Castle Terrace

Marlene:

Just a heads up, we had a bit of trouble recording Susan's audio, so it doesn't sound great. If you have trouble understanding, there's also the transcript that you can read. I hope you enjoyed the episode regardless.

Hi, welcome to Walking Woods. I'm Marlene Cramer and I'm taking you for a walk. Not in the woods, but in Edinburgh.

You are now standing on Castle Terrace with a splendid view over Arthur’s Seat and Old Town to the South. We are looking towards North, where you can see Princes St and New Town. But I want you to look even further than this, towards the Firth of Forth. Following the shoreline to the east, just at the edge of your view you…

Susan:

…you can just make out Newhaven, which is… which was an independent town before Edinburgh swallowed it. But it's actually a town that was founded to build a ship.

Marlene:

This is Susan. Susan is a stand-up comedienne. And not only that.

Susan:

My name is Susan Morrison. I don't know a great deal about wood, but I do know about history, and you can't really know about history without knowing about Woods, I guess.

Marlene:

Well, certainly you can't build a ship without wood. The particular ship that Susan was talking about was called the Great Michael, and she was built by King James the 4th in 1505. And yes, that's the same King James the 4th that, as Anne told us, had the Great Hall of Edinburgh built with Norwegian oak just a few years after that. What does that have to do with the great Michael?

Susan:

Well, the Michael was a very large ship. She could have carried 1000 soldiers. She had 120 Gunners, so she was absolutely massive. And she was said to use every single piece of oak in Scotland in her construction. And she probably did, because she was so vast.

You need a particular type of oak to build a battleship. It must be straight and you can only use the heartwood, the very middle. You can't use, you can't use those oak trees that are all kind of like gnarled… cause nobody, nobody, wants a curvy battleship. You have to be straight. So she used up all the decent oak in Scotland.

Marlene:

The oak is said to have come from Fife, which you can see just on the other side of the Firth. We'll hear more about oak from Fife later in the tour, but what happened to the Great Michael?

Susan:

She was launched in 1513 and she went to sea. She had more guns than any other ship at sea, she was huge. And 1513, tragically, James the 4th dies at Flodden. We sell, Scotland, sells the ship to the French and she... disappears.

Marlene:

Of course, we'd all love to know what happened and where all of Scotland's wood reserves ended up, but…

Susan:

No one knows. There are some stories of a ship rotting in Brest Harbour. There's one story of a ship attacking a castle, that's what she was designed to do incidentally, attack castles, with those huge cannons that could smash castle walls. But nobody actually knows what happened to her.

Marlene:

Well, whether or not all the decent oak of Scotland disappeared with the Great Michael, the UK did start to rely on imported timber more and more. Britain did not pay much attention to its homegrown timber resources until the early 20th century, and so to reliance on imported timber still persists today. The UK is the second largest net importer of timber in the world, but for the last 100 years there have been some efforts to have more forests planted and cared for and to get more home grown timber into use. We are still doing a lot of work on that at Edinburgh Napier University, so check out the blog to learn more.

You can now make your way down Royal Mile. At the next stop, we shall see if not a bit of decent oak from Fife remained after the Great Michael.