

Episode 2 The Housekeeper'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 - 0:47)

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 2, The Housekeeper's Story. Wendy Sargent has been a housekeeper for Landmark in Staffordshire for 25 years, first at Tixall Gatehouse and then at Ingustry Pavilion, where she works alongside her friend Sarah Winter-Wright.

(0:47 - 1:13)

In this episode, Wendy tells us all about her time with Landmark and what it takes to get a building ready for its next visitors. My name's Wendy Sargent and I'm the housekeeper here at Ingustry Pavilion. There was a building in Tixall Gatehouse which everyone drives past and I knew it was a building, but I never knew what went on there.

(1:14 - 1:36)

And it wasn't until, gosh, when would it be? I started work for Landmark in the year 2000, so it'd probably be, I don't know, six months before that my partner was doing some work in the woodland surrounding Ingustry Pavilion and he said, oh, there's a really funny little building in the woods. He said, I don't know what it is and what it's for. So I said, well, I'll bring you some lunch one day and I'll have a look.

(1:36 - 1:55)

So I saw this building, didn't really know what it was, and I don't know exactly how I found out what it was. I perhaps found out what it was called, Ingustry Pavilion. Yeah, I can remember seeing the building and there was obviously nobody staying there.

(1:55 - 2:19)

So I looked through the windows and I thought, oh, this is obviously occupied for some reason. Just a beautiful little building in the middle of the woods that nobody knows about unless you sort of happen to come across it. And then at the same time in our local paper that week or the following week there was a housekeeping job advertised at Tixall Gatehouse.

(2:19 - 2:57)

So then I sort of put two and two together and researched a bit into Landmark and realised that they were both holiday lets. And I think then I went up to the open day at Industry Pavilion and sort of found out a little bit more about who they were, what they did, and then spoke to somebody about the job I'd seen advertised at Tixall Gatehouse. So there I met who was to become my new boss, should I say, property manager, who then, yeah, we arranged an interview and then, yeah, got the job at Tixall.

(2:58 - 3:34)

It was a job that fitted in my oldest daughter, I think had just started school, and my youngest daughter was at Playgroup. Obviously then in a position to go back to work, albeit not full time, but to, yeah, to go and, yeah, earn some money again and doing, I suppose, something for myself. So, yeah, it was the hours that were really good, enabling me to drop them off at school and Playgroup, start work at ten.

(3:38 - 4:01)

When I started there was a lady that had worked there for a while, so I guess she showed me the ropes and the procedure and the way that they make the beds. We always start with stripping the bed straight away. Obviously it's easier to do it with two people than one, so we always made the double beds together.

(4:01 - 4:31)

Then it was all sheets and woolly blankets. There was no modern duvets, so it was, yeah, making sure all the blankets were tucked in neatly at the corners and folded back, yeah, precisely. And then, oh yeah, obviously pillows and pillowcases, were they feather pillows then? So, yeah, puffing them up and, yeah, then the bed spread and, yeah, it was all ready to jump into.

(4:31 - 5:15)

So start upstairs and do the bathroom upstairs and then come down to do the two bathrooms downstairs while the other person would be on vacuuming and polishing all of the furniture, doing the wooden floors. And I think we probably both ended up meeting in the kitchen and doing the kitchen together at the end. One big thing there was there was a lot of wooden flooring that had to be polished and then buffed up with a machine.

(5:16 - 5:42)

But the polish was applied by hand, on your hands and knees. You had a tub of wax polish and a big cloth. You had to go over the whole floor, give it a coating of the polish, leaving it to soak in and dry for as long as possible because the drier it got, the sort of better shine and finish

that you got to it.

(5:42 - 6:11)

And then we had, yeah, luckily a little polishing machine, electric polishing machine that we'd have to then go over and several, several times to buff up the floors and make it a nice finish. So that was, yeah, that was quite a task. And then it was just getting into a routine of, yeah, cleaning the bathrooms and hoovering and polishing.

(6:12 - 6:27)

Cobwebs, obviously tall building. We had a really long cobweb brush that we'd have to make sure there was no cobwebs around the ceiling and the lighting. Yes, that was quite, quite a big job.

(6:27 - 7:05)

The biggest room for presentation was probably the kitchen. There was a large dresser in there and all the landmark old Chelsea crockery was all displayed on there. I think we all had our own layout, should we say, of where we thought certain pieces should be, which, yeah, we stuck to and each time, yeah, they were left in the same positions and displayed, yeah, displayed really nicely on the dresser.

(7:05 - 7:27)

So, yeah, that was a little bit of a work of art. The tea tray's always left on the table with, yeah, cups and saucers, teapot, sugar and a milk jug. We did used to leave a little vase of fresh flowers, which we still do now if we bring something from our own garden.

(7:28 - 7:42)

That was always to be left on the kitchen table. I think something out of your garden is probably nicer than, nicer than some mass-produced flowers from the supermarket. I've bought some today from Sarah's allotment.

(7:42 - 8:16)

She's got some beautiful cornflowers that are just out, lovely blue cornflowers, and then there's some little daisies as well, so I've bought some of those up today. And then there was the log books where people write their memories and events of staying at the property. They were always in the lounge on the bookcase, along with, yes, yeah, any maps or additional information for the property history album.

(8:17 - 8:48)

And there's also the little landmark soap. There's a soap left in every bathroom that had the

landmark name imprinted on it, so obviously we had to make sure there's one of those in each bathroom and in the kitchen. We were in the property, you know, minimum of twice a week, so yes, any issues with, yeah, damage, paintwork, yeah, that was our job to, yeah, to report that to our area manager, anything that needed doing.

(8:48 - 9:10)

But yeah, we're definitely the eyes and, yeah, it's knowing, I suppose just experience and knowing where to draw the line and what really needs doing and what is part of the character. So yes, it all gets noted and passed on. Yeah, I have been in there.

(9:10 - 9:48)

I've been there when it's dark and it is quite, quite spooky. Yeah, I guess in the winter months, in the dark in the winter, I have to leave my headlights on full so I can see where I'm going and see the building at night time with all the little windows, individual windows, I guess to describe it as looking like an advent calendar, which it does and it still does now when you drive past and there's a lot of light on upstairs, downstairs, in the turret or in the kitchen. It was always really, really lovely to chat to the guests.

(9:48 - 10:07)

Obviously, they got to contact me basically to gain access. Where did we leave the key at the time? I know there's now a key safe there that wasn't there. It was probably like under the mat by the door or something as simple as that.

(10:08 - 10:47)

They had to phone up about that and some people, that's all that they wanted to know, just where's the key? Okay, thank you. Others had lots of questions about what to do in the area, where to go, where's the best pub, where's the nearest supermarket? Then a lot of the time as well, we'd start chatting about, I'd perhaps say, is this your first landmark? Where else have you been? Then we'd have their stories and where have you been? We'd have both versions of where we'd stayed and where they'd stayed. I just do remember I bought so many of the girls teas because people tended to phone at tea time.

(10:48 - 11:23)

The girls' dinners were quite often overcooked because I was chatting away and then forgot about dinner. It was great having contact with the guests and listening to their many stories. It's really funny because you always think, when it's somewhere where you live, why do people want to come and stay in Staffordshire? Then over the years, very quickly, we're very close to the pottery town, so we've got Wedgwood and several of the pottery manufacturers just up the road.

(11:23 - 11:43)

We've got the cathedral city of Lichfield, not very far away. For the children, especially in the summer holidays, it was Alton Towers, which is a 20-minute, half-an-hour drive away, so people would come there as a base for Alton Towers. Callit Chase, obviously, for walking, was always well-recommended.

(11:44 - 12:09)

Lots of places in Stafford, the old Stafford Castle, the ancient high house in Stafford was always local. Then, literally on the doorstep, we still have Sugborough Hall. I think I was at Tixall for eight years.

(12:09 - 12:52)

A vacancy came up at Inkistree Pavilion, where I am now, and I was offered a change to come up here. It's in a very woodland setting, along a track, probably about a mile and a half off the main road, up through Farm Track. Surrounded by trees and woodland, just off this little track, a small garden area at the back, a small grassed area, and little pieces of grass out the front.

(12:52 - 13:21)

There are three steps up to the building, and three or four large pillars that take you into the portico, and then the doors to inside. The settings are very much woodland in the middle of nowhere. Opposite is what we call the view, the gap between the trees, where you can see off into the distance.

(13:21 - 13:31)

Obviously, over the years, the trees have grown and grown. That view is still in place, but obviously the trees have got bigger. They do get cut back occasionally.

(13:35 - 14:20)

In the early days, Peter Pearce was the director, and I think he once came up to Inkistree for a housekeeper meeting, but didn't really have any contact with him. And then when Anna came along, I think housekeepers have been made more involved in the day-to-day things that go on, like by introducing the Friday newsletter that keeps us in touch with other buildings and properties and what's going on. Housekeepers, area managers, anybody can contribute and send in stories of what's been happening at your property, any sort of work that you've had carried out, any nice comments.

(14:20 - 14:45)

People send in pictures of the nice comments in the logbook. So it's to share over the whole of Landmark what's been going on in the last couple of weeks. We're obviously regularly featured

in newspapers and magazines, so any of those articles, there's a link to those, so you can see who's been talking about Landmark this week.

(14:45 - 15:05)

Yeah, I look forward to receiving it every time to sort of keep up with what's going on. Sarah did send some information when we had our new curtains the other month, so that was featured in there with Sarah hanging the curtains. So yeah, so it's nice to see your own property mentioned.

(15:06 - 15:23)

I think realise that we've got a voice and a part of it as well. So yeah, I've known Nana a lot longer than I did Peter, and I've got to know her a lot better. She's really become the face of Landmark.

(15:23 - 15:41)

Everyone recognises her. I know she's been involved in the television programmes that we've done on the properties, and then also she did a series on when they restored Big Ben. She presented that, which was fabulous to watch.

(15:41 - 16:08)

So yeah, she's just really more involved and I think probably spread the Landmark word a lot better. I think the programmes obviously helped, but I think it was the advance of having a Landmark website. When I started, it was just a handbook that you flicked through and saw one or two pictures of a potential property you wanted to stay out.

(16:08 - 16:42)

Black and white, I think, when I first started, and then they brought the colour ones out. I think the development of the website has certainly increased people's awareness of Landmark and what they do. And then also several properties during the year, they have open days, so they're accessible to the general public, free of charge, so you can go and visit properties and experience them without actually having to stay there, which is really, really good.

(16:44 - 17:14)

We were all invited down to the head office in Shottersbrook for a party, and then also we went down when it was the 50th as well. I do remember at the 50th party, we were fortunate to bump into Lady Smith, who was one of the founders by that time. Unfortunately, I think Sir John had passed away by then, but she was there, and we honestly felt like we were meeting the Queen.

(17:15 - 17:49)

She was such a special, lovely lady, and just chatted to us like we were a best friend, very knowledgeable. She used to be involved in screen printing the curtains and the furnishings for the properties, so we were sort of very interested in that, and yeah, lovely lady, so felt very honoured to have been able to have met her. It certainly made me more aware of all the buildings that I've worked in and ones that we go and stay.

(17:49 - 18:20)

One of the first things I love to read is first the restoration, the history restoration, and then the history album about who lived here, why it was built, what it was for. Yeah, it's made me far, far more interested in history than I ever used to be. Yes, we got to help out in an open day at State and Agents House in September, so I've got to read, yeah, go on the website and read all the history so I've got some answers for visitors when we help out there.

(18:23 - 18:45)

I really missed coming up to work during Covid and the lockdown times. Yeah, and then you're sort of back for a week and it's like all those months never happened kind of thing. And then it was obviously a really extremely busy time after when the properties reopened because obviously people have had to cancel their holiday.

(18:45 - 19:17)

So then probably the following 12 months, 2 years, people had rebooked, so we were really, really busy then for the next couple of years really until everything had filtered through and normal booking started again and then people could go abroad again. So when we reopened, obviously everyone was holidaying in the UK, weren't they? So it was really, really, really busy, which was great, which was, yeah, really good. But yeah, it sort of went from one extreme to another very, very quickly.

(19:19 - 19:39)

I just really enjoy the job, looking after, you know, a lovely place. It's an escape from my midweek job in a busy office. So yeah, no phone calls, no... Yeah, it's just, yeah, just nice to come up here and, yeah, I don't want to work full time.

(19:40 - 20:20)

As you first come up the drive, there's an area of woodland, there's always noisy buzzards flying around as well. There's been evidence of a few deer in the woodland round and about and it's only probably the last 12 months that we've actually seen them and guests have really recently started commenting on that we've seen deer as well. So when it's quiet, I guess, in the evening, they obviously appear coming up towards winter and there'll be lots of crazy, crazy pheasants on the track that we have to negotiate sort of driving through, but generally they sort of just get out of the way.

(20:21 - 20:35)

Yeah, we see them in the garden, lots of squirrels. Apparently there was sighting of a missile thrush recently. Yeah, then the track, yeah, it's obviously various in the trees changing colour in the autumn.

(20:35 - 21:01)

It's always particularly beautiful when the trees change colour and also beautiful driving up on a sunny day under the canopy of trees with bits of sunlight shining through. So yeah, it's just in a lovely setting. Me and Sarah keep joking that we'll be 80 and we'll still be coming, driving up the track in the Land Rover and coming to work.

(21:02 - 21:18)

Sarah's been here as long as I have. She's been here 17 years with perhaps a one or two year sort of gap, but we just, I don't just work so well together, our routine. I don't have to check her work.

(21:18 - 22:28)

She's immaculate and she probably has to check mine. She was a friend before, but now she's become more of a good friend and yeah, we just work well together and I think if Sarah left, it'd be hard to replace her. Sarah's just so good at everything and very such a perfectionist, so and Sarah doesn't complain, so even if she doesn't like doing the job she won't complain.

It's only if she sees a spider then I have to come to the rescue, but generally she's, yeah I don't think there's anything she doesn't like doing. Yeah, so each time we do beds together. One does bathroom, shower room, kitchen and the other does Hoover polish throughout, cushions, floors, and it just works out well sort of time wise.

We're both generally finished at the same summertime and if not we just help each other to finish off. Sometimes, yeah, you think, God we've gotten really well and you look at you go, gosh is it that time already? It's sort of time sort of just flies by, but time flies doesn't it when you're enjoying yourselves. The day's always filled.

(22:31 - 23:10)

My youngest daughter has always, yeah, since very young loved landmark holidays and then my oldest daughter went through a spell of not really wanting to go. She was more, wanted the luxury of a hotel rather than a landmark. But Emma's always, always loved coming with us, but now as my oldest daughter Zoe has got older, she loves the landmark holidays just as much now and planning, planning the next one and where we can go and stay.

(23:11 - 23:38)

They love landmark now, follow them on Instagram and everything like that so yeah, really, really it's what they were brought up with, landmark and landmark holidays. Thanks for listening to this episode of the Landmark Chronicles. We hope you've enjoyed hearing more about landmark and the people who make it special.

(23:38 - 23:43)

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