

John Evetts

(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 - 0:38)

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 4 – The Furnishings Manager's Story In this episode, we meet Landmark's former Furnishings Manager, John Evarts.

(0:39 - 1:02)

Working with the Landmark Trust for almost 50 years, from 1976 to 2024, John helped define Landmark's distinctive interior style, furnishing more than 200 historic buildings. Now retired, John speaks to us from the Cotswolds, where he has lived for most of his life. He takes us back to the early days of the charity and shares some memorable moments from nearly half a century with Landmark.

(1:03 - 1:15)

My name is John Hastings Evarts, and I was born in Farnborough. My father would have been in the army. He was a lieutenant colonel in the Royal Scots Fusiliers.

(1:17 - 1:46)

At that time, he was just about to be posted to Malta, I think. Subsequently, we moved to Scotland and lived on the Collington Barracks, I think they were called, in Edinburgh, with a view of King Arthur's Seat. And I went to a small primary school there before being sent to prep school in Sussex, called Temple Grove.

(1:46 - 2:09)

I was sent away quite young, between 1954 and 1957. I lived in Malaya with my family, so we lived in Penang and Ipoh, where my father was stationed. And we returned when I was six.

(2:09 - 2:22)

In those days, one was sent away very young. I don't think I was a lot more than six and a half, maybe seven, when I went to school. I think it was very difficult to visit.

(2:22 - 2:47)

I might have had one visit a term, and we might have gone out to tea in Crowborough or somewhere, but I don't really remember that. I just remember being in school. I was terribly asthmatic, so couldn't take part in many games, and used to spend a lot of my time reading or playing snooker or getting up to mischief.

(2:49 - 3:29)

After Temple Grove, I went to Charterhouse because my maternal grandfather had been to Charterhouse. I was a gown boy at Charterhouse, and my stay there was incredibly short

because I was even worse behaved at Charterhouse, though I spent quite a lot of time in the art block there, where I did sculpture and various other things that interested me. But I left Charterhouse after about a year and a half, two years, and eventually ended up being a day boy at Cheltenham College.

(3:33 - 3:49)

My education at Cheltenham College was remarkably sparse. I remember doing O Levels. I think I did get quite a lot of O Levels, but I never sat A Levels.

(3:49 - 4:21)

I left fairly soon after my 16th birthday, so I went to Doughty's as a technical apprentice and went to Tech College to do the academic side of the apprenticeship. That didn't last a huge amount of time. I suppose I was about 18 when I decided that I wanted to get into advertising and I wanted to be a photographer.

(4:22 - 4:37)

So I bought a studio in Cheltenham. He had a Leica enlarger and a Leica camera and a studio, all of which came for £400, and I bought the lease. I used to take photographs of horse events.

(4:38 - 5:25)

I sort of muddled along doing this until I was probably into my early 20s when I answered an advertisement in the local paper saying that they were looking for somebody to work at the newly formed Central Electricity Generating Board, which was in Gloucester, photographing for their PR. And so that was fascinating. I spent time going to sites where they were building nuclear power stations like Dungeness B, and also I spent quite a lot of time up at Denorwick at the pumped electricity storage centre there, alongside doing weddings and portraiture and still doing a bit of horse work.

(5:26 - 6:00)

I was looking at these photographs and thinking about how the advertising had changed, and there was a picture of two jaguars on a hillside. And what was particularly interesting about them was that not only were there no tyre marks of how they had got them on the hillside, but also behind was an extraordinary white Gothic building. When I opened this version of the Sunday Times, it must have been an old one.

(6:00 - 6:52)

When I picked up this article, it was all about John and Christian Smith who had started a charity called the Landmark Trust some ten years previously, and also Clare Ridley, who later on became Lady Clare Percy, and also a little bit about Sonia Roth. And it talked about the Landmark Trust and about what they were doing and about the fact that they were looking after old buildings and furnishing them. This was interesting to me because when I lived at home at Wormington, I lived for some time in the stables and had spent quite a lot of time restoring the stables there and making them into a flat for me to live in, the Wormington Grange, which was the house which my great-grandmother had bought.

(6:52 - 7:02)

She'd bought it in 1919. It was a Georgian house of some 40-odd rooms. She then filled it full of the most wonderful things.

(7:02 - 7:32)

She was a great collector. In the Broadway area, you had fantastic furniture dealers, H.W. Kiel, you had Gordon Russell, you had the Guild of Craftsmen, you had all these people producing wonderful things, and she was buying them and filling Wormington Grange with fabulous things. Also great art, which she was buying from the Lefebvre Gallery in London and others, and we had whistlers and all sorts.

(7:33 - 8:07)

And so I was indoctrinated, I suppose imbued, by these wonderful things, which I appreciated without really understanding what they were and about the interiors, which were fantastic. And also it was a fantastic... It was an amazing building. So I was looking at these photographs and having seen the two jaguars on the front and wondered how they got there and seeing what I later discovered was Clyde the Castle behind and read about it.

(8:07 - 8:40)

I remember that at the end of the article, in fact, I've got a copy of the article here, I've still got one, that it said, if you want to rent one of our properties... And of course rentals were very new then too. You know, renting property as a holiday was something quite new. I mean, you might have let your relatives stay in the house that you owned in Cornwall, and they might have given you a bottle of scotch or something, but, you know, you didn't... There wasn't an active holiday-let market at that time, not that I remember.

(8:41 - 9:06)

And so it was pretty groundbreaking, not only to let them for holidays at all, but also to restore the houses in order that they could be let and that the money from the letting could keep the landmark trust going in perpetuity. The whole thing just rang a bell in me. I rang up and I said, look, this is rather difficult.

(9:07 - 9:25)

I don't want to rent one of your properties for a holiday. I want to come and work for you. And I remember speaking to a man called Group Captain Williams, who was the secretary, which was a role that would now be occupied by, I suppose, the chief executive, and he said, well, come and see me tomorrow.

(9:25 - 10:20)

So I got into my...whatever it was, Fiat, and drove to Shotsbrook and saw him, and by the close of play, I was working for them. There was very definitely a division of labour in the Smith household between the restoration of the building and the furnishing and finishing of the building. When I first started working for Joanna Chorley, it was even a while before I met Christian, and I think I first met her at Cromford, at the cottages in Cromford, when we furnished that, which was the first job that I was actually involved in with Joanna Chorley for the landmark trust.

(10:21 - 11:10)

I didn't actually meet Sir John or John until quite considerably later. He was a mysterious figure who used to disappear with Tom Dulake, who was his buildings adviser, I suppose, and they would disappear around the country looking at buildings and overseeing the work. I've seen plans where he would annotate all the original plans with red pens saying what he

wanted done, and then Tom Dulake would transmit those thoughts to the architect who might, who was almost certainly chosen by John Smith himself.

(11:10 - 11:36)

The earlier architects like John Warren, Jeb, Philip Jeb, Peter Byrd. The antique market was incredibly vibrant, mid to late 70s, and everything was selling at enormous sums, increasingly large sums, most of it to America. One thought it was never going to end.

(11:37 - 12:15)

I remember in Burford, the back streets of Burford would be full of container lorries, and they would be, furniture would be coming in from Wales and Oxford and everything and just sold to American dealers and just packed off into containers and sold. And there were antique shops crammed full of what we would now call brown furniture in every town. And John Smith said that Landmark needed to have a store and we needed to fill it full of furniture now so that we were able to furnish buildings in the future because, you know, soon there wouldn't be any left.

(12:15 - 12:52)

So Joanna was given this checkbook, the Coutts checkbook, and told to go out and buy furniture. I didn't really meet John Smith until I furnished Dean's Yard, and he was so funny about Dean's Yard because he would have a speaker telephone, the most extraordinary old-fashioned speaker telephone on his desk. And he would be buying and selling stocks and shares or doing whatever he was doing, and talking to dealers in America or dealing with some high funder somewhere else.

(12:53 - 13:09)

I mean, he was obviously incredibly busy or buying a lease or doing something. And you would go in and he would say, Hello, John, and then he would turn the speaker back on, and so I would stop speaking. And then he'd turn the speaker off and say, Carry on.

(13:10 - 13:22)

And then when I carried on, he'd turn the speaker back on again. So the implication was that he could assimilate two conversations at once. It was the most extraordinary experience.

(13:22 - 13:38)

And he used to get De La Rue to print pound notes but without anything on them so he could write notes on them because then he'd fit it exactly in his wallet. And he had three pens. He had a red pen, a green pen, and a black pen in his pocket.

(13:40 - 14:38)

And depending on whether what you said was something that he wanted to remember or whether it wanted to go into his diaries or whatever wanted to happen to it, he wrote it in various colours of pen depending on what the destination of the note was. And he would then tuck it back into his wallet and next time you went to see him, he would have had a summary of what he'd discussed with you typed up. So one day he had this brilliant idea that we were going to keep all the furniture in old railway carriages, and it took at least three years to get them off the notes because I'd told him day one it was the most stupid... Well, I hadn't told him it was a stupid idea, but I'd said, you know, as tamphly as I could do

that there was a guy who was barely 30 against this man with the extraordinary intellect and talent that I'd never heard such a stupid idea.

(14:39 - 14:53)

Well, I mean, we were expanding at the most horrendous rate. I mean, in the early 70s, there were 15, were there, 15 landmarks? By the time I left, there was over 200. You know, we were doing six or more a year.

(14:54 - 15:10)

You know, we were turning, really turning them out. I had a massive workforce. Landmark was a very amateurish organisation having to grow up in one big hurry, really, because it was suddenly becoming quite a serious affair.

(15:12 - 15:49)

OGC, which was the old garden cottage of Shottersbrook, was a house that I think had been converted some time previously for John's... It must have been his aunt, I think. OGC, which was called Old Garden Cottage, and it was kind of a little dower house, a dower cottage, if you like, for the lady who had lived in the big house, I think would be polite. And he had an office there, a big office there, and he had a wonderful table there, which was made out of the ship's timbers, which had got cannons and everything carved into it.

(15:49 - 16:02)

And I think it might have been made from the timbers of one of Nelson's ships of the line or whatever. So that was in the middle of the room. He had chairs around it, and he used to... He had a big desk where he would look at plans, and then he would have meetings.

(16:03 - 16:21)

He had the Monday morning meeting they used to have, of course, which I was never invited. And they would all sit round and decide what was going to happen or what was going to be done or what building they were interested in and, you know, how they were going to run it. I mean, it was all, it was all hands to the pumps, you know.

(16:21 - 16:45)

There was nobody there who couldn't actually do something useful, preferably with their hands. And even in those days, Christian was printing these wonderful hand-blocked curtains in the stable block at Shottersbrook, which were designed by Joan Packer, who was a very, very talented artist but was going blind. And she drew the blocks.

(16:45 - 17:14)

So Christian would go to a building and would see something that she thought was interesting. Maybe it was a bit of carving or a date or an owl or a rose, a briar rose. She would photograph it, and then Joan Packer would do a drawing of whatever it was for her design, which would then be transferred into a hand-blocked print.

(17:14 - 17:34)

And then Christian would print every single curtain herself, hand-blocked. And then they were made up by Valerie Singleton, who also lived in one of the cottages adjoining the garages at the coach house at Shottersbrook. And then Christian would hang them.

(17:34 - 17:50)

But, you know, they invariably never fitted because we measured them a long time before they'd put the walls in or before they'd plastered them or whatever. And so when you got there, there was always some reason why they were too short or too long or too wide. It was just always a nightmare.

(17:51 - 18:20)

I think it was just flying by the seat of our pants as to whether we could get the properties together at all. So as the furniture stock increased with Joanna, I suggested that we took on the stables at Wormington. So I was able to have workshops at Wormington and we used to bring the furniture back and I used to go and pick it up from sale rooms for her and bring it back.

(18:20 - 18:30)

And she wasn't buying for anywhere specific. She was just buying because she liked it. We were just doing the best we could to furnish the properties.

(18:31 - 19:00)

I remember we did the Swiss cottage in Ensley, on the Ensley Estate, which had been a fishing club. And Ensley House, which had been built by Geoffrey Wyattville with a landscape by Repton, had got outlying cottages all built for the Duchess of Bedford, Duchess Georgina of the Duchess of Bedford. And there was a Swiss cottage built up on the hill and there was a pond cottage in the Dairydale and we did the Swiss cottage first.

(19:01 - 19:36)

Oddly enough, I later read, having read lots of books, that it was where Georgina had an affair with Edward Lancia. And as a by-the-by, it was always suspected that her eighth, I think, son was in fact fathered by Lancia, not by the Duke of Bedford. And I was one day, some 20, 30 years later, at an antique fair and I saw the picture and I picked it up and looked at it.

(19:36 - 19:58)

It said, dedicated to His Grace the Duke of Bedford by Edward Lancia. And I looked at it and it was a little boy standing by a door. I knew that that was the eighth son standing outside the door of Swiss cottage, because I recognised the door.

(19:59 - 20:36)

And so I bought it and it's in Swiss cottage. I was driving to a pond cottage and I saw a skip outside the stable block where Polizzi had been clearing the stable block to make extra bedrooms for Ensley House Hotel and I saw, all my life I'd been a skip diver and I saw this bit of furniture sticking out of the skip and I thought, I know what that is. And I went and got it out of the skip and there at the bottom was the other one and they were the two corner cupboards out of the Swiss cottage.

(20:37 - 21:06)

And I took them up and you could just see a silhouette of where the top of them had been fitted into the cornice and they did indeed fit exactly there. And it just rang a bell that there was a silhouette in the corner of this thing and I just knew exactly what they were. And of course, you know, they were pretty useless and somebody at some stage would have

thought, I don't know what these smelly things are doing in the corner of this room and taken them down and chucked them in the stables of the big house.

(21:06 - 21:32)

But it's wonderful when something like that finds a home and goes back to where it was. When I first started, John Smith had a very... just had an idea of what he wanted to go into a room and he said, I want a pot cupboard with a light on for each person who sleeps in the room. They must switch from the lamp, not from the door.

(21:33 - 22:12)

There must be another light that switches from the door so that you don't get confused the next day about what is on and off. You must have a chest of drawers, a blanket box maybe to put your extra bedding in, a wardrobe or some hooks on the wall, a desk for me to write letters at, a chair, preferably with arms on but I can sit in the corner and read a book in if I want to quietly on my own, and another chair to sit to the desk on, and then some nice old tatty old rugs to make it look homely. He had very fixed ideas about how he wanted it to be and I've always borne that in mind.

(22:13 - 22:30)

I just think because he used to write copious notes, there were always pictures of people writing at writing tables. They were from a generation where they wrote letters and they were very precious. You bring yourself to the building.

(22:30 - 22:47)

Try not to impose a decorative aesthetic on that building. There was very much a feeling of it being just old school, I suppose. But also, you know, they were... It had to be comfortable.

(22:48 - 22:57)

It had to be a pleasant place to stay. That was a great saying of his, it has to be a pleasant place to be. It just had to be comfortable.

(22:57 - 23:18)

Comfortable and pleasant. As comfortable as its nature allows. And I think what he meant by that was that he wouldn't compromise the historic integrity of a building to end up with something that was comfortable.

(23:18 - 23:31)

You know, all the bars had to be six foot long so you could lie out in a bar. To start with, we used to have plastic shower fittings, which, of course, sprayed everywhere. And they went rock hard when they got in time, and, you know, were hopeless.

(23:32 - 23:41)

But, you know, you certainly... In those days, you certainly didn't shower. That was something you did on the consulate. There was a sense that you were able to read the room.

(23:42 - 24:03)

The kitchen was something that was carefully assimilated into the room rather than being, you know, a neon flashing kitchen that you notice. It was a kitchen for cooking in. And, you know, we had lists of everything you wanted to have.

(24:03 - 24:22)

You know, all right, they had a garlic crusher and a pair of scissors and a whatever and a tea strainer. Everything you wanted, it was on the list. There were just a lot of things that you knew you were going to get in every single landmark that just identified it as being a landmark.

(24:22 - 24:29)

It was a sort of... It was a stamp. It was a corporate identity. It was a hallmark that that was a landmark.

(24:30 - 24:43)

And that was something that I guarded very fiercely. And there were various markers, if you like, which I hope will persevere. I'm not sure that they will.

(24:44 - 25:13)

But, like the Hessian lampshades, which a lot of people hate, but they do... What you need to be able to do is you need to be able to have a stock of lampshades which will do every property. You cannot have too many different makes because you have to be able to carry them around with you to replace them because, inevitably, people, they knock the lamps over and damage them, and you need to be able to replace them. And if you start replacing them with different makes, it's very difficult.

(25:13 - 25:37)

So I've been, you know, I've been absolutely rigid in the way that I've thought about these Hessian lampshades. There isn't any room for egos in it. You've just got to make it pragmatic, sensible, boring, easy to maintain, great quality, solid, invisible, anonymous things.

(25:39 - 25:49)

We were never pretending to be anything other than what we were. And that certainly... I mean, that goes right back to the beginning. That's what John Smith was all about.

(25:49 - 26:07)

That was, you know, as comfortable as the nature of the building allows. If something is mildly inconvenient, it is only so for a week. I think a good example is Swarkestone Pavilion, you know, which was on the cover of a Rolling Stones album.

(26:07 - 26:20)

And you've got four corner pavilions. Four corner towers. And one of them... And basically one room at first floor level with a sort of loggia downstairs.

(26:21 - 26:55)

And the only way you could get to a bathroom without compromising the building so intolerably that it would have been unthinkable would be to go up in... ..up to the attic, up to the top floor, to walk across the leads outside to the bathroom, which is in a diametrically

opposite tower to the one you came up in. So you have to walk outside to go to the loo, across the leads. And yet I think it's fantastic, you know, because it's given the building a use.

(26:56 - 27:10)

And the building has not been altered in any way from what it was. And it looks exactly like it would have looked when they saw it in the 17th century or whatever it was. It is a visit.

(27:11 - 27:19)

It's a transitory visit when you will understand the building. You've got all the books that you want. You've got the history.

(27:20 - 27:31)

You've got everything about it. I can't remember how John put it, but it was very, very clever. The early introductions to Landmarks, which were written by John, that absolutely fantastic.

(27:33 - 28:01)

He talks about just imagine, you know, it's your place for a week. At the time, Wormington, which was my family home, was the stable block and what I used to call the orangery was in full operation. We had a workshop, which was in the orangery, which was fully kitted out.

(28:02 - 28:33)

And we had at least three cabinetmakers working there full-time, and one man who did the colouring. I then had at least a couple of full-time assistants working up in the stables themselves. We were designing and making the kitchen, so Mark would come up to my office, which was on the first floor of the stable block, looking out over his workshop.

(28:34 - 28:48)

And we would design the kitchen together. He was a brilliant... Mark Sminton was brilliant on CAD. He was an astonishingly able cabinetmaker and had been trained at Gordon Russell back in the day.

(28:49 - 29:28)

So we used to have quite interesting, I suppose is the word, discussions about how the kitchen was going to work and he would put it on CAD and I would stand behind saying, I want this here, I want that there. Let's make it out of ash, let's make it out of oak, let's put a top on it. And all that kind of thing, bearing in mind the consideration, which was always there and always in the back of my mind, that the building on which we were working was a holiday property and that not everybody who stayed in it would appreciate or take care of what we had provided.

(29:29 - 29:48)

So we were doing the very best we could to make everything, in the words of John Smith, camper-proof, which meant that we were almost being anti-designers. We never put any fripperies in. It just had to be solid and functional.

(29:48 - 30:09)

If you walk into a landmark and the first thing you notice is the furniture, then I've done the job wrong. You should notice the building. So the most important thing is the building and the furniture should be cleverly chosen so that it sits comfortably within the building without drawing attention to itself.

(30:10 - 30:34)

We used to think very strongly that when I walked away from a property, that was going to be okay for at least 10 years. So, you know, because we were so busy then and we were doing so many buildings every year that you didn't have the luxury of being able to keep going back. You went in, you did it, you left, and you got on with the next one.

(30:35 - 31:00)

So you had to be incredibly organised. So although I was using Heal's furniture throughout and buying it and stripping it and bleaching it and getting it whatever colour we wanted to and doing this and that, inevitably there were one or two bedrooms that we hadn't kitted up. But I would always have that in the back of my mind whenever I was at an antique fair or I was at Exeter or something.

(31:01 - 31:19)

And every so often you'd think, ah, that's it, that's going to be perfect for the common room or whatever it is at Goddard's. When we were passing on a Friday, you know, on the way to another property, we would probably swap them over. I used to travel all over the country.

(31:19 - 31:46)

I loved it. This was what I did. I'm a white van man.

I've got a Mercedes Sprinter. And wherever I was going, you know, I would put in the back a load of rugs, some shades, a couple of tripod tables, an odd couple of chairs, this, that and the other. And if I went to a building, you know, I would give it a bit of a spruce up, give it a bit of a, you know, wash its face a bit and make it look better.

(31:46 - 32:16)

And then I would travel home because changeover was between 10 and 4. So what you'd do is you'd leave home at, say, 5 o'clock in the morning, get up to Scotland or down to Penzance or wherever you were going, and then do what you had to do. And then you would buy your way home and you would stop at all the antique dealers en route on the way home and fill the van up again. And that was the exciting time.

(32:16 - 32:26)

Now the business has changed fantastically. There were three or four dealers I used to go to in Glasgow. There was a couple of dealers I go to in Dumfries.

(32:27 - 32:42)

There was a guy just outside Newcastle. And I used to go to people who were what you would call trade calls because I wasn't looking to buy at retail prices. I was looking to buy it as cheaply as possible.

(32:42 - 33:07)

And hopefully I was looking to buy something that they hadn't a clue what it was in the first place, which is even better. And there were other people who used to send me photographs when we started to use mobile phones, or they'd bring you up. And then there was a few local auctions which I went to, but I much preferred going to antique fairs like Newark and Ardingly and Kempton, all of which were sort of on the way to somewhere else.

(33:08 - 33:32)

So I used to dovetail quite a lot. You know, if you went to Newark, you might go and have a look at the Chateau or go via Lincoln and have a look at the House of Correction. I just did the best that I could, as cheaply as I could, and I always furnished a house to please myself because if you're happy, you've at least got one happy person.

(33:33 - 33:53)

So I used to, you know, I used to furnish everything as if it was mine and as if I was going to, you know, as if I was going to live there. My whole world is steeped in arts and crafts. My great-grandmother had an arts and crafts house built in the turn of the 19th, 20th century.

(33:53 - 34:23)

She had the Barnsleys do the Wormington Church when she paid to have Wormington Church completely refurbished in the 20s, and it's the most wonderful arts and crafts church. So, and then, you know, next door you've got Gordon Russell and you've got the Guild of Handicraft in Chippen Camden. I mean, if you were ever going to live anywhere where the arts and crafts, you know, seeps into every pore, then it would be here near Broadway.

(34:24 - 34:40)

To condense it into a thought, it is the simplicity of design, but of course it isn't simple at all. It's just beautifully designed and it looks simple, but it is anything but. It is a choice of materials.

(34:40 - 35:16)

It is the skill of the craftsman, and it is the fact that it is not saying anything other than the fact that I am an unbelievably useful piece of furniture which will give you pleasure to look at. I usually start with something that gives me a theme, a sort of rhythm that I can follow. I mean, there is something extraordinary about Landmark that makes you utterly committed to it, and if you've got it in your DNA, you just can't get rid.

(35:16 - 35:33)

It's just a niggling, it's just a niggling saw, which is, it's difficult to express sometimes. At first we all got infected with the original enthusiasm for it all. I mean, it was unbelievably exciting.

(35:34 - 35:56)

When I used to go and see John Smith in Dean's Yard, he would always say to me, are you having fun? He thought that absolutely everything should be fun. If you were having fun, you were doing a good job. Like at the villa, I had 17 people working for me at the villa when we were finishing the villa, and I would go down into town and I would buy all this food and this wine.

(35:56 - 36:17)

I took on a chef, and it was just, you know, it was fun. Everything about it was just utterly creative, and there was this just feeling that you were doing great things and that people were going to enjoy them. For me, all these jobs would be manna from heaven because they're just right up my street, and I've loved every minute of it.

(36:23 - 36:35)

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. To hear more stories like this, head to landmarktrust.org.uk forward slash podcasts.