

The RFS Scottish Group

Highland Folk Museum, Newtonmore, Inverness-shire

The Highland Folk Museum is recognised as Britain's first mainland open-air museum, which opened at Kingussie in 1944. Named Am Fasgadh (The Shelter) this became the third home for founder Dr Isobel F. Grant's renowned core collection of Highland material culture and as a living history museum, with the Lewis Blackhouse on site, the inspiration for the larger Newtonmore site. Dwellings and ancillary buildings and furniture have been reproduced for an all-round experience of a vanished way of life. Opened in 1995, the Newtonmore site has gone from strength to strength, proactively reflecting many aspects of Highland rural life and culture through collecting, preserving, interpreting for and interacting with individuals, groups, communities and institutions both within and beyond the Highlands. The collection of priceless Highland memorabilia, including furniture, was gathered in 2014 into a new purpose-built store, for study and research.

The RFS Scottish Group members were privileged that their visit took place on 7 June 2014, prior to opening, with Ross Noble, former Director, and Rachel Chisholm, Curator, as our escorts.

In a traditional Highland dwelling a central hearth heats the occupants and is used for cooking. Peat smoke filters slowly through the roof, and usefully preserves food. Occupants sit below the smoke on low chairs, to work and eat without tables. Pots are hung over the fire for food to be cooked and porridge, soup and stews are eaten in bowls, to be set on the floor. Oatcakes and bannocks cook on a flat girdle hung over the fire. Preparation was done on the dresser or a galleried baking tray set on the dresser.

I. F. Grant identified three types of Highland Chair construction:

West Coast – A slab of timber, plus bent back and legs. The bent arm is set in sand, with hot water poured over it, to make it malleable and bent to shape. Later a steam box was used. Legs and back spindles penetrate the seat.

Central Highlands – A natural fork slice to which back and legs are added, with a spar added to the front to complete the seat. Natural bends and tree forks are stronger than jointed wood.



A pair of Sutherland chairs made by Samuel Clark (Courtesy of Highland Folk Museum)

They were also used in boat building and roof construction, 'couples' in Scotland, or 'crucks' elsewhere. Full grown trees with a suitable bend were split in two. The two halves set across, each secured with pegs. These sat on a series of stone bases to avoid rot and support the roof.

Northern Highlands – Sutherland and Caithness

In one example, natural knees of wood are split to create parallel back and seat members; legs are added with rounded or natural wood cross bars. Described as 'ladder back' in sophisticated chairs. The seat could have been finished with woven straw before a plank seat became the norm. In later forms cut timber without natural knees was used continuing the form with horizontal members for the back and a plank seat.

A chair was provided for the head of the house and a smaller one for a usually smaller wife and the elderly. Children and guests sat on stools or on low turf walls around the edge of the house. Additionally, a long bench/seise/settle in England was an extra seat or bed and might be taken outside for the Tacksman (leaseholder) of a township on rent collection day.

Stools – Backless seats including 'Creepies' were of plank construction, used as milking stools in agricultural areas. They comprised a piece of cut or roughly trimmed natural

wood with three or four legs, punctured through the base. A 'cutty' stool resembled a comb-back chair with a low or shallow back.

Cradles – Scottish cradles are distinguished from others by the use of turned pegs to secure the child by lacing it in with string. Southern ones usually have holes for the same purpose. There is evidence of boat building skills in bending a thin hood and base, others were of a faceted construction. One cradle rocker was fitted with a large dovetail, a 16th century survival detail, rather than with pegs or screws. There was an unusual twin cradle, and one from Auchendrain in Argyll, the last occupied township in Scotland. It circulated in the village and reputedly cradled a thousand children.

Dressers are well represented, wicker a feature of cupboards.

Unusual items included a huge wicker basket with a rim and curved base, used on the top of the last stagecoach running from Kingussie.

Sincere thanks are due to the Director Bob Powell, Ross Noble and Rachel Chisolm for the privilege of enjoying such a wonderful tour. Highly recommended for all RFS members visiting the Highlands of Scotland.

Crissie White