

Cleaning up for next year's holidaymakers this winter

SHARON LOOKS FORWARD TO CLEANING UP AT BELMONT OVER THE WINTER MONTHS!

The House Manager of a reclaimed Georgian Mansion House on Unst, Shetland, the UK's most northerly island, has revealed the extraordinary work and personal effort which goes into maintaining the unique property throughout the winter months, so that it is once again ready to welcome self catering guests in the spring and summer.

Sharon Calladine, an Australian, and former Secondary School Teacher who has taught English, Geography and History in Australia, England and Egypt, as well as Applied Linguistics in the Middle East, Japan and China, has looked after Belmont House for the past three years.



Alongside handling bookings and administration, she carries out numerous practical tasks to ensure everything is ready for guests on arrival. Living nearby on the island, Sharon, additionally acts as a point of contact for guests whilst they are at Belmont.

Although self catering business for the House, which dates back to 1775 when it was built by local landowner Thomas Mouat to a classical Georgian design, is most brisk in the spring and summer, there can still be the odd group of guests staying at the property over the festive period, mainly local Shetlanders, or guests staying to attend the Up Helly Aa celebrations in January and February.

“The House is fortunate enough to be booked this year between Christmas and New Year with a local family who want to get together and relax,” said Sharon, who moved to Unst seven years ago, having originally come to visit on holiday with her husband, a Scotsman from Angus. The well travelled pair describe themselves as “in love with all islands,” but were particularly attracted to the beauty and tranquillity of Unst.

“If we have a festive booking we make a real point of decorating Belmont for Christmas, as it looks amazing,” said Sharon. “I add many of my own Christmas ornaments as I live in a small croft house, so am never able to decorate it as thoroughly as I would like. I also crochet and have made more than seventy little Christmas wreaths to hang up on the tree and fireplace. The Board of trustees that run the House, together with myself, want it be as festive and welcoming as possible. It’s a grand house, the grandest on the island, and deserves to be dressed up at this time of the year.”

“Deep cleaning however, begins in earnest in January,” said Sharon. “We have a VisitScotland 4 star rating and have to maintain our high standards. The House can be very busy with people coming and going during the summer months, so it’s really important to have time to clean and carry out maintenance when it’s not catering for guests. It’s an old House, and we have harsh weather conditions to contend with, but I am glad to say that we have our routine down to a fine art which more than delivers the results we need.”



And it is a very thorough routine indeed, with Belmont House cleaned from top to bottom, often by Sharon herself and just one other helper, her cleaner Allyson Williams. They counteract the damp weather and salt spray from the sea by cleaning and wiping down all Belmont's windows and external doors with vinegar, to reduce mould. Exposed woodwork, such as the porch benches, are re-painted, whilst the wooden benches in the kitchen are oiled with olive oil.

"We really put our backs into our deep clean, disinfecting door handles, shampooing carpets, cleaning soft furnishings and curtains, and washing and cleaning all the fireplaces," said Sharon. "We even take down the light fittings, and the paintings on the walls to clean behind them."

Belmont House has an outside pavilion and a basement which are also cleaned out thoroughly. "This year I hope to oil and stain all of the woodwork in the West Pavilion," said Sharon. "It's a real asset to the Main House with some guests choosing to sleep here for a more adventurous experience."

Sharon explained that occasionally plans for any repairs to Belmont in the winter could be hampered by extreme weather conditions, but many suppliers are local, including Charlie Clark, referred to as the "maintenance hero".

"He will be making a counter top cover for the laundry sinks," she said. "He also helps us check the fire and sprinkler systems, which are very important jobs," said Sharon. "He is really invaluable for a whole host of maintenance issues as sometimes we can't get tradesmen over from other islands."

Once everything is done, Belmont House will be ready once again for another busy lettings season, which sees Belmont particularly busy in April and May with bird and wildlife watchers visiting Unst.

"Next year is the VisitScotland Year of Coasts and Waters, which is ideal for us here on Unst, surrounded by stunning

coastline and sea!" said Sharon. "We will be once again looking at hosting some media as part of our ongoing PR and Marketing campaign, and we hope to have many guests coming from all over the UK and beyond."

"I love seeing groups enjoying themselves here. I also like knowing that myself and the Trustees are doing all we can to preserve and maintain the historical integrity of the House for the guests, and its importance to the island. It makes Belmont come alive having people here. It's a beautiful, magical House which feels very cosy. It's wonderful seeing others appreciate its beauty, calmness and place in the landscape."

Sharon finished by saying: "It may be a great deal of hard work maintaining a House like this in this location, and I am sure many guests will not appreciate just what goes into keeping Belmont as grand as she was in her heyday as the House of the island's rich landowner, but to me, it's well worth a bit of sweat and the odd callused hand, as it's a real privilege to look after this property, and to be a part of its long term, viable future."

"It's ironic as my original plan on coming to Unst to live was to be semi-retired! You could say that Belmont House got under my skin!"

Belmont House is owned by the Belmont Trust, a registered charity formed to ensure the preservation and protection of Belmont for the benefit of Shetland. Income from visitors to Belmont House goes directly towards the ongoing maintenance and upkeep of the property.

Belmont House has been rated 5 star 'Excellent' on TripAdvisor and 4 star by the National Trust for Scotland Holidays. Rates are from just £25 per person per night (based on a short break with 10 sharing). Flexible arrival and departure dates. Guests can stay for full weeks or short breaks. The minimum stay is

two nights. Belmont House welcomes you to contact them direct to discuss your requirements in order to plan your stay and travel arrangements.

For more information contact Sharon Calladine on +44 (0)1957 711870 or email at bookings@belmontunst.co.uk

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