

ALCHEMY OF LAND & WOOD

Fuggo King describes the journey she and her partner, Geoff King, made to turn a subsistence plot in Scotland into a productive landscape and how they made it a base from which to create exquisite natural wooden jewellery.



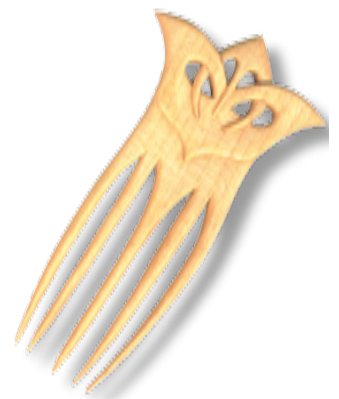
Living in the north-east of Scotland in the microclimate of an Easter Ross peninsula, it feels easy to appreciate all that we have. Our own renovated croft house on two acres of forest garden is, as Geoff calls it, 'an oasis in a desert of sheep'. Sometimes we refer to it as 'the Arbol vortex' because visitors say it is so difficult to leave.¹ We are certainly planning to stay.

What I feel is important to convey is how ordinary we are, yet by taking lots of little steps we are evolving in our landscape. It's a slow process, 'speed of a tree' as our great friend Tree Paul puts it. He has been collecting local tree seeds for many years and is responsible for clumps of trees in gardens, corners of farms and hillsides all over Ross-shire and Moray.

Below left: The croft and garden before work began.

REVITALISING THE LAND

The trees growing here are largely for food (hazel and gean), coppicing, firewood for the second hand rayburn, and willow for weaving, (mostly living sculptures). We also have a mix of oak, ash, birch, rowan, alder, hawthorn, blackthorn and Scots pine as windbreak and improvement on the surrounding grassland. These trees were planted in 1995 and have since been busy soaking up



water from the natural spring line, attracting birds and other wild life and providing shelter. Adding sheep and rabbit-proof fencing proved essential; blackcurrants, damsons, apples and scented white roses from the old garden all then thrived. We watched the seasons turn, witnessed what nature preferred to nurture and started to plant between the trees to see what we could grow.

Below right: Croft, side view, with mountains beyond.





Working from the house and caravan outwards we turned the rubbish patch into a herb garden, grew vegetables mixed with wild flowers, and experimented with companion planting. Always growing organically, one step at a time, rejoicing in every mouthful and new challenge.

Our latest aid to producing more food and lengthening our season has been to erect

Top pages 27-30: Looking north from nearby coast.

a polytunnel. The decision to buy so much plastic was difficult, but such a big expanse of glass was too expensive. Plus it seemed a little risky on such a windy site, even with so many trees planted. We are so far north (about a hundred miles south of Stockholm) that our season is short but intense. The previous owners would have lived on tatties, neeps, lamb and porridge. We are vegetarian however, and anyway I like tomatoes!

With Geoff succumbing to Lyme disease after our house renovation, we realised I needed more help in the garden. We'd heard of WWOOFing (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) and we tentatively became hosts. But what a lifesaver with unexpected benefits. Not only were we helped with all aspects of growing, we also took on new challenges: repairing dry stone walls, building a chicken hut, pond digging, expanding

Below left: Returning to the croft after a winter walk.

fruit beds, planting another acre of trees. Still to come are a compost toilet, better rain collection and low tech solar and wind power. Even more importantly we have been able to share ideas, enthusiasms and late night discussions over homemade wine. Whilst eating the food together, we are linking to a world of people who want a similar connection with their environment. All our volunteers have been engaging, helpful and full of their own stories. I would encourage anyone who has an organic garden or who wants to help out in one, to join as a host or volunteer.

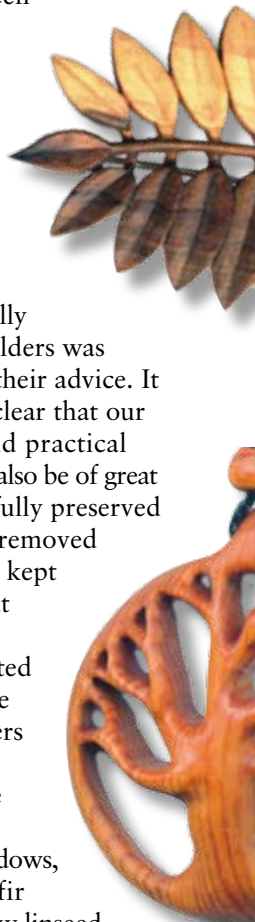
RENOVATING THE CROFT

The 'grand design' of a perfect eco-renovation of the abandoned croft soon took a reality check – we found out that the nearest supplier for much of the material we needed was in London!

Below: The polytunnel thriving in its first year.

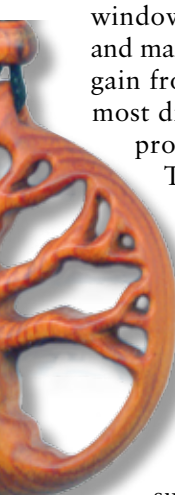
In fact a lot of materials would have been imported from Germany. We also had no computer and no electricity initially at all, but the Association of Environmentally Conscious Builders was brilliant with their advice. It soon became clear that our scavenging and practical natures would also be of great help. We carefully preserved 90% of slates removed from the roof, kept everything that could be used again and started to see what the original builders had done.

Geoff made local oak into doors and windows, and Douglas fir coated with raw linseed oil was used for the roof and floor structures. Our





floorboards were made of recycled pine beams. Geoff embarked on a fantastic course at the Scottish Lime Centre so that we could use natural stone from a nearby ruin, and lime mortar and harling to create a breathable addition to the height of the building. We kept the original northerly windows to a minimum and maximised on the solar gain from the south. Our most disappointing compromise was insulation. The sheep's wool and recycled paper options were way beyond our dwindling budget. After three and a half years in the caravan and with Geoff's health suffering we opted for fibreglass and plasterboard, – aaargh!



WOODY TREASURES

Alongside all this, Geoff decided to try to regain some independence and earn some money by working all the small pieces of wood he had been salvaging and rescuing over the years. Having previously made large furniture, doors and windows, his creativity took flight in carving small items. "People treat wood as disposable," says Geoff. "They do not give it high regard, but I have always treasured it, enjoying the enormous variety of textures, grains, colours and properties that different species have. I wanted to put all my little off-cuts to a use that would give them value."

Turning native woods into exquisite jewellery, necklaces, brooches, earrings and combs has also happened slowly. The results are stunning. Geoff works with finesse; carving, cutting, finishing and oiling every piece.

Below: Halloween pumpkin grown in the polytunnel.

He sometimes creates Art Nouveau-inspired filigree scrolls that would be complex in metal but are extraordinary in wood, and also borrows from traditional jewellery by setting stones. Amber is set in brown walnut; turquoise in cream coloured box; polished beach pebbles in pale holly. Bog oak from Somerset is a wonderful material that takes fine carving detail. In particular, the combination of this wood that has been dated to over 4,600 years old, with amber that is much older, is very satisfying. Geoff would love to find some Scottish bog oak.

The same basis of reduce, reuse and recycle has applied to this fast growing side of our busy lives. Geoff uses a minimum of power tools, instead hand carving and finishing with natural plant oils. He has devised small wooden fastenings and

Below right: The author picking blackcurrants.



is now developing linen and cotton braids and cords to match the high quality of his work. We travel and sleep in our van and put up a medieval style marquee to sell the pieces at festivals and events and we also have our website. Combining ancient carving techniques and modern selling seems to work and helps pay the bills.

Centre: Daffodils herald the coming of spring.





LIVING OUR DREAM

The journey we have taken so far has been a succession of revelations, discoveries, ups and downs; finding our own balance of work, rest and play. We are also fitting into our place in earth's cycle of celebrations; a fantastic way to reconnect with a heart and soul based life.

When we lived in Somerset our involvement in the local Green Party was very educational and gave us many new perspectives. But having a child and seeing the political system chew up and spit out so much enthusiasm helped us choose to live the dream for ourselves first. Now I feel ready to open out more to the local community, to show what anyone can achieve in small and simple steps.

The track to our home is bumpy and long, but with re-surfacing approaching it feels like the connection with the outside world is strengthening.

Below: A safe warm refuge from the winter storms.



We plan to invite local schools to visit, hold open days for local people and perhaps tap into the Transition Town movement. Who knows where all this will lead? I dream of a corridor of trees joining the coastal communities in the area.

We have also been enjoying getting involved in a drama group. All three of us have been in amateur productions; a fantastic, thrilling and nerve racking creative process with lots of laughter. Also, as an antidote to, and balance from, what is still a busy life,

Geoff and I both practice Taoist Tai Chi and I enjoy being a voluntary instructor.

So now we are inviting more of the world back into our home. This January we celebrated Imbolc as well as two birthdays, with a fire, drumming, singing and dancing.² A pattern of continuity with the generations of Easter Ross; past present and future 🌍



Fuggo and Geoff King live in Easter Ross, five minutes' walk from a sandy bay. info@woodlandtreasures.co.uk
www.woodlandtreasures.co.uk

To find out more about becoming an organic farm host or volunteer see: www.wwoof.org.uk

FOOTNOTES

¹ Arbol (Gaelic: Arbol) is a place in Easter Ross, in the Highlands of Scotland made up of several scattered farms. It is situated about 10km (6 miles) to the east of Tain and a short distance inland from Dornoch Firth. Source: Wikipedia

² Imbolc is one of the four principal festivals of the Irish calendar, celebrated among Gaelic peoples and some other Celtic cultures, either at the beginning of February or at the first local signs of Spring. Most commonly it is celebrated on February 2, which falls halfway between the Winter Solstice and Spring Equinox in the northern hemisphere. Source: Wikipedia



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