Grassmarket Community Project

Marlene:

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 in front of a cafe called the Coffee Saints. From the outside, this does not seem to have too much to do with wood, but perhaps you already spotted what's hidden inside the building when you made your way here via Greyfriars Kirkyard.

John:

You wouldn't necessarily know a wood workshop was here. It's tucked away upstairs in the building. There's a little back door entering onto Greyfriars Kirkyard, which is how quite a few people encounter us. They sort of stick their head in. They're walking around the kirkyard, but we are… Yeah, a project that's been in this building for over 14 years. It's been operating for, you know, before that for nearly 20. And yeah, we've got a fully functioning workshop in here, a compact one, that's manufacturing furniture to commission, offering training opportunities for a whole host of different people who come and be members of our project.

Marlene:

This is John.

John:

I'm John Slight. I run the wood workshop at the Grassmarket Community Project. My background was wood. Well, I'm a I'm a joiner by trade. I've worked in the industry for over 20 years. I've been running the workshop here at the Grassmarket Community Project for nearly four years.

Marlene:

And the wood workshop is not only training people and making valuable items out of local timber, it also uses resources that most others would consider waste.

John:

We used a lot of recycled stock and the project started very much as a project that was designed to recycle materials, specifically church pews. We have a connection historically with the Greyfriars, the Greyfriars Kirk, which is right next door to us, and it started out using old pews that were being removed from churches and trying to do something with this wood and offer skills training for people who might benefit from that. We still have a reputation as the church Pew people.

Marlene:

In case you're wondering.

John:

So a church Pew is a wooden seat, a fixed seat, that is traditionally part of a church interior in the UK. Well, probably all over the world. There are just, I guess, different names for it internationally. And a lot of churches remove these pews these days because they are, like I say, fixed. They're sort of an old-fashioned interior. And they can remove them. They can have a more functional open space in the in the building and use a different type of seating. So they become kind of defunct, but many of them are over, you know, sort of, you know, put in the buildings over 100 years ago and more. And so it's a huge range of different materials. A lot of softwood, a lot of pines. Pitch pine, which, again, is now quite rarely used. I think in the industry, if you're buying it fresh, you know. Oak, we've even had teak in the past. Yeah. Massive different range of timbers you can find.

Marlene:

The wood workshop gives the pews and other recovered timber a new life. The reuse of old timber is not at all common in the UK and Europe, and most recovered timber is chipped for recycling or energy production. Community projects, like the Grassmarket Community Project or community wide recycling organisations, make great use of the recovered material and give them another life that stores away the carbon inside the wood for a long time. But not only old timber gets a new life here.

John:

We also use a lot of windfall and sort of reclaimed timber, as we refer to it. So again, timber that's never been cultivated for woodwork, but it's come out of Parkland, it's been removed from building sites and we we've had that milled we've had that planked and stored for drying…seasoning and we use a lot of that as well. So, again, that's all very, very local.

Marlene:

When park trees are felled, they are normally regarded as waste and chipped for energy recovery. This is a shame because many of these trees could have a use beyond becoming firewood. But not only park trees and windfall, but most of the hardwood that we harvest in the UK is actually burned for energy production because, as John says, these trees might not really have been planted with timber production in mind. And so, the trees might not have the best form to give the highest yield of timber, and it might be a challenge to find sawmillers who take them on. We will meet one hardwood sawmiller later at station 8. There's also an article linked that explains different challenges with hardwood sawmilling in more detail.

In the wood workshop here, they make the sawn timber into bespoke items.

John:

We've got our little window down on the front street there with a few wooden items, which is sort of a taster. And likewise in the cafe, a few little wooden items for sale, but the majority of our work is sort of larger commissioned pieces of furniture. So, we don't actually make a huge amount of those smaller retail items and they're just, they're almost a bit of a token that, yeah, as an example of what we do.

We've recently made a couple of objects that have gone into the Edinburgh Futures Institute. So, some display cabinets for them and that was using recycled material. Again, that came out of the construction project and came out of the actual old building there and some windfall trees that came out of the site. So, a good example of what I've just been talking about, how we recycle material.

Marlene:

I've put that on your map in case you want to see for yourself. But besides giving discarded timbers and exciting life, the Grassmarket Community Project is also big as a social enterprise.

John:

Aside from what we manufacture for the business side, it's all about offering skills sharing and training to our members. Anyone can join our project, totally open to all. We work specifically with a group of young people who are trainees. We refer to them as pre-apprentices, not quite on a full apprenticeship. But they're given a stepping stone towards an apprenticeship. Many of our trainees would probably find it challenging to access a full apprenticeship, mainly because they have a history of, sort of, learning difficulty or mental health needs, support needs and so on. So as a result we're trying to give them a stepping stone towards some future training, maybe. You know, they could maybe take on a craft based professional training course after this, with another institution, perhaps with a bit more confidence after they've come to us. And others will, you know, sort of stick around and actually stay with us and, you know, become I think good woodworkers in their own right.

Marlene:

And as John says, the workshop is open to anyone. Anyone can join and volunteer or go to one of the many events at the Grassmarket Community Project. You can drop into the coffee and the workshop roughly between 10:00 AM and 4:00 PM Monday to Friday.

You can now follow the map through grassmarket, a historic marketplace that has long also been a gathering place, and so you'll find many a pub with a long tradition here. The grassmarket was also a place for public executions in the 17th century, so keep an eye out for the Covenanters memorial just at the entrance of Grass Market. You can also take a detour from the end of grass market, up the stairs to the famous venal viewpoint and listen to the next episode from there.