

Intro: Landmark's six regional property managers are the backbone that holds together our holiday letting activity. They each look after more than 20 buildings, organising the housekeeping teams, maintaining standards and overseeing minor maintenance works. It's a busy and demanding job calling for great dedication for the benefit of everyone who stays in a Landmark. Marilyn Donuhue looks after Landmark's South region and Cy Neil is in charge of Scotland and the North of England properties. They have almost 50 years of experience between them; here they take time out to reflect on their role and how things have changed over the years.

Marilyn: Do you remember your recruitment at Collegehill?

Cy: Well, you should remember it well Marilyn...So for all those people, you know, it's Marilyn's fault that I'm here. No, I do remember coming to Collegehill House. And Edinburgh, one of the Rosslyn properties, and that was obviously was my first visit to a Landmark. Obviously being me, I did my homework before I came and I read up on the properties I'd be taking over. Again, going back to the good old days, Marilyn, I had six properties.

Marilyn: Yeah, it was six or seven wasn't it?

Cy: Yeah, just central Scotland, always in a nice commute of my house, and that's exactly what I was looking for. I had worked in a local authority perspective, four and a half years, and I was looking for a nice part time job and that's what you gave me...

Marilyn: To start with –

Cy: Yeah – [both chuckle] – lovely...

Marilyn: My first experience of Landmark, I was with my young family at the time, we had our first Landmark stay at Danescombe Mine in Cornwall. And in the back of the little A5 handbook at the time it asked for volunteers. And even though I was five months pregnant with my with my last son, I thought 'this sounds interesting!' So I wrote off and had a very polite letter back from Sheila Glover to say that they would be in touch, so I didn't hear any more. And then in 1988, I had a letter to say that as Shottesbrooke could no longer manage everything out in the field from Shottesbrooke, they were going to recruit various people out in the field and would I be interested in one of the roles... And it was called, the role them was called a Local Secretary. So I thought this sounds interesting, you know, very part-time. So, anyway, I applied and I was one of, believe it or not 227 applicants at the time. And I was very fortunate - I had my interview in The Library and was very fortunate to be offered the post. So I started in September 1988 with five buildings, and four of those I've still got in my region, which is rather nice, four of those original five. The Library being the one where I was interviewed, but I no longer manage.

Cy: Yeah, thirty two years later Marilyn and how many buildings have you got now?

Marilyn: 27 over eight counties...

Cy: Yeah, that was the same - after I had my nice eight wee properties, after a while this woman called Marilyn Donohue came in and said: "I wonder Cy, would you possibly look after the Saddell Estate, just a short time?"

Marilyn: Yeah, just to help out –

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Cy: Yeah, I didn't realise that the Saddell Estate was what, three and a half hours on a good day, I mean from my house. Got in the car, got to Saddell and as Marilyn had promised me, I mean I just fell in love with the place, I mean it's absolutely beautiful. The road then to Kintyre and then when you get into Saddell Estate, it is like it's own wee magical village and I mean, eventually they told me it had a third of the bed spaces in the whole of Scotland you know, ranging from obviously the Castle to the big house to wee Cul-na-Shee at the corner.

Marilyn: But I knew that you would fall in love with it. You see, that was my tactics and that you would keep them after.

Cy: So, 12 years later, I still look after the Saddell Estate and of course over the years southern Scotland was added on to the portfolio. And then, how many years ago Marilyn was the last restructure? I can't remember... I don't know I managed to get six properties in England. So my area now takes me from Berriedale in Caithness right down to Howthwaite in the Lake District. And I suppose in a way, Berriedale was other story because you told me that I would just love putting on a new property.

Marilyn: Well every RPM should have a new property.

Cy: Okay, so after a seven and a half driving the car this time, I get to Berriedale and have to go over a rope bridge to get to the property. John Evetts was there at the time and he was trying to carry all the furniture over the river on a raft. So to me it was something I don't know, out of a comedy film. You know me not knowing what I'm doing, this beautiful property on its own beach, but let's see, John with all this furniture and Beau, you know, trying to sort out Berriedale.

Marilyn: But it's interesting looking back because of course, you know, in the very early days when I started, we didn't have computers, we didn't have mobile phones. So, most of the paperwork was actually done at Shottesbrooke. We didn't have hardly any paperwork to do. But of course, the bookings then were very different too because from April, I think it was April through to the end of September, you could only book one week. And then after you could book from October through to obviously the end of March, you could book Monday to Thursday. And then, the weekend bookings went Thursday through to Sunday, but you didn't have to be out until six o'clock on the Sunday. So it was very different and of course, we didn't have a linen service. All we used to do was put on those, do you remember those Calico mattress covers?

Cy: Oh that was before my time –

Marilyn: Oh right... It was like putting on difficult pair of tights, to get them on the mattress. And then they would just put the under sheet, the under pillowcases, the blankets and the visitors had to bring their own their own linen with them. But of course if they came from overseas, then they were charged five pounds a head. They could hire it from the housekeeper and the housekeeper used to wash it for them so, so yes, it was it was all very different.

Cy: I wouldn't like to go back to those days, Marilyn, I wouldn't like to go back to the days when there's no computers or mobile phones.

Marilyn: Yeah, because you always had to know where the where the local telephone box was because if you went to do a property visit and there was a problem, you couldn't just pick up your

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mobile and call a contractor. You had to have lots and lots of 10p pieces in your glove box so that you could go out and actually phone either phone Sheila at Shottesbrooke, or, you know, the contractor direct. So again, it was how we made it work. I don't know, but we did somehow, you know, it worked very successfully for quite some time.

Cy: I suppose Landmark has always been a bit different. It still is, you know, the challenges may be different, you know.

Marilyn: Yeah, very different. Yeah, in some respects.

Cy: The distance that we cover, we don't maybe get to properties just as much as we would like. And you know so much is now done as we're doing this now, you know talking over Zoom and conference calls and that. There's nothing really to beat when you drive up your property. You know, you do I still do this, you know, can I feel enough? Oh, lovely.

Marilyn: Yeah, I think I think we all become very, very, yes - part of that building I think.

Cy: Yes, I wasn't going to do that at all as I told you, I was going to have a wee part time job and I wasn't going to get as... [Marilyn chuckles]

Marilyn: It gets under your skin, doesn't it Really? And do you remember the original job description said that you had to possess a flexible attitude to dealing with any situation? And I think really they should have added to that and possessing a good sense of humour as well because without a good sense of humour, you're not going to get far in the job are you?

Cy: Now I'm thinking about you know, again I think about Carolyn when I think Anthony Gormley statue that we still got on Saddell, I hope she's not listening, but you know, he's had a hat – he's recently during the Covid, someone managed to put a mask on him and so you know, it's...

Marilyn: But you know Cy yourself, the horrors that we face sometimes when we arrive you know, even if it's down to something silly like you know the legs broken on the on the king size bed or, you know, and how are we going to get that for the booking coming in. But goodness we always do somehow or another, don't we? We seldom fail and so that when the when the visitor arrives they're absolutely blissfully unaware of what's the preceded their arrival, you know, the chaos and the, you know, head scratching and how are we going to solve this one but we do somehow or another.

Cy: I think Marilyn you'll agree that our job is made easier by you know, the tremendous housekeepers that we have. You know what I mean? They just love their properties and look after them. Again in the changing times, it's very difficult to recruit housekeepers in many areas.

Marilyn: And so we're very fortunate in the in the amazing housekeepers that we do have. We couldn't do it without them, could we really? But, you know, it's interesting as the region sort of grew and grew and grew. You could you could never call this a nine to five job could you?

Cy: Oh, absolutely not. No, no, no, no. Then would we like if it was?

Marilyn: No, because I think you and I are very similar in that we both enjoy the flexible lifestyle, and the challenge of dealing with whatever is going to come our way. And I just wanted to say one more thing, I actually jotted this down, hang on... And I just wanted to say, you know, it's been a huge part

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of my life. And it's a very simple thing. I just want to ensure that my visitors today still get that same sense of sort of excitement and anticipation when they put that key in the lock. You know, like I did when I had my young family, you know, doing it. I mean, Cy and I now are both approaching retirement, aren't we?

Cy: Early, early retirement.

Marilyn: It's nice for me at present to know that they're still going to be excuse me, a Donohue out in the field, because my eldest son, obviously manages another Landmark property at Crownhill in Plymouth. Yeah. I can continue to wear my volunteer badge even when I retire. So I should still be a little part of Landmark.