

Woodworking In Scotland

We just finished a 21 day trip to Scotland and I thought I would let you know about some of the interesting woodworking items I came across.

We started the journey on the western side of Scotland on an island called Islay (pronounced eye la). Islay is one of the smallest regions of the whiskey producers and I managed to get tours and tastings on 9 out of the 10 distilleries. One item that caught my attention was the washback vats which start the fermenting process of the barley. In the distillery where this picture was taken they had 6 of these big vats. Depending upon the distillery, these vats are 10 to 15 feet across and 20 to 25 feet deep. At this distillery they talked about the “argonay” (my Scottish is not very good) pine that was used for construction. It was highly praised because it is very straight and true. At the next distillery they also talked about the “argonay” pine and they liked it for its straight timbers and because the wood and the yeast added a lot of flavor to the whiskey. At the next distillery “argonay” was translated into Oregon! Oregon pine is Douglas Fir in english.



No. 8A Washback vat at Bowmore Distillery.

The washback vats are replaced with new wood every 4 or 5 years. One of the distilleries on the island of Orkney, Scapa, took the wood staves from an old washback vat from the Glentauchers distillery and made it into this giant megaphone which sits on their back door overlooking the Scapa Flow bay. Very interesting joint work considering its size. It is big enough for a 7' person to walk inside of it. Try figuring the taper requirements for the boards and the angles at which they must be cut!





We now move over to the eastern side of Scotland and go north to the island of Orkney. For the history buffs in the guild, we stayed in Kirkwall. Kirkwall sits on the edge of the Scapa Flow bay. This was the home port of the British naval fleet in WW 1 & 2. Lots of great history in this region. Now back to woodworking.

I stumbled upon a very small tour that only happens two times a week and they only take 6 people on the tour. The tour was a chance to visit the upper levels of the St. Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall. This cathedral was built in the 1500's and I was very impressed with the woodworking skills they used to construct the upper levels. The outside of the cathedral is pictured below.



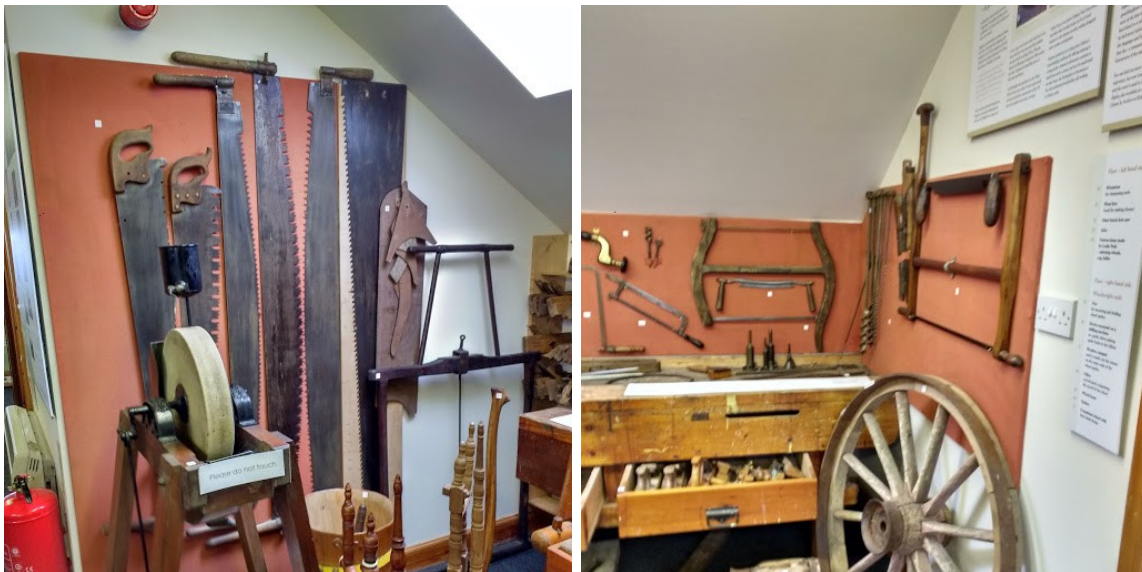
St. Magnus Cathedral

The woodworking craftsmanship inside is incredible from the pulpits to the wood surrounding the pipe organ and other church furniture. The one thing that really got my attention was the construction technique that they used to build the roofs. Several years ago the church underwent rejuvenation. When they got to the upper levels as shown in the photo below they discovered a building technique that I had never seen. To get the beams and ceiling joists in place they built a platform on the ceiling joists and covered it up with dirt in a triangular shape. This allowed them to lay the ceiling joists on the dirt so that they could mate them up with the beam and the mating ceiling joist. They then left the dirt in place over all the years. In the photo below during renovation they removed a lot of the dirt to get it off the ceiling joists and then reinforced it with the steel structure. Incredible engineering at that time!



St Magnus Cathedral showing the partial earth brim used to support the ceiling construction.

We took a tour of the Orkney cultural museum and on the second floor I stumbled upon these woodworking tools. For a hand tool woodworker this is paradise! While not totally visible on the back wall, left hand side there must have been 50 or 60 hand planes, many of them molding planes to produce fancy edges on the woodwork.



Orkney Cultural Museum – Woodworking tool collection.



Orkney Cultural Museum – Woodworking tool collection.

Look closely to the photo on the right and you can see the collection of the hand planes along the back wall.

While walking around one of the cities in Scotland I came across this furniture restoration store. His collection of hand tools was incredible. Unfortunately, he had stepped out of the building to run some sort of errand and I never got to go inside. Just have to get used to the eye candy!



Finally, while not really woodworking but a fine art of craftsmanship is the Italian Chapel on the island of Orkney. This chapel was built by Italian POW's during WW II. They were captured in Africa and transported to the Orkney islands in the month of February. This is where the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea meet and it is brutal in the winter.

The chapel was made out of two Quonset huts put end to end. The only building material they had was whatever they could salvage off of wrecked ship in the area. I am not sure what sort of material lines the interior of the Quonset hut but my closest approximation to it in modern day building materials would be gypsum board.



As you marvel at the skill level of these POW's and you say, wow, they were masters of art and tile. Think again. All of this "tile work" is nothing more than hand painting on the interior walls of the chapel.



Italian Chapel, Orkney Island, Scotland

While it looks like tiles cemented to the walls of the chapel, everything in this picture is hand painted!