

Age-old tradition, with a modern twist

Recognised the world over, the Orkney chair has a proud tradition of master craftsmen that grew from the most humble of beginnings.

The shape of the chairs has seen many changes over the hundreds of years that they've been crafted, but the true traditions behind them have been kept alive, and authentic, both by the many amateur chairmakers throughout the county and those who dedicate their days to making the iconic pieces of Orcadian furniture.

One of the latter is award-winning furniture artisan Fraser Anderson.

This year, Fraser is celebrating the tenth anniversary of his business, Orkney Hand Crafted Furniture, which he started when he was just 19 years old.

However, with a decade's worth of experience behind him Fraser is still exploring new and exciting ideas in designing and constructing the chairs and forms of furniture he creates.

Over the years, Fraser's range in abilities has moved on in leaps and bounds as he has embraced both the practical and the innovative with the same enthusiasm, with the many pieces of evidence for this sitting in his gallery at New Scapa Road, Kirkwall.

Fraser spoke to *Islander*, reflecting on the early days of his business, how he has progressed to expand his product range and services and how he views what he does.

"The time does feel like it's flown, but when you actually stand back and look what you've achieved in that time, you realise how far you've come — I'm just going to be 29 this year.

"Taking on new things and fresh ideas is really what's kept things fresh, and a new design that I'm coming with for the tenth anniversary is something completely different."

He added: "I had always wanted to make furniture when I was younger, so, when I was 19, I knew making the chairs was what I wanted to do."

Of course, as Fraser explained, it wasn't always just about making the furniture — the hardest bit was just getting the "business head" to find the orders, find the advertising, to do the trade shows and to know what to do.

"Really, when I started the first design was the round-back chair and even at that point I had wanted to make something a little bit different, which was my own thing and had my own approach to it.

"The result did catch people's eye — but it was a case of getting enough people to see it and that's why I did all the shows."

His name established, Fraser was able to pursue new ideas that would add to his growing repertoire of skills.

However, through all the changes, his key concept was to think about the early Orkney chairs and consider what dictated how they looked and what they were made from.

Originally, Orkney chair frames were most often made from driftwood, with the backs made from straw that was available locally.

These elements were combined into a design that was borne out of necessity.

Fraser explained: "Once I got the business up and running, I wanted to take the craftsmanship back to what it was hundreds of years ago, when it was made by the 'poor man'.

"The fact that there was no furniture readily available in Orkney — because folk couldn't afford to buy anything — meant they had to make it themselves.

Young Orcadian craftsman celebrates his tenth anniversary in business with a romantic take on a classic design

"So they'd use driftwood from the shore, straw for the back and bent grass for the string.

"The straw chair back would keep in the heat from the peat fire and keep out the drafts, and the longer you sat in the chair, the more comfortable the back got.

"Every item would have been individual and I think that appeals to people today. The only thing that's changed is that the chairs used to be a lot lower to the ground, to avoid the smoke from the open peat fires. Nowadays, they are made to a specific height to suit the individual.

"But what's not changed at all is the way the chair is constructed — it's all handmade; there's no jigs or templates for the back — it's all purely done by eye and by getting the feel for it. I still fit all the joints by hand, because it's a lot truer joint. It's all mortise and tenons, which is a lot better quality and will last a hundred years."

But while sticking to tradition, Fraser was keen to incorporate the different practical demands of a person today.

For example, he collects driftwood from Orkney's shores, just as the county's crofters would have done centuries ago.

The subtle difference, however, is that rather than wait for small pieces of driftwood to wash ashore, Fraser uses a jetski to tow the timber in.

"With the driftwood, it's a massive job, but you spend days and take six or seven pieces off the shore which you will probably only get about 50 per cent of the wood from and the rest will end up in the fire.

"But what you can use will take three to three-and-a-half years to dry out properly before it's ready to go into the furniture. But at the end of the day it is worth it."

Fraser has also developed the skills, and bought the equipment, to be able to mill the timber he uses himself — meaning that he is in control of every process involved in creating his

furniture, from the drawing board to showcasing the finished product.

"It's good to be able to work that way," he said, "and offer the made-to-measure service because a lot of the customers that come to me like that — it's the same person who does the work from start to finish."

All this hard work has led to orders from around the world.

"I would say getting furniture to go worldwide is a big thing — I put a whole dining set to Key Largo, in Florida, and I'll be putting a piece to New Zealand soon.

"While the people in New Zealand are from Sanday originally, the customer in Florida said she just fancied something unique and different for her house."

With the continued expansion of his business, reputation and skill set — all the while keeping a sharp ear for what customers want — Fraser has been able to dramatically increase his range.

One of the most radical and innovative

additions to his gallery has been the space-saving 'Corner Orkney chair'.

Fraser said: "Lots of folk came to me with the problem that they didn't have enough room in their house for an Orkney chair. So I came up with the idea of the corner Orkney chair.

"It's a design that's completely my own and based around the idea of space saving. That part was simple. The difficult part was designing the whole thing. It might not be everybody's cup of tea, but a lot of people like it because their upper body isn't restricted in the way it can be with the traditional chair."

Ten years on and Fraser is delighted with how his business, and designs, have progressed.

"I've really branched into so many different things that I've always wanted to do in the past few years. There's doing the rustic furniture, like the cabinets or pieces like that for, say, a living room of a certain size. I do a lot of outdoor



Celebrating ten years in business — furniture artisan Fraser Anderson at work on the straw back of one of his Orkney chairs.

(www.theorcadianphotos.co.uk)

furniture as well.

"Also it's not just the fact that I can make it out of 'standard timber' — I'll make it out of timber that's unique or rare, so that the customer can say that it's a one-off piece. I think that that's a big attraction for some people."

"I definitely think that Orkney chairs are a big part of Orkney's identity, and the chairs do have a reputation throughout the world.

"Being able to keep that going is absolutely brilliant, but being able to keep it going in even more of a traditional way is even better."

In anticipation of his tenth anniversary, Fraser has a new website in the works and is continuing to promote his bespoke furniture.

He has also been quietly working to, once again, produce another twist on the "classic" Orkney chair design — the Kissing Orkney Chair.

The idea for this design came, once again, from listening to his customers.

"I would say this new design is really my tenth-anniversary statement. The kissing chair is made so that two people sit in opposite directions. It has a lower back so you can get your upper bodies above it. It is something completely different and came about as a potential wedding present.

"The Kissing Orkney Chair is very different and people will either like it or they won't, but I think it will attract a certain market.

"I suppose it's more of a romantic Orkney chair, but, at the end of the day, it's just taking what people have told me they would like and evolving it. Yes, it is a very new design, but it's still very much rooted in the tradition. I would imagine it will catch the eye anyway."

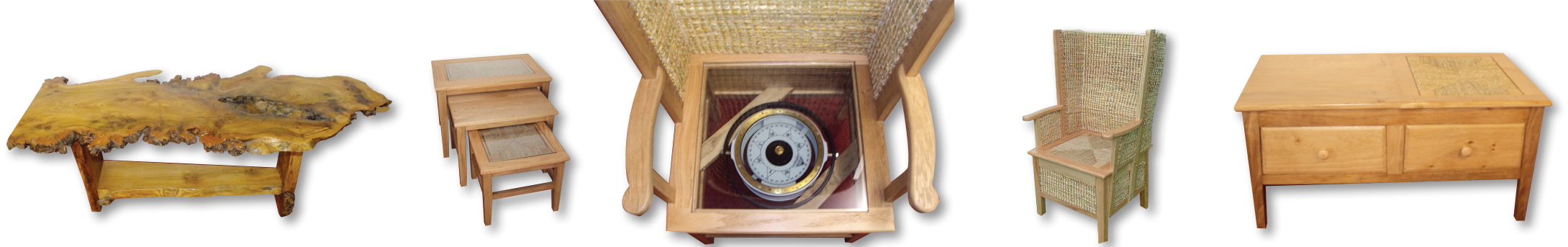


Fraser at work in his Kirkwall workshop.

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The new Kissing Chair — Fraser's 'tenth-anniversary statement'



Fraser Anderson

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