

# ISLAND TRADITIONS

## *Speaking to an Orkney Chair Maker*

Kevin Gauld is a furniture maker based in the Orkney Islands, off the north coast of Scotland. He is one of a handful of people who carry on the tradition of The Orkney chair, a simple wooden, straw-back chair with humble origins.

Unique to the islands, the chair has been at the heart of the Orkney home for centuries. As Kevin explains 'The Orkney chair is so much more than just a piece of furniture. It tells the story of people, place and time.'

The original makers of The Orkney chair were farmers or fishermen who made the chairs out of the resources which were most available to them. The isolation of the Orkney Islands meant that generations of Orcadians had to be largely self-sufficient, using materials which they had readily to hand. Exposure to the strong Atlantic and North Sea winds means that trees are rare on the isles. Rather than being able to fell timber to build houses and furniture, the Orcadians instead turned to driftwood washed up on the shore, and made good use of local raw materials such as sandstone and oat straw.



The oat crop grew in abundance in Orkney; oats would be eaten as porridge or oatcakes, and the carefully dried straw would be used to make rope, feed the cattle and finally to make the 'strae backed' chair. The very early Orkney chairs were made almost entirely of straw, with wood just being used for the short legs, this keeping the sitter low to the ground, protecting them from sooty air from the peat fire.

The Orkney chair evolved over time. Wood came to be used in the frame, and a hood was often added, which provided shelter from draughts in the croft. A drawer under the seat also became a common feature of the chair, often used to store personal items: for the man of the house perhaps a bible or a bottle of whisky, the woman knitting needles and sewing pins.

With the coming of industrialisation and mass produced goods becoming more accessible for Orcadians, the tradition of making the straw-backed chairs was at risk of dying out. However, at the end of the 19th century David Kirkness, a joiner based in Orkney, commercialised the chair, refining the traditional form into four distinct designs. Thus, the Orkney chair saw a new revival. At this time the Arts and Crafts movement, led by William Morris, was becoming more and more influential. The movement's ethos of respecting traditional craftsmanship and using authentic materials to create beautiful yet functional homeware tied in directly with the furniture that Kirkness was producing. Overtime the Orkney chair began to gain commercial and international success. It was stocked by the likes of Liberty London, featured in rooms designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and was shipped to many homes around the world. Kirkness's designs have stood the test of time; Orkney chair makers, like Kevin Gauld, continue to employ a similar design to one of the four classics that he developed over a century ago.

Kevin Gauld joined the tradition of chair making at an early age. Having left school at 16 he began an apprenticeship with a local craftsman, before turning his attention to the art of Orkney chairs. He tells us, 'From a young age, I was interested in making things from wood, it seems to be a material that I am naturally drawn to. I was very lucky to have been given the opportunity to learn how to make Orkney chairs - I soon realised it was the perfect job for me.'

Kevin is passionate about running a zero-waste business. He explains that this passion 'probably stems from my upbringing and being taught to make the most of what you have. When I first started in business, I used much more imported timber but I always questioned why I was shipping wood from the other side of the planet when there is perfectly good - and often better - wood to be sourced much closer to home. America is my biggest export market and it just seemed crazy to buy oak from America, ship it to Orkney, make a chair from it and ship it back to America again. It made the carbon footprint of the chair huge when it didn't need to be. Using more local materials is much more in keeping with the story of the Orkney chair. I believe we all need to do our bit to care for our planet even if it is just something small.'

Sustainable, locally sourced, high quality material is integral to Kevin's furniture making. To make the woven straw backs for the chairs, he grows his own oats on the family farm, situated next to his workshop. The oats are harvested carefully to guarantee the stalks don't get damaged and then they are left to ripen, an important process, ensuring that the straw develops a beautiful golden colour, characteristic of The Orkney chair. Kevin told us, 'Growing my own oat straw that I use within my work reminds me of my childhood. As a child, I was never happier than when I was outdoors. Both sets of my grandparents had farms, so I learnt so much from a young age from helping them out.' It is clear that Kevin's craft is deep-rooted in the Orkney way of life. His passion for preserving the tradition of Orkney chair making is expressed in his functional yet elegant pieces. He insists, 'I never try to redefine what an Orkney chair is. The Orkney chair is perfect as it





Though Kevin is respectful of tradition he is not always bound by it. His oeuvre manages to stay contemporary and reinvent itself in innovative and surprising ways.

In a recent collaboration with The New Craftsmen, Kevin, and London-based furniture designer Gareth Neal, created the Brodgar Series; a unique and modern reimagining of the use of the techniques which make an Orkney chair. The collaboration combines elements of the vernacular Windsor chair with the Orkney chair's straw back. The refined timber frame is designed by Gareth Neal, and made at a small Windsor chair factory in Warwickshire before being transported to Orkney where Kevin adds the back.

The Orkney chair is a piece of furniture steeped in the nostalgia of traditional country life in Orkney. The chair came about as a practical response to the Orcadian climate and the needs of the islanders. It is this kind of functional design, fused with a curious and open-minded approach, which enables talented craftspeople like Kevin to continue to renew the stories of the places and people they come from.



Kevin Gauld and Gareth Neal's Brodgar Bench, in collaboration with The New Craftsmen

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