

Intro: Our team of in-house surveyors look after the maintenance of our buildings to keep them in good order. They also get drafted in as Project Managers to oversee our restoration and conservation projects. These complex and sometimes testing projects involve a large team of people and the Project Manager keeps this cohort of experts in tune for the months and years that it can take to save one of our historic buildings. Inevitably they have many fond memories of these remarkable projects, and here Alastair Dick Cleland and Richard Burton reminisce about some of their favourite buildings.

Alastair: So Richard, good morning.

Richard: Good morning, you alright?

Alastair: We thought we'd have a chat about some memorable moments in Landmarks restoration of various projects.

Richard: Yes, absolutely. I mean, are both of us have covered quite a few years between us.

Alastair: I'm losing count. I think I'm nearly up to 25 or...

Richard: Twice as much as me then. I was checking the other day and I've done 12 years in October, so quite a lot.

Alastair: That's pretty good. So between us we tackled a very broad range of projects. And a favourite of mine is always my old chestnut Dolbelydr. I think because it happened relatively early in my Landmark career. And I remember there was a very nice, local Conservation Officer. A chap called Phil Everell at Denbighshire, who was really sort of quite persistent in a way that I think probably a good Conservation Officer looking to tackle probably his most at risk historic building, should be. And he kept on saying that he thought only Landmark would be mad enough to take this building on and would we have another look at it. Because I think we had considered it before I joined. And I always tell a story about when I first went to see it and it was absolutely pouring stair rods, and I was with my wife and children, all of whom refused to get out of the car. I was sent off on my own across several fields because the one thing about the house it had no access. It used to be from the river, didn't it. Across the river from the other side. And anyway, eventually I got down to this valley bottom and there was this sort of incredibly sad house with no roof at all. I mean, literally no roof. Not any of it.

Richard: Wasn't that a tree growing out of it as well at one point?

Alasdair: A huge sycamore. You couldn't put your arms around it, it was so big growing out of it. And you might easily I think, sort of dismissed it as well beyond restoration. But actually, there were some lovely things about it, including, astonishingly, it seemed to have retained almost all its original oak mullion and transom windows. They'd never been modernised. It hadn't sort of had sash windows in the 18th century or PVC ones in the 20th century. So yeah, that was that was a real treat. And I'm glad with a bit of persuasion, I think eventually the trustees did say 'Yes'.

Richard: To me, that's one of my favourite Landmarks as well. And it's one I looked after as a, for maintenance purposes and whenever you turn up on that site, you come over the hill and down into

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the valley there and you see that white house in the bottom of the valley there. I mean, it's just glorious, is exactly what Landmark is here for.

Alastair: It's a magical setting. And I remember we had Andrew Thomas as our architect for that project. And in best sort of conservation practice he was very keen that we retained as much of the original timbers as we could. Because although it's completely stone on the outside, inside, of course it's all timber there are no masonry partitions. And virtually everything was still in there, although it looked like a pile of spilkins on the floor. And anyway, he measured and he drew and it was all carefully recorded and numbered. And if memory serves me right, it all went off to Scotland, amazingly. I think Carpenter, Oak and Woodland were the specialist subcontractor for the framing and they had a base up in Scotland. So it all went up there and some various hairy bearded carpenters, set too over the next many months and pieced the whole thing together. And there was there was that great moment wasn't there when it all came back on site and the roof trusses which have been sort of pre-assembled, sorry, were reassembled on site but then craned into position. And I always remember talking to one of the carpenters there about, you know what it'd been like working on a project like this. And the degree of trouble we were going to, to retain the timbers, and he absolutely agreed, he said on a lot of jobs like that, that for other clients, they would simply would have measured all the timbers and remade it all in new and all the old timbers would have gone on the bonfire. But I do think it makes a difference to how that house feels inside.

Richard: Absolutely. I mean, it's got an atmosphere, hasn't it? You can feel the age of the building as you walk in to it.

Alastair: Exactly. It feels like a repaired old building, not a new building.

Richard: Absolutely. You can go and buy an oak framed building off the shelf if you want to. But yeah, that one is just, it's just astonishing, it's amazing. So, that's perhaps one of your earliest projects. One of my earliest memories of coming to work with Landmark was, you invited me out to Astley, to look at that project just as it started. And we arrived on site, and there was a big crane there, and they were ripping the building apart. They were pulling it down. And I didn't understand. I had just joined left one conservation organization to join another, thinking I was going to be repairing restoring historic buildings and now they were pulling it down. But because I didn't have the history of what had gone on at Astley and I didn't understand why you were taking a big chunk of it down. And in the end, it all makes sense then that it allowed and facilitated the rest of the buildings.

Alastair: Exactly. It really was, I think of all the buildings I've had the pleasure and privilege of visiting on Landmark business over the years, I think Astley is probably the most dangerous building in terms of its condition. Because you'll remember with that one we had an initial sort of go at rescuing it when it was going to be funded through a big property development in the village which didn't get planning permission. So that all came to nothing, but we'd been involved then and a lot of scaffolding have been put round the building to really to access it and survey it. And when we came back again, which must have been what, 10 years or so later, the building was all leaning on the scaffolding. There wasn't a scaffolder in the land that wanted anything to do with it, man.

Richard: I'm not surprised.



Alastair: But yes, we did have to take down a substantial amount but we definitely kept the oldest and the most interesting parts of the building. And it was that was a fascinating process, working with a firm of architects who were not conservation architects, so hadn't particularly work with historic buildings before. Very different sort of approach because obviously, we talk sort of slightly different languages.

Richard: Definitely, yeah. They're looking more...they were certainly looking more at the aesthetic of the building, whereas we're looking more at the restoration, conservation.

Alastair: Exactly. But they were very good at adapting their plans, because there were bits of the building which, initially, we had had listed building consent to take down, but as things turned out, we were able to sort of keep more than we had expected. And by doing so, they had to adapt their designs. Because if I remember the staircase was going to be almost external to the building, but by keeping more of the originals – the vice tower or stair tower, they moved the stairs inside again.

Richard: But it's interesting when we do these projects, what we find on site as well sometimes. I mean, my two favourite projects are the Welsh ones that I've done most recently which is Coed y Bleiddiau and Llwyn Celyn. Yeah, I mean Coed y Bleiddiau, modest little railway cottage, Victorian railway cottage, but you realise how much slate was important in North Wales in the Ffestiniog area and the slate quarries up there. Everything, everything was made from slate. So you had fence posts, roofing slate, all the hips were manufactured from a hip roll- slate rolls that was turned or carbon cut to fit the hips. But also finding them reusing slate in the building as well. Because the railway track had been realigned at different times, the mile posts or the quarter mile posts, all had to come out and be relocated because they, they were incorrect. Then reused them as lintels and things within the building. We found, I think we've probably found two within Coed y Bleiddiau while we're working there. One's gone off to the museum at the railway, and the other one is still in situ in the building.

Alastair: No, they didn't waste anything, did they? I mean, it's hard work working stone or slate and if someone's already done it for you, you know, thank you very much.

Richard: It's the same I suppose the walls because they a lot of the walls have got the sleeper stones off the railway track embedded in them. So you where you put the...

Alastair: ... the fixings for the track?

Richard: Where they'd ripped the track up they'd taken them up and put them into the walls of the cottage so that those are dotted around the place as well.

Alastair: And they were originally separate, is that right? They didn't link across the left, right? So in time they must have tended to sort of wander apart.

Richard: I presume that that's what they found as they were bringing more slate up and down hill or down the hill, the track was beginning to spread.

Alastair: And what was it like doing it all by train?

Richard: Nightmare! It was fine for me. I don't mind walking up there. But I know the contractor was getting on the train, he loading the train between four and five o'clock in the morning, in the yard. Or even doing it the night before. So if you could be in the yard the following morning, at that sort of

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time, take the train up, offload everything and send it back down before the service train started working and the line was open again for visitors. So he was amazing. And he was absolutely shattered by the time he'd finish that project. But it was also quite interesting that it focuses the mind as well. You've got to do things by a certain time because the train will be there or it won't be there. You can't mess around. The same applies when we were furnishing it really, that John had to be on the platform at a given time to load the train and take all the furniture up there and get it offloaded. So it was interesting and through all sort of weathers as well.

Alastair: Absolutely yes. I mean as we're discussing you know, we both have an enthusiasm for Welsh buildings. And I've been going to Wales most of my life and I remember we had a surveyors meeting, site meeting, visit to Coed y Bleiddiau and I've never been so bitten by mosquitoes...

Richard: Oh god it was awful that day!

Alastair: It's not something I associate...or was it midges, or whatever.

Richard: Whatever, they were biting though!

Alastair: It felt like mosquitoes!

Richard: It happened that day but it never didn't happen again. All the time we worked on that project.

Alastair: It's not something you normally get in Wales at all.

Richard: One of those funny things. But talking about things found, I mean, Llwyn Celyn of course. Great project, and that one continued to reveal right up to the last month of the project there. You and I were on site early on when we found the fireplace and the bread oven.

Alastair: Yes. That was fun. Peeling back all those layers of history.

Richard: And finding that fireplace at the back there. And that was right at the beginning before we even really started the construction work and even got a contractor lined up for it. But then right at the other end of the contract, almost finished, and they're just doing some plastering in what became the dining room to reveal that arch in the wall that we think led to the staircase, which probably fed the, the solar wing. We've never been able to prove that, one way or the other. But just the project continued to reveal all the way through.

Alastair: And Llwyn Celyn of course, wasn't just one building you had to restore, you had dozens of them.

Richard: Well we had the whole site to do, what with the threshing barn and the drying shed, cowshed, beast house... Yeah, the whole lot.

Alastair: Yeah, it's a real complex. I've always had a weakness for stone tile roofs and I think the ones at Llwyn Celyn are just a triumph. And one of the nice things of course is that some of those slates were new.

Richard: Oh, they were. Yes, we managed to find a local guy that was still quarrying and splitting and dressing those stone tiles individually and to watch him do that is, it's just such a time consuming process and you understand why they're so expensive. Stand in the yard with a pile of stone with

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what was essentially a steel girder buried in the ground up to sort of about waist height I suppose and he uses that as his anvil. Then dresses the stone over the top of it hacking off the edges and putting the bevel edges on it. And then drilling holes in it as well. But yeah, handling tiles from six or eight inches long to four or five inches wide up to the beast. So paving slabs, 30 inches square or thereabouts. A skill.

Alastair: It's lovely to be able to keep those craft skills and materials alive and still being used. And in fact, you saying about the sort of size of the stones, it reminds me a bit of Winsford Cottage Hospital and some of the enormous Delabole slates on that roof. I mean, some of them were nearly three feet across weren't they.

Richard: Yeah, they were long and not so deep. But again, what a beautiful roof.

Alastair: Hopefully, keep our feet dry for years to come. Not the sort of thing we want to do too often, replacing roofs in our in our lifetime.

Richard: No, one would hope for 200 years at least on those two roads.

Alastair: Well, well done.