

DRIFTWOOD FURNITURE FROM SHETLAND

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I spotted my first piece of driftwood furniture, although I was not aware of it at the time, over a stone dyke at Gott on the mainland of Shetland, when I was eleven years old. It was an upright spinning wheel of unusual form with the wheel set slightly to one side (Fig. 6). It had been discarded because of woodworm, indeed, for this reason the good woman did not wish me to have it. I suppose this must have been the fate of a great deal of driftwood furniture.

It was not until some twenty years later that I returned to Shetland and visited the Islands several years running. The furniture in the old Shetland croft included a long settle, known as a resting chair, box beds, various chairs and a dresser with plate rack, a cradle and at least one, and very often more, spinning wheels.

I have always been interested in chairs, particularly those in the vernacular tradition because this is perhaps the one piece of furniture that tends to express regional characteristics more than any other. The Orkney chair with its straw back and sometimes canopied hood was quite familiar, reflecting the old saying that an Orcadian is a crofter with a boat, whereas a Shetlander tends to be a fisherman with a croft.

There are no trees on the Shetland Isles although attempts were made earlier this century to establish small plantations. Driftwood was a ready source of supply for making furniture and on quite a number of pieces there are circular bore holes made by the ship worm, *Teredo*.

The most common design of armchair (Fig. 1) has an almost eighteenth-century appearance with its shaped top rail. The frame is of oak pegged together and the panels are of pine. There are good examples in Lerwick Museum. However, on account of the time lag, this must date from the mid-nineteenth century at the earliest. The chair was found in an abandoned croft at Catfirth, some twelve miles north of Lerwick. The second chair in this group appears to be much later, is similarly constructed, but has a fielded back panel. It is made entirely of pine and came from a croft at Skellister in South Nesting. It was originally stained and varnished and has now been restored as far as possible to its original appearance (Fig. 4).

In another deserted and ruinous croft in Brough not far from Eswick on the mainland, I came across a third variety of chair of indeterminate date (Fig. 3). The frame, as in the previous examples, is of oak and the seat of pine. The arms sweep outwards in the traditional Scottish manner. The rails in the back are moulded and an early repair in copper is still in place. There are vestiges on the back of grey paint which could quite easily indicate Norwegian influence.

In the same croft was a broken spinning wheel, now restored, of very diminutive proportions (Fig. 5). Like nearly all Shetland examples, it is constructed of a variety of woods — anything that was available. The finials do not match, as so often seems to be the case, and this would indicate an early repair.

The earliest chair (Fig. 7) found in a broken state and held together with a wooden triangle nailed to the back, came from North Nesting. Apart from the seat which is pine, it is

made of oak and exhibits late seventeenth-century characteristics but in all probability was made in the late eighteenth century. It was shown unrestored at the exhibition titled *Common Furniture* held at Temple Newsam in 1982.

The last chair I acquired is a hooded example (Fig. 2), it has an oak frame with nicely pegged joints. The panels and the hood are of pine. The roof of the hood is very slightly bowed in front which gives an added refinement and there were vestiges of a reddish-brown stain. The chair was bought at auction in Lerwick but came originally from Unst, the most northerly of the Shetland Isles. Quite a large number of these chairs have survived and must have been popular in the cold and draughty crofts in this part of the world.



1. Armchair, oak with pine seat and panels, mid-nineteenth century, from Catfirth, Skellister, Shetland



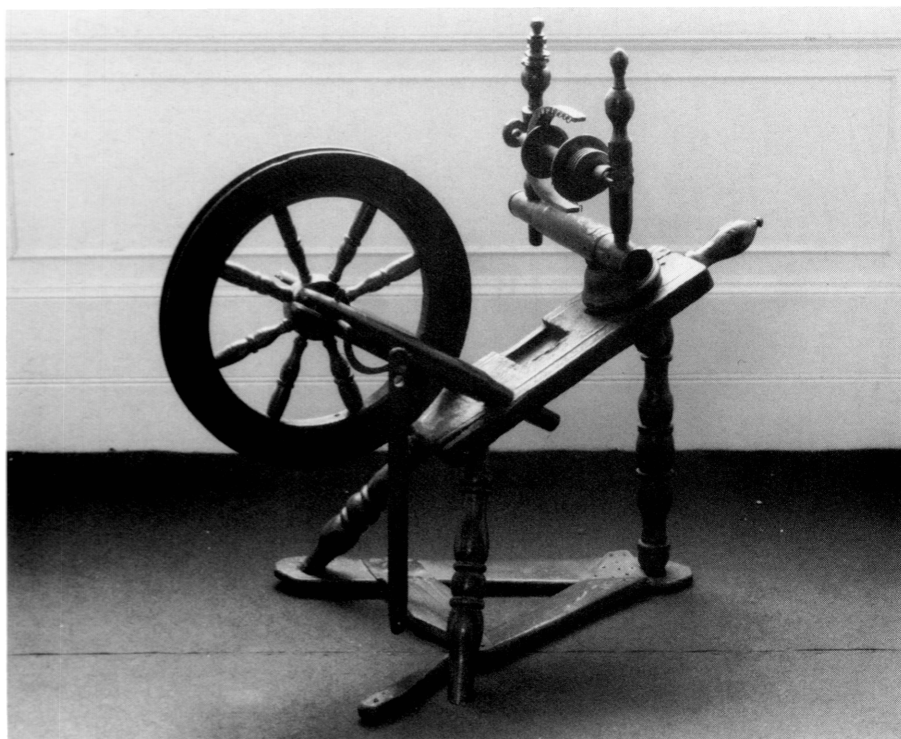
2. Hooded armchair, oak frame, pine hood, seat and panel, from Unst, Shetland



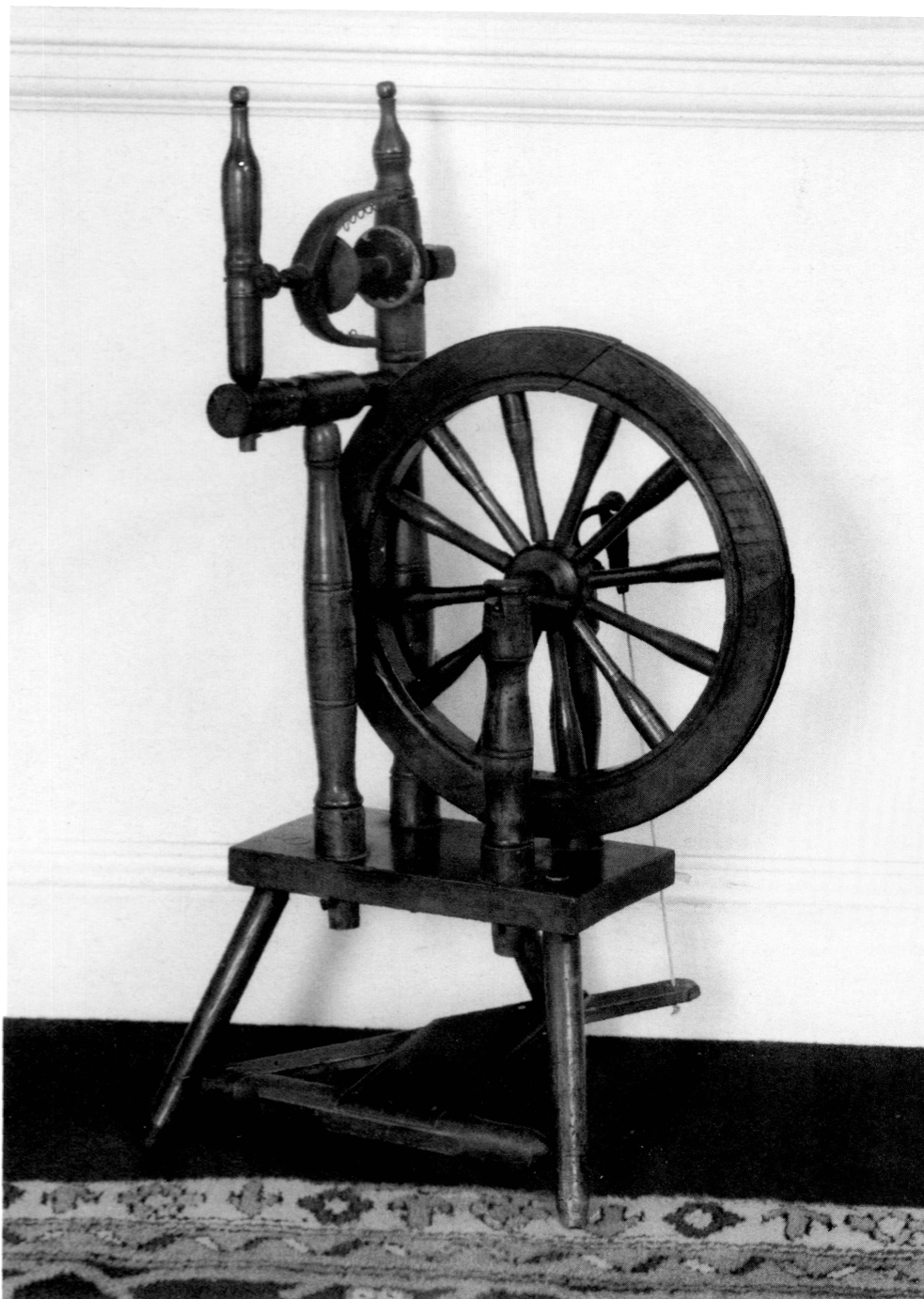
3. Armchair, oak, nineteenth century, from Brough, Shetland mainland



4. Armchair, pine and oak, late nineteenth century, from Skellister, Shetland



5. Spinning wheel, various woods, from Brough, Shetland



6. Spinning wheel, beech, with oak legs, mid-nineteenth century, from Gott, Shetland mainland



7. Armchair, oak with a pine seat, late eighteenth century, from North Nesting, Shetland