Parliament Hall

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 should find yourself just off Royal Mile in the midst of many imposing buildings. Surely the most impressive one is St. Giles’ Cathedral to your left, but for now we shall have a look to your other side. The large building complex to your right is hiding its interior behind arches and columns, and you would never know what's going on behind the walls, but…

Philip:

There's actually a sign outside that says “Parliament Hall Court of Session” so is actually where the Scottish Parliament met and they met there until 1707, when the Act of Unions basically took the.. down to Parliament in in in England.

Marlene:

I'm speaking with Philip.

Philip:

Philip O'Leary. I've been a timber consultant for over 25 years, spent over 25 years at TRADA, inspecting hundreds if not thousands of structures. A lot of our work has been, historically, has been inspecting old buildings - when there's a change of use or what condition the timber is and what's the strength grade that engineers can use.

Marlene:

And Phillip was called for an inspection of the roof of the Parliament Hall of what was the original Parliament House. The hall was constructed in 1637 and the roof in 1639, and the roof is really something special.

Philip:

It's called a hammerbeam roof, when, actually, it's not actually a true hammer beam roof. A hammerbeam roof typically has what we call a hammerbeam and hammer post, and they're actually missing from that roof. And hammerbeam roofs were designed simply to be what we call an open truss. So, there was… there wasn't a tie beam at the bottom and therefore it could span a big space, but keep it open. So, it was designed to become the early way of spanning wide spaces. And it's a sort of peculiar British thing, actually, you don't see it much in Europe, I don't think.

Marlene:

If you still can't imagine what a hammerbeam roof looks like, have a look at the sketch in the notes. You can also see the truly impressive example of the not so true hammerbeam roof in the Parliament Hall. But Philip says that some of the interesting things about the roof normally stay hidden from the visitors’ view.

Philip:

It has an interesting history in that, at the time it was being built… it's made of oak. But what's interesting is that when, at the time when the roof was being built, the literature did say this is in the 16th century, that it was hard to find local oak timbers for these people to build these kind of structures. And it was at this time that the Scotland was certainly importing a lot of timber from the eastern Baltics, Denmark, Sweden and Norway, predominantly pine, but certainly oak.

But the literature just showed that this was from oaks growing mainly at a place called Culross and Balgownie which is in Fife, which is, for those of you not from the country, is fairly local to Edinburgh.

Marlene:

You'll remember seeing Fife on our last stop at Castle Terrace. So apparently there was some decent oak left and Fife even after the construction of the Great Michael. Or was there?

Philip:

But on close inspection of the timbers, what's quite interesting is that they have used what's fairly small oak trees because there’s piths in the middle of the tree and you can see that the whole section, and it's typically… the bigger section is typically 300 by 300.

Marlene:

So these trees might well have been from a new generation of oak trees after the Great Michael. You need to have a very close look at the structure to notice that the oak trees were so young because people were quite clever with their design.

Philip:

When you're higher up on the roof, you can see that, in fact, that lot of the timbers have got wane on the one edge or two edges, and they always tend to place it on the top edge, so from the ground you can't see it. You can see some of it sometimes, but most of it you can't see until you get quite high up, so it's all it's all done… designed that way. But it's a clever design and it would have been some really challenging things because it has this, kind of, five-sided shape at the bottom and the middle part of that five-sided shape is actually the middle part of the tie beam, which is made in three sections. And then the rest of it took all the Timbers above the five-sided shapes and below the, kind of, tie beam is there to support that five-sided shape. So, it's quite a complex way of designing it and it has stood up there for nearly 400 years now, so that obviously works.

Marlene:

And it still works, not lastly because people like Philip check on our historic structures and make sure that everything stays in good shape.

Philip:

So prerogatively they do get checked maybe five years, ten years, but if someone sees something a bit odd, they wouldn't expect… And so, so a kind of non-timber specialist did inspect it and just raised a few questions. So, we were called in to do full inspection of it, really.

Marlene:

And luckily nothing major was discovered at this time.

Philip:

It's been there for 400 years and as long nothing major happens... I mean, it has been repaired. Works have been done so… quite crude repair work has been done, actually, in some places. But it is a listed building so any repair works or certainly strengthening work has to be done with sympathetic nature, really. You have to get past all the conservation officers and all that kind of things. So, it's quite tricky these things.

Marlene:

Luckily, Philip is taking care of the tricky things so that the historic structures remain for us to enjoy. Now, even though the building is still actively being used as the Civil Court, visitors can enjoy a look at Parliament Hall.

Philip:

When you go in, you go through kind of double doors and in front of you there's a desk and a security, but you don't have to go through that. To the right-hand side, there's a double door which you can go in. So, it's it looks a bit odd when you go in there. It might look a bit daunting. Can I really, should I be in here? But you can.

Marlene:

Parliament Hall is open for visit 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM Monday to Friday.

You can now continue your walk past St. Giles’ Cathedral and down Royal Mile. At our next stop you'll hear about a building that could have used Phil's services with inspection and repair. Watch out for the next stop just past the Radisson Blue Hotel on the left-hand side.