



Four generations working together, L-R, JJ Mowbray, Emma Bell with her dog Barney, Malcolm Bell with Gino, Fiona Bell, Evelyn and Jim Allen with great grand-daughters Elle and Mila Hughes, Barbara Allen, Joanne Hughes with Jerry, Gavin Hughes and Coral Mowbray with Bruce

Keeping it in the family

Six generations have carved Cumbrian countryside into one of the Lake District's most popular holiday parks adapting to changes in tourism caused by war, weather and now disease

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Four generations stand proudly in front of an old coach house given new purpose recently for the needs of modern tourism. At the centre of the family portrait is Jim Allen, now 90 and still central to the truly family business that continues to develop Park Foot Holiday Park on the shores of Lake Ullswater, near Pooley Bridge.

When he was born in the coach house, known as Woodside, which backs on to Barton Fell with easy access to High Street, the old Roman road to Windermere, there was no electricity and the domestic water supply was still running in the nearby stream. Today the five self-catering houses that occupy the renovated building are streaming too – high speed broadband to meet the ever-increasing demands of today's holidaymaker.

"I have seen such a change in people," says Jim, who still lives on the park. "They need a lot more than they used to do. They used to be happy just to come camping in canvas tents that weren't even waterproof, but now they want everything. You can't just sit

back, you have to keep moving forward, everything has to get better."

And that is why the whole family comes together to plan the next move and adapt to change, which this year will be dominated by the impact of COVID-19.

At the moment the immaculately presented holiday park, which rises from Ullswater up the hill to offer glorious views of the mountains and fells, is home to 130 privately owned holiday homes and 300 pitches for tents, camper vans and touring caravans.

There are 17 self-catering lodges and houses, TJ's restaurant, bar and takeaway and an extended shop. There is also access to the lake and the opportunity to be surrounded by red deer, red squirrels, badgers, foxes, peregrine falcons, skylarks, snipes and cuckoos.

Park Foot is one of four Cumbrian tourist facilities owned by the family – there's also the 40-holiday home park at Knotts Hill, Watermillock, 40-home park at Melmerby and 16-home Seat Farm that also boasts a lakeside venue for weddings.

At a glance it seems a far cry for its origins but on closer inspection it reflects the same entrepreneurial zeal of the founder James Allen who diversified from farming and milling almost 120 years ago.

"My grandfather came to Park Foot in 1902," recalls Jim. "We had relations there even then and they were leaving so he took it on. He did farm but was not a natural born farmer. It seemed that working seven days a week for a low return wasn't the best way forward, so he came to the Lakes to become involved in the holiday trade.

"Park Foot House, where I still live now, had six rooms and they ran a B&B collecting the visitors by horse and trap from Penrith railway station. It was a gravel track back then and must have taken a while. But they offered full board and also did rowing boat hire."

In 1951 Jim's parents Joseph and Evelyn bought the land and the family has been developing the 97 acres ever since.

While coronavirus may have temporarily stalled business, World War II stopped it in its tracks. "I was a child during the war and we

used to knit for the army,” Jim recalls. “We also went out and collected sphagnum moss which was used to treat soldiers’ wounds. The army would use Park Foot for some training and there was a big camp at Martindale. We used to watch the poor conscripts being made to crawl up the freezing cold river and we had to clear our sheep off the fells when the tanks were firing at targets.

“We also took evacuees and the place was full of Londoners and Italian POWs worked on the farm. Then in the Fifties we started with vans. We were only allowed to take 15 at first, though we could have as many tents as we liked. We used to charge two shillings a night for a car and tent. A local farmer would come round with milk and eggs. Our first shop was a converted caravan, then an old wooden chalet, before we built a proper shop and extended that into what we have today.”

Jim recalls the harsh winters of the past with deep snow and a frozen lake. “One year the ice was as thick as me and for some reason I thought it would be a good idea to drive my Ford across the Lake, doing handbrake turns on the ice. Another time, when it wasn’t as thick, I set an old Morgan three-wheeler away on the lake and the wind blew it towards where the ice was thinner. It caused a bit of a traffic jam on the main road of people watching it and I got told off by the police.”

Today the business is run by his daughters Barbara Allen and Fiona Bell, Barbara’s children Coral and JJ Mowbray and Fiona’s daughters Emma Bell and Joanne Hughes. Fiona’s husband Malcolm and Joanne’s husband Gavin are also involved in the business.

The original two outside toilets, one for the family, one for the visitors, have grown considerably with facilities now including blocks with underfloor heating and family rooms, and large pitches with power and water. Future plans include the addition of glamping pods and a jetty.

Emma is taking a university course on holiday parks, inputting a host of information



An aerial view of Park Foot



Joseph takes some young visitors for a ride in the trap

into the park’s database and monitoring takings and costs, while Coral is developing the booking software and website incorporating cloud technology for the tills and restaurant bookings, while superfast broadband is being installed for campers.

“COVID has had a huge impact but we are using the time to make lots of improvements for when we are allowed to reopen,” says Fiona. “We have already made many changes including contactless check-in, sanitising stations, fogging machines and removing things such as board games and throws in the houses.

“When we did open on July 4 we were pleased to welcome people from all over the country, those who could not go abroad as well as our traditional market from the North East, Manchester and Scotland. As staff were still furloughed it fell on the family to cope and we were fully booked every day rather than just at weekends. People were so pleased to be out they went a bit crazy and we had to remind them to stick to the rules. It has been a bit like going back to the Sixties before package holidays when people stayed in this country.

“We’d renovated the coach house last year and there’s a pony trekking business next door. We even had Channel 5 film Rich Holiday, Poor Holiday here and the ‘posh men’ had a great time and really enjoyed all the activities.”



Woodside, the former coach house where Jim Allen was born

Fiona also recalls the washing away of the bridge at Pooley Bridge after Storm Desmond in 2015. “Losing the bridge was like having a death in the family,” she says. “It made us into a cul-de-sac, which was a nuisance, so it was great when the new bridge opened.”

While the family ensures Park Foot adapts to the needs of modern tourism, Jim also runs a containers storage business in Penrith. “But I still enjoy doing my bit at Park Foot,” he says.

parkfootullswater.co.uk