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CHAIRS OF THE NORTHERN ISLES

One of the most distinctive furniture types anywhere in Europe is the Orkney Chair. Its vertical wooden frame and curving straw back are instantly recognisable and replicated nowhere else – with one exception: on Fair Isle, the most southerly of the Shetland Islands. The Orkney and Fair Isle traditions are distinct, however, on account of the methods used to make the backs. Straw chairs were, at one time, common throughout those parts of Britain and Ireland, including Wales, the English West Country and East Anglia, where straw-working was commonly practised. Today, although wicker chairs are still made in England, the production of straw-backed chairs is confined to the far north of Scotland.

In Orkney, because of the strong winter winds, there are few trees and for countless centuries straw and stone often took the place of timber. Driftwood was too precious and imported timber too expensive to be made into furniture when straw was a satisfactory substitute. What timber existed was needed for boats, ploughs and those parts of the house not made from stone and straw, such as roof couples. The earliest Orkney Chairs to survive today were made almost entirely of straw with only thin strips of wood to provide a framework. They were essentially inverted baskets with a curved straw back, and for every chair of this kind there were probably a dozen straw stools.

Orcadians were adept at using straw, primarily for baskets (kaesies, cubbies, luppies), but also for mats (flackies), as bedding, and even for shoes. Simmens, or straw ropes, were used to roof houses, the thickly laced ropes forming the base for a layer of turf and thatch held down by more ropes. At one time even straw was too valuable as fodder to be used in such large quantities and simmens were made from heather. Even where flagstone was used as roofing, straw simmens were laid over as insulation.

The form recognisable today as the Orkney Chair is little more than 150 years old and has probably survived thanks only to the entrepreneurial efforts of the Kirkwall joiner David Munro Kirkness. Kirkness was born in 1854 on Westray and began to make Orkney Chair frames in about 1878. He had the backs woven by outworkers, either

Stephen Jackson

Below

Stewart Thomson of Fair Isle carving the arm of his chair.



Opposite

Jimmy Fergus in his workshop, Westray, Orkney.

crofters working in the evenings or fishermen at times ashore. The half-timbered form that he used, however, had been developed several decades previously. Surviving examples of these early chairs are generally boxed-in around the legs, with or without a drawer, draught-resistance being a central feature of the design.

Kirkness' success derived from his ability to market the chairs on the Scottish mainland. He adapted the form to suit the market for arts and crafts furniture, being the first to replace plain boarded seats with woven sea-grass ones and boxed-in legs with an open framework. He died in 1936, having supplied chairs to the Royal Family and to major furniture retailers throughout the Empire. The business was carried on until 1978. Throughout the twentieth century there continued to be people, particularly on the outer islands such as Westray, Sanday and Eday, who made the occasional chair for friends and family. Today the production of the chairs is divided between those for whom it is a business, employing a limited number of assistants or outworkers, and those for whom the work is a supplementary form of income.

The making of the straw chair back is a time-consuming task and every maker follows a slightly different pattern. Today the timber frame is assembled, with or without a drawer below the seat, from imported oak or, less commonly, from driftwood. In prehistoric times the only wood to be used in either Orkney or Shetland was washed ashore from the virgin forests of North America, although by the Middle Ages the wealthy imported timber from Scandinavia and the Baltic. The best straw for chair and basket-work comes from black Murkle oats. An inferior grain that nevertheless thrives on poor soils and can withstand strong winds and heavy rain, it is grown in only the smallest quantities today for its thin, supple and robust straw. This is harvested in September or October and stacked over the winter (tied down with simmens).

When ready for use, the grain is simply cut off and the straw dressed, that is the loose leaves removed by hand. Lengths of straw are bundled together and the first row nailed to the seat. New lengths of straw are added almost constantly as the work progresses





and are held in place with a metal or wooden ring that also regulates the thickness of the bundle. The back is essentially a continuous series of rows turned back upon itself at the wooden uprights and either nailed or laced with string to these uprights. As the straw is wound back and forth, the rows are sewn together using a flat-headed needle and a single length of sisal string. The last row of a standard chair is finished with tightly wound sisal. This sisal is imported, although in the past locally gathered 'bent', or sea-grass, would have been used.

Most makers today choose to make a fairly angular shaped back which draws away from the base about a quarter of the distance up. Older chairs were often more rounded in appearance. Hoods are either built up as a continuation of the back, or begun from the centre of the back in an arching pattern; with both methods the result is very similar. Any remaining rough hairs of straw can be singed off by quickly moving a flame (or blowlamp) across the surface. In all, the making of the straw back alone can take up to a week. Drop-in seats of woven sea-grass tend to be more popular than plain boarded seats. Although timber is imported, the rest of the process is remarkably sustainable, with the oat waste going to feed chickens and timber waste burnt to smoke salmon.

The Shetland Islands differ from Orkney in many respects and are generally characterised as a place where fishing and trade were more important than arable farming. While this was broadly true, straw-crafts were still well-developed and on Fair Isle, the most southerly of the Islands, straw-backed chairs were being made in the nineteenth century. They are today made only by one man, Stewart Thomson. He continues to live a crofting way of life in which agriculture, chair-making and the upkeep of an aerogenerator all contribute to his income. He grows his own Shetland oats, which yield an exceptionally long straw, and his timber is a mixture of imported hardwoods and salvaged wreck-wood. His design, which follows that used by his grandfather, Jerome Wilson, looks not unlike an Orkney Chair. The back, however, is woven with cotton string using surgeon's knots in a manner that recalls the net-

Below

Sewing in progress.



Above

Finished lacing.

Below

The Orkney Chair back is one continuous length of straws turning back upon itself at the wooden uprights.



Opposite

Stewart Thomson, chairmaker, outside his home, Fair Isle.

making skills of fishermen. The straw is worked back and forth in a similar way to the Orkney Chair, but each row is held in place by roughly thirty-six pairs of string threads, knotted across each row. All of Stewart Thomson's chairs have boarded seats and two tapering rear uprights give added support to the straight-framed back.

At the time of writing there are about half a dozen makers of straw-backed chairs in Orkney, roughly half of whom are based in Kirkwall, the rest on outer islands. The majority are men, many of whom worked previously in other occupations including agriculture and fishing. A few are women, however, in an economy in which employment opportunities for women are scarce. For some of these islanders chair-making provides an additional source of income, as it did for their grandfathers, and even on islands where no chairs are produced commercially there are residents who make the occasional piece. Although some makers are now in their seventies or eighties, the techniques are being handed down to a new generation, ready to market their chairs globally via the internet. A significant proportion of their work is sold to American and continental European clients and the prospects for the Scottish straw-backed chair are bright.

