

Caroline: Looking after the books on a windswept Island like Lundy provides its own particular challenges. Luckily, Landmark has a librarian for Lundy, who is more than up to the job. He is Michael Williams, who has known Lundy all his life and is now Secretary of the Lundy Field Society. Last year, Michael also wrote a guide to Lundy to mark 50 years of Landmarks care of the island and its buildings. Here I chat to Michael about the challenges and delights of caring for the books on the island.

Hi, Michael.

Michael: Hello.

Caroline: I can see you look as though you've been Zoomed into the Marisco Tavern.

Michael: Yes, yeah. So I'm back at the Marisco Tavern virtually.

Caroline: It's your kind of spiritual home, I guess.

Michael: Yes, yes. I've been presenting a number of Lundy webinars from here over the lockdown period, so I've become quite accustomed to sitting in a tavern virtually although, I'm sitting in my flat in Cambridge at the moment.

Caroline: Sadly, no pint of beer, but anyway. I'd like to just have a chit chat about the challenges and delights of being Landmarks Librarian for Lundy, which you have been for a few years now. And I suppose I wanted to ask you first about the legacy of previous Lundy Librarians because of course, you inherited the libraries on Lundy, when you when you joined us as our Librarian

Michael: Yes, so I haven't been Lundy librarian for actually that long. I started in early 2019. So I've only been Lundy's Librarian for about 18 months. I took over from Peter Rothwell who'd been doing it for a number of years and then prior to that he'd worked closely with Myrtle Turnstrum who is a well-known Lundy author who's written very many books about Lundy. Indeed, you will find quite a number of Myrtle's books and Peter's books on the shelves, in the properties in each of the libraries, and also in the Marisco Tavern, where there's a collection of Lundy books and natural history books as well. So yeah, they'd they worked very, very hard over a number of years. And I think before that nobody had any specific responsibility for the Lundy libraries, and so they were able to put together a really fascinating collection of books for each property and bring the libraries up to a standard where there were relevant books about the buildings because I think if you're staying in the castle on Lundy then you want to read about castles and how the Bristol Channel was defended during the life of such a building. And Lighthouses in the Old Light, as such. So quite an interesting and varied collection of books.

Caroline: Yes, because it was quite a pirate's lair wasn't it, Lundy through the ages?

Michael: Absolutely. And yes, so pirates smuggling as well. So we have books about pirates and smuggling. And actually pirates are quite a useful broad topic because they can actually be quite interesting to read broad range of ages, as well as the sort of guidebooks and histories of piracy that you might expect to read, you can also have quite a number of fun children's books

Caroline: It is, it's brilliant. And in a way Lundy is so rich in its wildlife and its natural history, that for sure, I know how fantastic the books are in that respect. But it's also constantly surprising to me how much history can be fitted on to this few square miles of granite sticking out of the Bristol Channel.

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And you know, the weather comes in from time to time, doesn't it, let's say. So, in fact having a really good book to be able to curl up with while, the wind and the gales and the rain howling outside can be a really nice, cosy thing to do on the island. And the books are possibly almost more as important if not more important on Lundy as they are on the mainland. But not always easy to get books across I imagine, because you only go once a year, don't you?

Michael: Yes, so as Lundy Librarian I get to spend about a week a year on the island and I need to get round all 23 properties while I'm there. Now some of those properties I can do on a changeover day, to check the library, add any books, take anything away, do the inventory. Sometimes there might be a property that's empty for a couple of days, that's quite unusual during the main season on Lundy. So that opportunity doesn't often arise and that gives a little bit of flexibility. But then the rest of the time I have to go round when people are staying in the properties which is a quite unusual approach for Landmark Librarians because normally it's done on a changeover day. Lundy doesn't present the scope to do that so...

Caroline: And how do you physically carry the books around? I mean, I always kind of imagine you stomping around with a rucksack and hiking boots on is that is that how it goes?

Michael: That's roughly speaking how it works. Yes, so fortunately, the Lundy properties are grouped together quite nicely, but of course, sometimes I get there and people are not in, properties are locked, I have to go back. So, quite a lot of it involves repeat journeys.

Caroline: I suspect probably there are some mainland Landmark Librarians who probably envy you being able to have a kind of properly immersive hit. Of doing your properties all at once, all within the week. It must be it must be nice to spend a whole week thinking about books on Lundy.

Michael: So yes, definitely it is because you can really throw yourself into it. And it also presents great opportunities from a practical point of view in that sometimes you'll find that books have migrated between properties, particularly properties which are quite close together. So you can do quite a lot of sorting out. But also you might find that you'll put something new into a property and decide to take something else out. And if you've got that in your bag and you go to another property and find that something's perhaps missing, you can sometimes rotate books around different properties. So the great thing about Lundy of course is that there is a common theme of the island and its natural history and its history, which means that there is a good collection of material that could quite comfortably sit in any property on the island as long as it's got a connection to the island, then it doesn't matter which building it's sitting in because...

Caroline: You have tiny bookcases don't you so it must be difficult to...

Michael: Yes, so that's one of the big challenges with Lundy is the very, very variant size and number of bookcases, a huge variation in the bookcases that we have. So in the small properties, some of them don't actually even have a bookcase. The books are in a cupboard or a small cabinet that might have a lamp sitting on the top of it. And so particularly the Radio Room, which is one of the one person properties on the island, the living space has a bed and chest of drawers and a comfy chair and a table in it. And all of the books are secreted into the bedside table. So that becomes quite challenging to curate a collection in that library because you're so, so limited on space. There must be perhaps only 15 or 20 books in that property, which is a challenge in itself because for a one - person property, you're actually more likely to sit there and read.

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Caroline: Do you manage to put relevant novels in as well, relevant fiction?

Michael: Yes, so fiction for Lundy on one hand is really easy because so many people have written items of fiction about Lundy. But on the other hand, there is so much to choose from it is quite difficult to select. And then also you're trying to find the right balance with relevant historical books. So you want to provide people with an opportunity to pick up a book that they may have read in their childhood or something like that and think, 'Oh, I remember reading Tarka the Otter', I suppose is a good example or something about Lorna Doone because you're not far from Exmoor. Or the famous book Westwood Ho!, from which the place in North Devon took its name, where the Spanish galleon was wrecked on Shutter Rocks, which is on the southwest corner of Lundy. I mean, you could quite happily put a copy of Westwood Ho! in every property and provide that really strong link with the island with a with a really traditional Victorian novel. But that said, I don't know whether you've actually read Westwood Ho! but I've had to go reading it on a number of occasions and it's very, very hard work?

Caroline: Yes, it's quite heavy going. But yes, it's funny, fiction - good fiction - is often one of the biggest challenges I think.

Michael: Yes, and I find that a real challenge. I find fiction real challenge particularly for the younger audience. I mean, for an adult audience, it can be much easier. For young children, you might find that you want to put in some picture books or some storybooks that are related to not necessarily to Lundy specifically, but about the sea or islands or going on holiday. But I find that one area where I really struggle to find good fiction that sits well, in Lundy properties, is teenage fiction.

Caroline: And equally they may be reading adult fiction by then. It's a mixture, isn't it? Yes. But anyway, I mean, as I hope all Landmarkers know we're always very happy and eager to receive suggestions for books to go into our buildings.

Michael: Very much so, especially on the fiction front.

Caroline: Exactly, particularly on the fiction front. And Michael, also, I feel I have to ask you about the contrast of trudging around Lundy with a rucksack on your back full of books and the day job, because not only do you live in Cambridge, but your day job is actually associated with a very different kind of library, isn't it?

Michael: Yes, so my day job, I'm Head of Collections Development and Management at Cambridge University Library, responsible for the development of and the ongoing management of our very significant print collections. We have between 9 and 10 million print books. Also management of our electronic collections. So my day job is managing library collections in the widest sense of the term, for very large library. And then when I turn my thoughts to Lundy, it rather takes me back to my roots, I think. So I think back to the start of my library career, where I started as a graduate trainee at a college library in Oxford. And it's actually been really fascinating to take a step away from my role in Cambridge and go back to the real sort of roots of my career and of librarianship where you're thinking about a very small collection, and trying to focus your thinking on how are you going to curate these shelves with a very limited amount of space. Of course, the great advantage that I have in my day job is that we have an enormous library building and we have enormous collections, and we have plenty of space to store them. That is not the case on Lundy, as we were saying earlier on, and every book that's on the shelf has to justify being there.

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Caroline: Well, I think we're very lucky to have you.

Michael: It's been great because when I've been looking for new books, I spend a lot of my time going around charity shops and second hand book shops. So I mean, I would never previously have visited the children's book section in a charity shop, whereas now I rifle through them and I've come up with some real treasures and some really great ideas. Amazing how many books there are out there about seabirds, and particularly puffins as well which of course, Lundy is ubiquitously associated with the puffin. So I've been really rewarding to wander around charity book shops and second hand book shops and really take a completely different eye on what I'd be looking for to what I would previously be looking for.

Caroline: And you can't beat a good Puffin.

Michael: No!