New Parliament

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 the new parliament building, the home of the Scottish Parliament. The building complex is designed to reflect the connection between Scotland and its nature, and so you might want to listen to this episode seated in the Amphitheatre style garden or by the fountain. The building was designed by Enric Miralles and...

Jim:

It's meant to look like a bunch of autumn leaves scattered on the ground, and if you do see it from the air, you can kind of see what he's getting at there.

Marlene:

This is Jim.

Jim:

My name is Jim Birley. I work for a small hardwood sawmill called Scottish Wood in Fife. And we cut up Scottish grown hardwoods and larch and we supply them to the market.

Marlene:

You might not be able to go inside the Parliament building now, but Jim will give you an idea of what it looks inside.

Jim:

When people come into the building, they will come into a nice foyer and as they come in on their right there is a long kind of desk with people helping, you know, people there to help you, sitting behind it and that long desk is very beautiful. It's made out of Scottish Sycamore, so it adds to the appeal of the building. But otherwise lots of open space, light, interesting design, interesting wood, lots of wood.

I really like the building and I think it's also done in a way that suits Scotland because Scotland is quite a, I think more than the UK, it's more of a community-minded population. And the parliament was very much built on meeting rooms that allow the public to have their say to have an input. And I think the design has been done very well on that basis that the people can come and get involved in meetings and have their input in the decision making.

Marlene:

This community spirit is even reflected in the wood that's used inside the building. Well, maybe not exactly on purpose.

Jim:

They only… to give them credit, they wanted to use some homegrown hardwood.

Marlene:

Which posed a bit of a challenge.

Jim:

Basically, Scotland used to have a healthy hardwood industry and then that industry died away in the kind of 70s, 80s and 90s because a lot of it was connected to heavy industry, like shipbuilding and coal mining, and also indigenous furniture making. And these things largely died away and so did the demand for homegrown hardwood. And so come the 1990s, there was very little happening on the ground in terms of turning Scotland's hardwood trees into products. And Scotland instead was importing an awful lot. Almost all of what it needed it imported from abroad. And didn't use its own, so it wasn't a pretty picture. It was a bit of a sad story.

Marlene:

Well, luckily the construction of the parliament building started in summer of 1999, and by the time the procurement for the interior started, the picture had changed a little.

Jim:

A bunch of us got together to create ASHS, which is the Association of Scottish Hardwood Sawmillers. We did this in the year 2000. And about six of us got together to create this organisation and it wasn't long after that that the people that were in charge of the new Scottish Parliament came to ASHS and said, look, it would be lovely to use Scottish oak in the building. We knew that we couldn't do that in huge volumes, so they used it for a specific project and the members of ASHS contributed on a kind of piecemeal basis and we all contributed a little bit to create what was required for their project within the Parliament.

Marlene:

So even with the existence of ASHS it's not exactly straightforward to get your hands on Scottish hardwoods. You need the whole community to contribute. And coincidentally, this way the new parliament also has something in common with the old Parliament hall, which we heard about from Phil.

Jim:

What we supplied probably came from Fife or not very far away, so it could have been Edinburgh area or Fife. It could have been Perthshire. Most of our wood comes from within about a 50 mile radius of where we are, and it will all have been Scottish. And then for the other members that supplied it would have been different places all over Scotland.

Marlene:

Since the construction of the Great Michael, we might not have a whole lot of oak in Fife, but apparently some decent oak could be found.

Jim:

Is very good quality oak and in the UK generally. On a kind of UK wide basis the hardwoods are considered to be of only moderate quality and the reason for that is that we haven't managed the woods, we haven't looked after them. We haven't pruned them and all this. Anything and the reason for that is because we had an empire and it was cheaper and easier to import, you know, very good high quality tropical hardwoods back to the UK rather than looking after our own. Which is why in Europe tends to have better quality hardwood forests than the UK, but otherwise Scotland, you know, the oak that it grows, it tends to have more character, which is quite often popular and in demand. But yeah, good quality wood obviously grows in Scotland and now thankfully we're beginning to learn how to make it make use of it again.

Marlene:

And we are helping people to make the best use of their timber by researching hardwood properties. Have a look at the notes if you want to know more. Inside the parliament, Jims oak has been used in small booths that people use for meetings or as a quiet place to work, but you'll also be able to spot some of it if you only have time to take a quick glance inside the building.

Jim:

There's an iconic stairway in the building and not far from there there's a lump of oak with a piece of modern art sitting on it and we supplied that also.

Marlene:

So do go and have a look inside. The building is open to the public Monday to Saturday 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM with last entry 4:30 PM.

And this concludes your Walking Woods Edinburgh tour. I hope you had fun, I hope you learned something and I hope you found some places you want to explore further. Thanks so much to Jim and all the other contributors!