

Simon interviews: Marilyn le Moign about stepping down from AIKB

Simon: So Marilyn, you're stepping down from AIKB after how many years?

Marilyn: 2003 so that makes it what? 20, 22 years.

Simon: Twenty two years. Now can you tell us how it came into being? I think everybody listening to this programme will obviously know AIKB, but tell us how it started.

Marilyn: It all started er because er we went to a fête on the Village Square, and we were all pushed onto tables with people we didn't know. And er on the table we were at – I was with my husband - there were a couple probably English, with a Frenchman. And the Frenchman said, "You are obviously not French origin". I said, "That's right". He said, "You English?" I said, "Yes". He said, "But you speak really good French. So could I have your details?" I said, "Any particular reason?" He said, "Oh, well, sometimes I need a bit of advice". But in actual fact, he gave, he was an estate agent, which I ignored. All his clients were English, and he sent them all along to me.

Simon: Ah.

Marilyn: Which obviously wasn't my vocation.

Simon: Um.

Marilyn: So my husband had a beautiful hou.... building in the village, and it was a listed building, and it needed work done on it, but when I asked him what he counted on doing, he said, "I've um given up on generosity, so that, I've too many things to pay for". And I said, "Well, actually, I need it as an office.

Simon: Um.

Marilyn: So er thanks to this Frenchman who was er bombarding me with English people.

Simon: Yeah.

Marilyn: I thought, well, that'll be the excuse to repair this building.

Simon: Okay, so but did you think at that point that you're going to start this association, or was it just, I mean.

Marilyn: I had to justify why my husband had had to spend all this money repairing this building.

Simon: OK.

Marilyn: So, yeah, I, I mean, I didn't know what an association really was either. I'd been in business in Paris

Simon: Right.

Marilyn: And I, I hadn't yet plunged into associative life.

Simon: Right. So when you started, you were being sort of fed English er clients from the estate agents.

Marilyn: Umum.

Simon: And did you, how long before you, or or did you immediately realise there was a huge need for the sort of advice that you were able to give? And and were people asking you things that you had no idea?

Marilyn: Definitely asking me things that I, I mean, I arrived in 1968. So all these problems, I'd solved them years and years and years ago. So I knew nothing, and they were just really rather bothering me. But at the same time, with this massive arrival of English speakers, it did seem logical that somebody should do something, and since that corresponded with the use of a building, I, I went on from there. And I managed to sell the idea to our local communauté de communes, and so we could employ someone.

Simon: Right.

Marilyn: Who did the advice.

Simon: So where did, and what were the sort of problems that people were coming to you with, first of all, so let let's, take it these are people who were just wanting to buy a place in France. Were they mostly people who wanted to move here as retirees?

Marilyn: Not necessarily. I mean, I, I it wasn't a market I'd explored. I, I, it was more like the estate agents er found themselves solving problems that they didn't want to solve.

Simon: Right.

Marilyn: And er so that was it. I mean.

Simon: A good deal for the estate agents.

Marilyn: Yes, they, they, they cottoned out far, quite quickly, from from doing it themselves.

Simon: Yeah.

Marilyn: And handing it over to.

Simon: Right.

Marilyn: Another person.

Simon: And what were the, what were the initial things that you were having to sort for people, what kind of problems were they coming to you with?

Marilyn: Er, electricity, telephone.

Simon: What? Getting connected?

Marilyn: Water.

Simon: Getting connected.

Marilyn: Yes, or any repairs that needed, or communication, generally speaking. And then, obviously, with over the years, it became more and more complex. But to begin with, it was more like a sort of an annex of an estate agent.

Simon: Right.

Marilyn: Than a.

Simon: Right

Marilyn: Anything else, which have never, ever been my intention.

Simon: So how did it grow? What, how did it sort of start to spread in its remit?

Marilyn: Well in as much as nobody else was doing it. So it became a a port of call that was didn't need to advertise.

Simon: Right.

- Marilyn: I mean you really needed a bunker to hide it. People were were constantly asking yes questions so. We had, we had no training, no, I mean, and frankly, the the French authorities, all these different, really took us for complete amateurs. Er and it was only after a couple of months that we were actually often more au fait with things than they were.
- Simon: Ah, so tell me about the the very early days. Was who was in the office. Just you?
- Marilyn: No, well we employed somebody almost straight away.
- Simon: Okay.
- Marilyn: There was a, a, a young woman who had, was looking for a job and who needed a job.
- Simon: A French woman?
- Marilyn: No, English.
- Simon: English. Bilingual?
- Marilyn: Yes, her French was not bad. I wouldn't say she was really bilingual.
- Simon: OK
- Marilyn: So it was all a bit. Yes, it was all a bit learning, a learning curve.
- Simon: Uhuh.
- Marilyn: And er that went on for oh, it's gone on for 22 years hasn't it?
- Simon: That's amazing. So in those early days, did you find that the... so the um the person in the office was dealing with French bureaucracy.
- Marilyn: Mm.
- Simon: For, on behalf of English people? So phoning up EDF, phoning up the telephone company, but especially with tax and maybe the health system. How was the... How did the French authorities react to this? Were they helpful to begin with? Were they open that? Oh, great. You want to help these people or?
- Marilyn: Not particularly. They, they, the French expected them to speak French.

Simon: Ahum:

Marilyn: They, really didn't please them that there was no effort made.

Simon: Really? Yes.

Marilyn: As the years went by, we became more specialist in. And they, they sometimes they set up direct lines. You know, if you had an English problem, there'd be.

Simon: Hm.

Marilyn: An English person at the.

Simon: Hm.

Marilyn: Other end of the line. But obviously, tax is very, very, very complex and.

Simon: Yeah.

Marilyn: Er it took a long time for people to er, for the French to realise how competent we were, and now it's got to the stage when they send us people.

Simon: They send you people?

Marilyn: Mm.

Simon: Wow. That's quite a compliment.

Marilyn: Well, not to me. It's the people I employ.

Simon: Okay, so within, how, within, how many years was it sort of really established as as the go to base for Brittany, central Brittany, I suppose. Well, what is your reach?

Marilyn: Well the region is, is, yes, it's Côtes D'Armor and Morbihan and a bit of Finistère.

Simon: Uhuh.

Marilyn: But it also goes goes wider because of internet and one thing and another.

Simon: Yes.

Marilyn: Which wasn't sort of the case to begin with.

Simon: Yeah.

Marilyn: Um, I think it probably took us about five years to really start climbing the ladder.

Simon: And so what, at what point did you realise that it had become this? Because I think everybody, when I arrived here, I knew nobody. I chose my house based on location and everything else. I didn't have any friends in the area, and although my French was very, very basic, I knew I needed to get some help for basic things like tax and getting onto the into the health system that. But how did I know that so quickly when I write it? That's so how did that become? How long did it take that to become a byword? You know, oh if you need help, AIKB, that's where you go. Because I don't know where I heard about it, but it would have been one of my English neighbours, or somebody in the pub, even I don't know.

Marilyn: I would have thought after about eight, eight nine years it was becoming better known.

Simon: Right?

Marilyn: And then, I mean, a lot of the administrative, administrators were just so relieved to have somebody to to be the go between.

Simon: Yeah.

Marilyn: But in France, things have changed, because er in rural France er now we have something called France Connect.

Simon: Yes.

Marilyn: With a little camionnette that goes around the villages, etc.

Simon: Mmhum..

Marilyn: Doing basically what we do in French for the French.

Simon: Right, right.

Marilyn: But they, so some of people, English people, go to their France Connect.

Simon: Yes.

Marilyn: And they seem to send them off to us. So.

Simon: Yeah, yeah. And it is surprising, because I I now do my tax. I go every year to the to the office in Loudeac for and and do it in the office, because I just can't handle the online thing. And it always surprises me. Well, it doesn't surprise me, but it did the first couple of times that there are so many French people sitting there who also struggle with the the paperwork. A lot of people struggle with paperwork. It's not, not just because you speak English and you're, you know, not good enough in French. So it's quite amusing to think that, you know, it isn't just, it isn't just us English people who are struggling with the forms.

Marilyn: You've got to think that the computer has taken over so much, and not everybody has learned to

Simon: That's right, or or the way that it's presented

Marilyn: Yes.

Simon: Is not very user friendly for for some people. I think.

Marilyn: I think in the country here, I think the children. Now it's the grandchildren that do it because they are computer fait.

Simon: Yeah, yeah.

Marilyn: But that we've, we've lived through that whole situation where some of us are slightly competent, and some people just never got on the bandwagon.

Simon: Um. And there is the fact that some of it isn't really about computing. It's about understanding the different categories you need to tick, or, you know, which which area, if you're doing work, for example, what category you need to fit in with? URSSAF or Le Cesu?, It gets quite complicated with that, doesn't it?

Marilyn: It does.

Simon: Yeah. So why have you now decided to step down after 22 years?

Marilyn: I think that, I think 22 years is way enough, and I think that everybody should give the people around the association the chance to develop and move it on.

Simon: Yeah.

Marilyn: You can't stay static forever. And er it's er also the occasion for me, I mean what do you do when you retire, you have a whole list of things that you'd like to do.

Simon: Yeah.

Marilyn: you haven't had time to do so since I retired, many, many years ago, there's still lots of things on that list.

Simon: Yeah.

Marilyn: That haven't been ticked. So there you go.

Simon: Oh, good. Well, really, wish you best of luck with all those things that you need to do that you didn't have time to do.

Marilyn: Exactly. Thank you.

Simon: And we'll wait and see. So do you think AIKB is going to metamorphosise into something different, or is it going to continue as it is, or what what's what's the.

Marilyn: I'll leave it up to them.

Simon: Okay, so it's going to be down to whoever's

Marilyn: Exactly, and that they, I'm sure they will, you know, do it, do it the right way, their way, and er that's how it should be. You should always have confidence in the future.

Simon: Er. Good. Well, thank you, Marilyn for that, and thank you for AIKB, I'm sure there are 1000s of people whose lives have been made a lot more, er what's the word, efficient by having AIKB on the end of a phone or being able to go into the office and solve a problem. So long may that continue,

Marilyn: Indeed. And thanks to the personnel and also to all the volunteers who who help. And there's a whole team of excellent people who are still there and around so I'm sure they'll see the future through.

Simon: Good. Three cheers for AIKB.

Marilyn: Thank you.