, and it seemed a gloriously perfect invention, sort of poetically, poetic and romantic and practical.

(4:44 - 4:57)

So I admired him from afar. Part of his original idea was not only to compensate what the National Trust couldn't do, but also help the National Trust do things as well. So he liked the

idea of partnership with the National Trust, and I knew that.

(4:58 - 5:24)

And I admired him even more because he was so interested and knowledgeable and positive and fun. And then in about 1988, someone who worked in the office said, have you seen the Sunday Times today? And I hadn't. And it was in an article where various people in the developing historic buildings, heritage world, as it's now called, had been asked who they admired most.

(5:24 - 5:37)

And John Smith, to my complete amazement, said the person I admired most is Martin Drury. And the reason for this, Up Park was a house in the National Trust base in Sussex. I used to look after when I was a curator in my early days.

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I always had a soft spot for it. There was a group of farm buildings there with one ancient stable building, which I thought would make a perfect landmark. So I invited John to see it.

(5:45 - 6:07)

I thought we might as well arrange for him to see some other things, which I knew about and thought it would interest him. So we saw that building, and he didn't really react and said, I'll let you know, and actually never had any more. But we also went to see, I took him to see a church, which has always been one of my favorite places, called Up Marden, a remote church.

(6:07 - 6:19)

It's in a farmyard on the top of the Downs, miles from anywhere, tremendous views. And it's got a rough floor of bricks, and the light comes in, it's clear windows. It's unrestored, untouched by the 19th century.

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Tremendously atmospheric place. And John, of course, responded to that and loved it and mentioned it in his thank you letter. And then we went on, on the way back to London.

(6:34 - 6:51)

I made a turning off the main road north at Midhurst to show him a brickworks, which I'd discovered by chance. And it was indeed a very extraordinary sight in 1988. You drove down a track, through a housing estate first, then you came to a track, got into the open country.

(6:51 - 7:05)

And in sort of scrubby woodland, there was a clearing. And it contained what looked like an enormous pile of bricks with a chimney sticking out of it, a factory chimney sticking out of it, which is in fact a kiln. They weren't mortared, they were just strapped together with iron straps.

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Two long sheds, as I learnt, full of bricks, drying. And a little cottage where the manager lived. And in the foreground, as it were, wearing waders and up to the knees in mud, it was actually clay.

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There was an old boy at home who had a cap on and he had a cigarette, he had a gap in his teeth, he had a cigarette stuck in the gap in his teeth. And he had an extraordinary thing, which I remember in the small scale, one you used to use for making food for chickens, you crushed apple skins and potato skins and things that made a mush. He was doing that with his clay, he was pugging, I think it was called pugging the clay.

(7:46 - 8:05)

He was adding some sort of porcelain to it to make it an effective mortar. So he was making bricks in fact, making the clay that produced bricks. And it was a process that hadn't changed of course since the Middle Ages and it happened all over the northern world and all over the world where you hadn't got the sun to cook the bricks as you have in the southern hemisphere.

(8:05 - 8:34)

And the sheds had the bricks drying in it, laid out, where they'd been shaped, I don't know who by, it wasn't anyone, but it was the same chapter, the shaping. And then every month or so they'd have a burn and a pile of bricks was walled up with the bricks put inside it and all around was this scrubby woodland which were actually where the clay was dug. So it was an increased industrial process, still being done in a medieval way, which has amazingly survived and I'm sad to say it doesn't exist anymore.

(8:34 - 8:42)

But John was obviously very impressed by this because it's just what he liked. He liked the practical side of building. He always used to say buildings are made with great care and skill.

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He admired the skills that went into creating buildings which we now love. And I didn't know that at the time, but it hit the spot and that's why I think. He said, I admire this chap Broughy who's the Historic Building Secretary for the National Trust because he's not only interested in grand buildings like Kedleston but also likes old brick works and that kind of thing, old brick making.

(8:59 - 9:22)

I was deeply flattered and very surprised. And in no time at all I got a postcard from him saying he was thinking of retiring. He was 66 at the time.

It was the day his father died and he thought he ought to get on. And would I become a trustee with his wife Christian. And of course I was deeply flattered by that.

(9:22 - 9:42)

And I didn't know, but the then Director General of the National Trust was rather unkeen to let me off this extramural work, which of course I'm not going to be paid. But eventually he agreed. So I became a trustee of the Landmark Trust with Sir John, as he very soon became, and Christian Smith, his wife, in 1988.

(9:43 - 9:56)

And it was quite bewildering because it was an extension of his own household. It was an entirely personal thing. His wife contributed in selecting the buildings because she had a good eye.

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And that sort of practical contribution was to make the curtains in all the houses. And she had quite an influence on the way they were decorated, which was always very simple. And she had a little kind of workshop at Shotsbrook where they lived, they made bed in the stables where she and a couple of people chose some feature from the building, part of the design of the plaster work or a figurehead or a gate pair or something, which they then turned into a stencil and made curtains, which were particular to that place.

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That was one of the distinctive things about Landmark. There were various people who were already ensconced. There was a person called Tom Dulake, who was a very able, energetic man.

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I took some time to understand the tensions and where I could play a part. But I was also doing a job with the National Trust, so I couldn't give it very much time. But this is the point, I think, to try and describe the distinctive features of the Landmark Trust because it is, I think, still unique in the world.

(10:58 - 11:24)

I know of no other organisation that gives a future to historic buildings by this particular means and in accordance with the same values. The idea was that people should have a holiday in a

place which took them away from the world and put them in a long line of people who had either lived in the building or used it in the past. So they felt part of a long, continuing story.

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So the boards, the floors, tended to be bare and decoration quite simple. There would always be books in every Landmark. So that when you thought, I wonder what the history of this place is, you could find out.

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Or if it was a chapel, who was the priest here? Or I'd like to read about the landscape around a bite. Or what's the nearest interesting thing to see? All those questions would be answered by the books. The library, there was two people who worked part-time choosing books for Landmarks.

(11:52 - 11:58)

That's a distinctive feature. There were certain things you could always count on. One, that you would be warm.

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And that the warmth would be generated, in part at least, by an open fire of some kind. Sometimes a stove, sometimes an open fire. And there'd always be a supply of logs for the open fire.

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Secondly, that you'd have an extremely properly equipped kitchen. And that the china would always be the same. There was a design, I forget where it came from now, of sort of willow pattern china, which people came to expect.

(12:22 - 12:33)

And it became a sort of part of the cult of Landmarking. Appreciated the way this particular design of china reminded them of Landmarks. What came first was the building.

(12:34 - 13:11)

And so you were induced to feel, when staying in a Landmark, that you're not only joining a community, a sort of vertical community over time, writing one more chapter in that story, but also sharing with the Landmark the revival of the building. So you and the Landmark were partners in making the best of this building. And if it required, as it does at a fort at the entrance to the River Dart, Kingsweir, if you have to go up onto the roof and walk across the ledge to have a bath, so be it.

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We don't complain about that. We think this is exciting and quirky. And we don't mind getting a bit cold because it's the best way of experiencing the building.

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And there are countless examples of that in Landmarks everywhere. And the other thing is there was no television and no internet. And you might think that would put people off terribly, but every property has a, I think it's called a logbook, in which you're invited to write a note about your experience.

(13:33 - 13:51)

It's a message to the next resident and also enables you to understand if other people have been there in the past. So that's all part of this linear community. And a huge number of people say what a relief it was not to have television or Wi-Fi because maybe you played games and went for walks and did that kind of thing.

(13:52 - 14:13)

So that, I think, describes the unique character of the Landmark. And John Smith, when I became a trustee, he almost immediately said he was going to retire. And I read his introduction to the handbook, which he'd just rewritten, and I thought it was the most exciting expression of values, really.

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It was full of wonderful phrases. One I remember was that he said, A stay in a Landmark is not meant to be just a holiday. It's meant to be an experience of a mildly elevating kind, which is a wonderful phrase.

(14:26 - 14:46)

I used to quote it all the time. And he talks about not exactly arresting the cannonball of progress but giving it a nudge. That expresses the inspiring quality of the man and why he was such a wonderful man to work with and for and why he inspired so many people.

(14:47 - 15:04)

And so it was a great honor to be asked to be a trustee, and it wasn't long before he started saying, won't you be chairman? And I said, well, I don't know. I'd love to be chairman, of course. I can't think of a better honor that you'd ask me, which I was, because I admired this organization so much.

(15:05 - 15:22)

If I'd like to be in anything, I'd like to be the mentor of Landmark Trust. It's unitive in nature. Nearly all the places have some cultural significance, either natural or historical, either historically interesting in the middle of Oxford, for example, or a rectory in Oxfordshire, or they're in remote and beautiful places.

(15:23 - 15:42)

It rents Lundy off the National Trust, Lundy Island, and there you're completely alone with the seagulls and the pogan falcons and the waves, sound of the waves. So it's nature and man-made culture as well. So in 1992, I became chairman of the trustees.

(15:42 - 16:02)

And by that time, there were two or three other trustees. And together, we set about trying to turn what had been an extension of John's private life, a private fiefdom, if you like, funded privately, in effect, by the Manifold Trust. I didn't say earlier on I meant to.

(16:02 - 16:22)

Landmark was founded by the romantic in John Smith. Manifold was founded by the shrewd businessman, which he certainly was, and banker. He funded the Manifold Trust by buying up the unexpired ends of commercial leases, which you could sell for a large sum, but you had no residual value.

(16:23 - 16:40)

And his phrase was, the Manifold thereafter generated cataracts of gold for good causes, one of which was the Landmark Trust. So there were two sides to John. We were beginning to raise money, but of course, there was a general perception that it was funded privately by John Smith, so raising money was quite difficult.

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And then, to my surprise, rather, in 1994, I was asked to be director general of the National Trust. And I couldn't, of course, continue being both. I could just about be a board member of the National Trust and chairman, but I couldn't be chairman and director general.

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So I had to give up and try and find a new chairman to succeed me with my trustees. That was quite difficult to do. And in due course, we asked Barty Smith, Bartholomew Smith, I think his real name is, Barty Smith, who was John Smith's able son, younger son, who was a good businessman and very like John in his creativity and his temperament.

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And so Barty agreed to take over as chairman, and I was relieved. But then immediately, Robin Evans, the director, resigned. So then there was I, trying to become director general of the National Trust, which was quite overwhelming, and I wasn't at all prepared for it, and trying to cope with the situation which I'd created at Landmark.

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And all the while, John Smith was sending me reassuring notes. We got on very well then. He was encouraging and said nice things about me, which was a great help.

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In due course, I found a chap called Peter Pierce, who worked for the National Trust, and had been the man on the ground who managed the restoration of Up Park after the fire of 1989 and had completed that task and was sort of a loose end in the National Trust. So I suggested to Barty Smith that he might ask Peter to come as a sort of stopgap director. And that's what happened.

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And he stayed, Peter, well on until I resigned as chairman 11 or 12 years later. So meanwhile, I remained a trustee of the Landmark Trust, but didn't attend all the meetings. After five years, I finished at the National Trust.

(18:40 - 18:53)

I said I'd be director general for five years. I retired in 2001 and began to attend the Landmark Trust meetings more regularly. Barty said to me one day, look, I can't cope with this.

(18:53 - 18:58)

There were too many other things. So I said I'd come back as chairman. So I had two spells as chairman.

(18:58 - 19:11)

And in 2001, I came back as chairman. And for a while, it went well. And we began to gain the confidence of the Heritage Lottery Fund.

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So we very soon got the confidence of the government funders. And that usually, I think, still does prime most projects. And then it was a question of loyal landmarkers, of whom were a huge quantity.

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But not many of them were very well off, but they can find sums which together are significant. We were now having to make our own way without the help of Mr. John Smith. It was a great honour to run it.

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I loved it because I love the people. I love the projects and the enthusiasm of everyone. Landmark was incredibly simple.

(19:44 - 19:58)

It had just the people who gave you money, the people who stayed in the buildings, and the people who helped make the buildings comfortable and usable. And they're all in lovely places. It's an extraordinary thing that Landmark Trust is now celebrating its 60th birthday.

(19:59 - 20:23)

And a wonderful thing, an inspiring thing. I think it would surprise the founders that the idea of something which is so constant and so unreflective of changing moods has proved so durable and is held in such affection by the people who stay in them. Thanks for listening to this episode of the Landmark Chronicles.

(20:24 - 20:33)

We hope you've enjoyed hearing more about Landmark and the people who make it special. To hear more stories like this, head to landmarktrust.org.uk forward slash podcasts.