

Cecil Tait: Paparwark

Fi Martynoga interviews a Shetlander who makes quality wooden items, from traditional chairs to spatulas.

Shetland is not a landscape renowned for its forests, trees formerly only appearing in sheltered gardens, although many more have been planted in the last twenty years. To find a high quality furniture maker on the islands is a happy surprise for me, as I can combine holiday with an interesting encounter. Cecil Tait, a born Shetlander, has been running his well named business, Paparwark there for twenty years. *Papar* is from the name given to the Celtic people living on the islands before the era of the Vikings, *wark* for creative work, a distinction from ordinary work which I have always enjoyed.

I was attracted to his wark by pictures on Cecil's website of traditional Shetland chairs, but here, as I leave the sight of St Ninian's Isle in glorious sunshine and enter his workshop, the first thing I see is an enormous Victorian mahogany sideboard. It is in for restoration as Cecil, trained first in Glasgow and then at High Wycombe where he gained a degree in furniture craftsmanship and design, can turn his hand to many things, including mending veneers and carvings. Chairs, also in for repair, hang from a beam but there is no sign of a traditional chair. For that I have to wait to see Cecil's showroom and what a treasure-house that proves to be!

I ask Cecil about traditional design. "It was constantly evolving", he says. "Wood was hard to come by, so people used what they could find, often driftwood. After a storm they would be down on the beach as the first person to touch a floating log and bring it ashore could claim it and others would respect the claim, providing he got it above the high

water mark." That means that the materials used were variable, as timber could float in from North America or occasionally halfway round the world from Africa, as well as from mainland Scotland and Norway. Cecil has used driftwood, he has also made chairs out of Shetland-grown sycamore and ash, but he more usually uses imported timber. American oak, ash, sycamore, maple, walnut and elm all appear in his work.

He was only 16 when he made his first chair, a Windsor-style rocker. "I found the design in a practical woodworking magazine and made it as an exam piece." Cecil was inspired by furniture he had seen in traditional croft houses. "I spent a summer vacation travelling around Shetland, taking photos of vernacular chairs in people's houses and in the museum. My father's cousin made chairs, and there was another old man who did too. I liked some of their designs but I wanted to establish my own way

of doing things." Cecil has certainly done this. His chairs vary from plain panelled armchairs to those with panelled hoods (like the basket hoods of Orkney chairs, ideal for keeping draughts from the back of the neck—I am old enough to remember how useful this would have been!) to benches or 'restin chairs' which most Shetland homes had in the past. Cecil points out that such benches would have been used as additional sleeping spaces in small croft houses. All of these chairs are solid, harmonious, and beautifully finished. Their joints are morticed and tenoned and primarily pegged. They look magnificent and are, unlike the flimsy products from our current most common furniture provider, absolutely built to last!

Chairs are not the only traditional items on show. What attracts, and delights, my eye is a clump of curious oval boxes with wooden lids that slide neatly into place down two slightly protruding spikes to make



Faerdie maet box. Photo: Mark Sinclair.

a very tight fit. These are 'faerdie maet' boxes and similar ones can be found in the Shetland Museum. That translates as 'food to go' but how much more lovely they are than a cool bag! Inspired by Scandinavian food boxes, probably made of birch bark, these migrated to the US and were made in thin wood by the Shaker communities. Cecil's version comes in two sizes, the larger about fourteen inches long. The materials, and so the colours, vary, with sycamore and walnut appearing most often and a contrast between the wood of the lid and that of the sides providing additional visual interest. The thin timber (quarter-sawn veneer) is soaked in very hot water to make the fibres pliable and then bent round a mould, with the joined end attractively scalloped. A faerdie maet box would be ideal for storing cheese as the lid can be inverted and used as a board. I find myself coveting one but know that it is beyond my holiday budget.

In the past, much of Cecil's trade was with islanders and visitors. Covid changed that, inevitably, and he decided to work on a range of smaller items that can be easily posted and to make fuller use of his website. The result is an attractive gift collection of candle sticks, serving platters, bread boards, wine bottle holders, book ends, and tea-light holders, all of them affordable. I find myself in possession of a clever spatula. It is curved, and tapers to a point, so can be used as a spurtle as well as for flipping things, and is fashioned from an off-cut from a furniture leg. "My first apprentice, Andrew, and I saw these large flakes of

Top: A Shetland chair and a hooded Shetland chair outside the local croft house museum.
Below: Baptismal Font. Photos: Cecil Tait.



wood going on the burning pile and decided to make use of them instead. People seem to like them."

Another success is Cecil's neat design for folding 'jumper boards'. These have been used in Shetland for as long as there has been a knitting tradition. When you work with traditional wools and with elaborate designs, it is important to be able to stretch the knitting to the right shape. He found examples in the museum and adapted them, making them adjustable so that they will work for many different sizes. Once folded flat, these are easy to pack and post and have proved extremely popular, especially following the revival of knitting that occurred during lockdown. Cecil is surprised at how many orders come from far afield (he has sold 40 in the last three months). "It costs as much to post one of these jumper boards to Australia as it does to buy it but that doesn't stop me from selling them to people there", he says. I wonder

whether folk use them for drying their newly washed jumpers, as well as when they are creating them. Cecil's wife, Jennifer, who makes the lovely hats, gloves and woollies that adorn the shelves of the showroom, isn't there to ask but I guess they would be a great improvement over spreading sodden garments flat on the kitchen table.

As well as these smaller items, Cecil, with the help of Jack, gets major commissions, from fitting luxury kitchens to ecclesiastical furnishings. He has made lecterns, communion tables and chairs, and even a font for St Columba's Church of Scotland, Lerwick. The bowl, made of native grown burr elm, and echoing the shape of a coracle, is suspended from two steam-bent, sinuous stands. It symbolises the fire of God and is exciting, striking, like many of the designs of this unusual maker. If you are in Shetland, visit his showroom at Bigton. If not, have a long browse of his website and you will see the talent and versatility of Paparwark.

paparwark.co.uk

Fi Martynoga is a writer and environmental campaigner based in the Scottish Borders.

