



# Shingle all the way

*Owen Bushell drove 8,000 miles across Europe to bring traditional shingle-making back to Scotland*

I gave a talk at the Reforesting Scotland Gathering last October, with a brief summary of my journey working towards setting up a shingle-making workshop, travelling to Europe with the Churchill Fellowship and the outcomes of that research: setting up a not-for-profit social enterprise to develop that learning at the Finzean Bucket Mill in Aberdeenshire, a water-powered saw and turning mill from 1853.

A roofing shingle is a roof or wall tile made from wood. Sometimes from sawn timber, sometimes (and better), cleft. The business case for home-grown shingles is solid: the UK imports an average of £2.5 million in mainly Canadian cedar shingles each year. I saw an excellent hybrid method of cleaving shingles from sawn timber in Sweden, an ideal product to compete with those worldwide imports that are shipped thousands of miles – mainly for making garden rooms and sheds feel ‘more eco’.

Fate brought me to Austria and I undertook a shingle-making and installation apprenticeship at its national open-air museum in 2020. This was hugely inspiring, with much of that inspiration coming from Klaus Seelos, the shingle master and museum maintenance director. Klaus had been deeply inspired by the writing of John Seymour and this had turned into a life’s work of keeping alive the intangible cultural heritage (such as working with horses, lime burning and skills associated with repairing traditional buildings) which brought to life the otherwise inert preserved buildings, which had been relocated to the museum to represent Austria’s rich vernacular traditions.

When COVID and Brexit made European living impossible, I returned to the UK with a clear idea that I wanted to set up a shingle workshop. The first breakthrough came when I was able to meet Ross Watson, the Woodland Trust’s regional manager for

the North of Scotland. Ross helped me secure larch from Migdale Woodland, on the north side of the Dornoch Firth, which was being felled pre-emptively ahead of Ramorum disease likely making an appearance in the forest. There are hundreds of land managers across Scotland just like Ross who have the power to make or break emerging craft businesses through access to raw materials: an open door can make a huge difference.

The larches in Migdale were stunning. I counted annular rings to 170 years old. They grew straight and slow and were not exposed to high wind pressure, which makes the fibres cleave straight rather than twist. Tight annular rings makes for a durable timber: it is the winter wood which makes for resilience over time.

I manufactured approximately 2,000 ‘red’ heartwood and another 250 or so ‘white’ sapwood shingles from the first load. These were all of the same pattern I’d learned to manufacture in Austria: variable in width and 600mm in length – much longer than your average import Canadian cedar shingles, which are generally around 400mm. This ensures substantial headlap (the amount one roofing tile overlaps another) to withstand heavy driving rain. This first batch was entirely hand-made, no hydraulic splitters – just axes, a big mallet, froe and shaving horse.

Plans to produce more were shelved when a sale on a joiner’s workshop fell through, but fortunately I spent much of 2022 undertaking the Society for the Protection of Ancient Building’s (SPAB) Fellowship programme, which included a placement covering the endangered craft of millwrighting – the trade of making and repairing windmills and watermills. In September 2022 I joined a ‘Working Party’ event at the mills of Finzean in Aberdeenshire. I was awestruck by the mills: three water-powered sawmills – a turning mill, sawmill and a mile



Previous page, from the top:  
In the Swiss Alps, Eva Gredig mainly manufactures shingles from spruce in her workshop at 1,700 metres above sea level.

The first 60cm shingles manufactured from larch from Migdale. The basic tools of the trade are froe, mallet and axe.

Owen's Landrover in front of Granhults Kyrka, Sweden's oldest church which is roofed and clad in Scots pine shingles.

Left: The Ambulance for Monuments in Romania is a shining example of how historic building repairs can reconnect communities.

All photos: Owen Bushell.

On my return, the conversation with the Birse Community Trust developed and we settled upon the Community Interest Company (CIC) structure as the best way to take forward the lease on the Bucket Mill. With support from Community Enterprise Scotland a sound business plan has been developed which looks to develop revenue streams to fund the long-term repair and maintenance of the mill and reduce dependence on grants.

One area to develop is, of course, shingle-making. Serendipitously, there is a historical precedent of shingles being manufactured in Finzean. The therapeutic benefits of shingle-making cannot be understated either – as we develop the means to host volunteers, shingle-making is set to return as a social activity, the products being sold to support the upkeep of the mill. Having pursued shingle-making for five years on a private basis, it is wonderful to be able to finally have a suitable vehicle to share it with a much wider audience and reap holistic benefits at the same time.

[www.bucketmill.co.uk](http://www.bucketmill.co.uk)

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## Read more

Owen Bushell's Churchill Fellowship report *Supporting Rural Craft Businesses – A Study of European Shingle Makers* is available to buy from the Reforesting Scotland web shop for £7.

upstream, the Bucket Mill, which is a turning and sawmill all-in-one. This hidden gem was clearly a special place.

Over the next two years pressure to earn a living put shingle-making in the back seat, although a couple of 'shingle jobs' came my way: producing sawn shingles to replicate an existing shingled roof for the National Trust for Scotland's renovation of Queen Victoria's Picnic Lodge on the Mar Lodge estate and for cladding a wall of a tool shed in North Kessock for the inspiring charity Go Flourish. I also made a start on designing and getting a custom Grey Fergie-driven hydraulic log-splitter fabricated to increase productivity.

Another bitter experience of insecure tenure delivered me back into Aberdeenshire in 2024 at which point I figured there was no harm to ask the Birse Community Trust – the owners of the Finzean Mills: 'Would you entertain a lease at the Bucket Mill?'

Parallel to this I had been awarded a Churchill Fellowship to research rural craft business in Europe and to learn more of the European ways, which is essential when the craft is at best not much more than a form of historical enactment in the UK. I realised that the challenges I was experiencing trying to set up a shingle workshop were universal challenges to anyone trying to make a living in the rural craft trades. Themes of access to skills training, funding, security of tenure and raw materials are universal to leather tanners, boat builders, weavers, lime burners and shingle-makers alike. Each niche has its own secondary challenges, such as the shingle-maker's need for straight, knot-free and preferably slow-grown timber.

Something deeper lay at the heart of this research, too. With the concerning move towards carbon credits, the new wave of concentrated land ownership in Scotland may do much for nature conservation, but it deletes humans from the landscape and prevents the emergence of a new production economy, both in crofting and through developing small-scale, resilient rural crafts businesses, producing societally useful things, from natural materials.

I began the travel for the research in August 2024, driving first to Newcastle for the Amsterdam boat and then across northern Germany into Denmark and over to Sweden. From Sweden to Finland, Finland to the Baltic States, south to Poland and onto Romania, then west to the Balkans and the Slovenian, Austrian and Swiss Alps before a stop in the Black Forest of south-west Germany, meeting a multitude of primarily shingle-makers with a smattering of interesting research institutions and open-air museums. All in all, the trip was around 8,000 miles – three months spent living out the back of my trusty 110 Defender.

I started the research with a hope of finding clear examples where governments or the third sector gave grants or some means of financial or premises support to support makers direct. The low-hanging fruit was for personal gain: learning more about my niche craft. The bigger prize was to identify mechanisms that might improve the lot of craft trades in Scotland and to find the best practices and bring them home. For those reflections, you'll be better placed to read my report (see box on the right).