

atHome

SCOTLAND on SUNDAY

AUGUST 23, 2009

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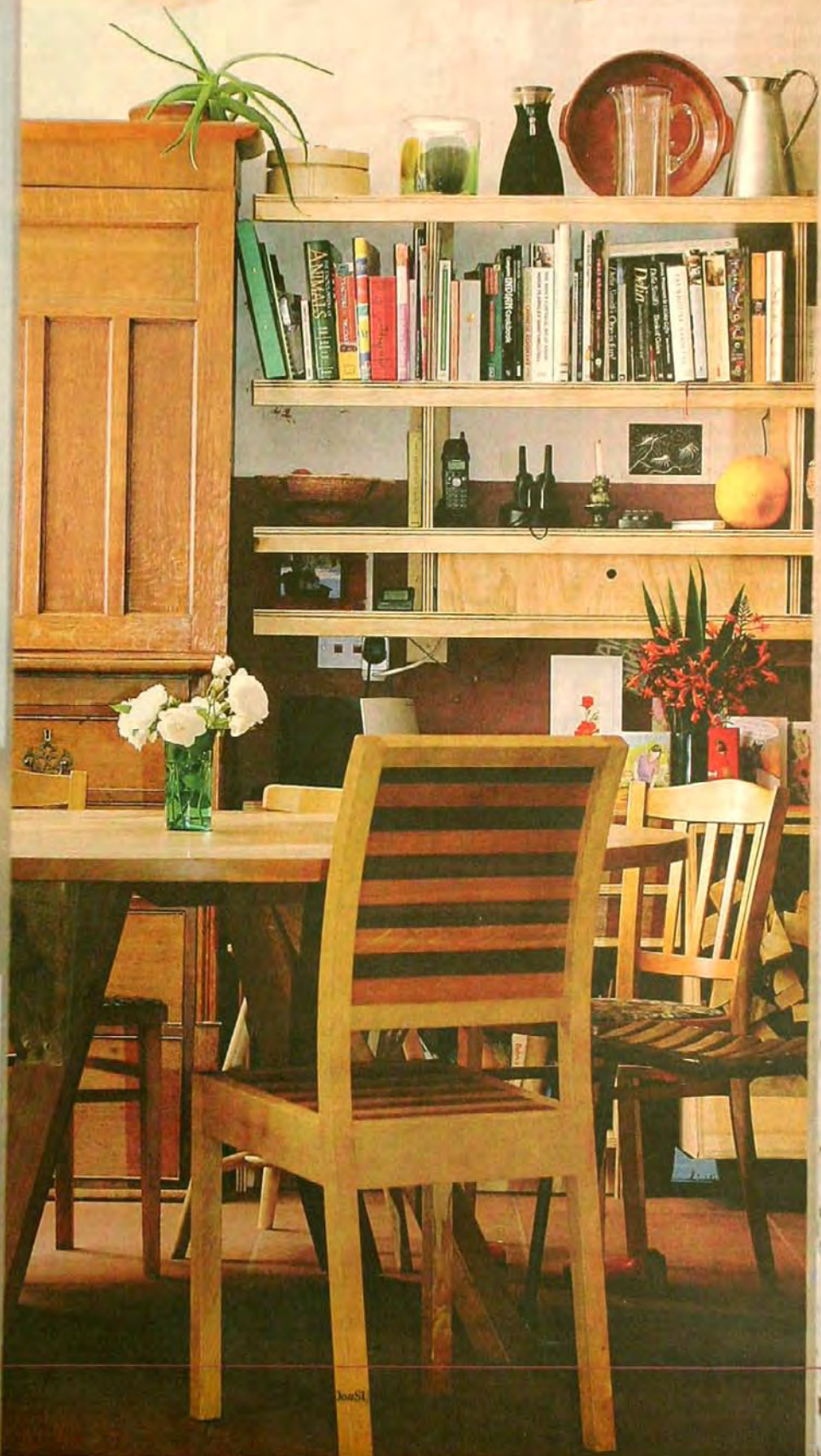
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Thomas Hawson's stunning house, created from the ruins of a mill, fits perfectly into its natural setting



Good wood

Words **Fiona Armstrong** Photographs **Phil Wilkinson**



AMONG recent projects completed by furniture maker Thomas Hawson is the construction of a deck that slots into a banking of the River Jed, close to Jedburgh in the Borders. It comes complete with an ergonomic timber bench and a ladder which allows Thomas's four-year-old son Fergus and his mates to lower themselves into the water with ease.

Like the deck, the bench and ladder are unaffected pieces of design, sincere in both purpose and appearance.

"Fergus designed the ladder," says Thomas. That's not hard to believe, given the extent to which he and wife Jenny have sought to create a stimulating environment for their two children in and around the once-derelict farm and mill they call home.

Daughter Freyja, now almost two years old, is a frequent visitor to the mill her father has been converting into his "dream workshop" over recent years. The first pieces to be made (using machinery now in place) will be windows and doors to replace plastic sheeting that has so far provided the only protection.

Diverse projects, Thomas admits, have distracted his attention from the workshop renovation. Last summer he devoted two months to making art, "a good break", he says, from all the building work.

Encouraged by an invitation to exhibit work alongside that of fellow Borders artists sculptor Charles Poulsen and textile artist Pauline Burbridge, Thomas set about exploring his passion for deer stalking and kayaking.

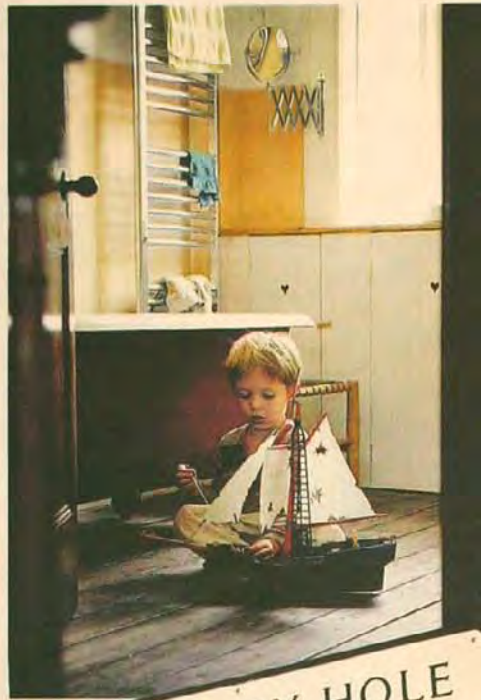
"I wanted to make art that expressed my will to hunt," he explains, referring to his lack of barbaric motivation and instead his overriding concerns to maintain a healthy deer population.

As for the kayaking, Thomas has long been drawn to the crafting of seafaring vessels and back in 1999 studied Viking shipbuilding. He used its principles to create a chair, presented in 2000 to the Icelandic Parliament as a gift from Holyrood, and in 2006 gained a PhD in contemporary Icelandic craft. The hunting origins of the kayak - traditionally made from materials found in the wilderness - are of intrinsic interest to Thomas and a skin-on-frame Greenland kayak he made was selected by Visual Arts Scotland for its annual show at the RSA last year. Today his new deck sits at a pool in the river that's ideal for practising kayak Eskimo rolls.

As intriguing as Thomas's work is the house he inhabits. When the couple bought the derelict stone buildings eight years ago, Jenny's father asked Thomas if he was "scared" by the task ahead.

However, Thomas had helped plenty of friends with renovations and was aware that it would be an all-consuming experience. He put work on hold for a year to devote his attention to the stone buildings (a farmer/miller's house and mill dating from 1898) and planted short rotation coppice woodland from which his resources - oak, ash, birch and willow - would be harnessed. What he and Jenny have created is a home finely tuned to its environment and which echoes the unassuming nature of Thomas's furniture design.

The absence of hot water and a toilet made things challenging in the beginning, when Thomas was focused on making the leaky farmhouse watertight. But having originally trained as a civil engineer, he wasn't short on problem-solving ideas. A perforated pipe was placed in a trench dug to the house foundations, draining water and drying stonework, while dehumidifiers were positioned below suspended wooden floors. A mason's lime mortar, appropriate



THE GLORY HOLE



Clockwise from top left: Fergus in the bathroom; the sitting-room; some of Thomas's hunting-inspired wooden art; a wooden tippie tribute; oars in the sitting-room; the family's dining area





'This home appears to have sprung from time-honoured practices and materials, as evidenced by features such as sandstone flooring in the kitchen'

for the building's fabric, was used to fill wall cavities. Internally the original plaster was retained and painted with a coat of breathable lime paint that leaves the mottled appearance of the plaster exposed, something Jenny wasn't prepared for. "It didn't take long for her to come round," says Thomas.

Like Thomas's furniture, this home appears to have sprung from time-honoured practices and materials, as evidenced by features such as sandstone flooring in the kitchen. This room, open to a dining area, has a refreshingly ad hoc feel, with freestanding pieces including a cast iron stove and a Belfast sink resting within shelves supported by branches.

Thomas recently built a practical log box on wheels; the stove is sufficient for heating the house and water during summertime, when the oil burner is switched off.

The kitchen table was nursed back to health after being badly damaged in transit between Iceland and Scotland (during a trade mission Thomas was involved with), while the Perspex pendant light above is from Denmark. His respect for Nordic design extends to Ikea too; Thomas's study, for example, holds an ergonomically designed chair that allows movement while sitting. This room is also home to an unconventional dentist's chair from a local surgery, while a barber's chair, picked out of a skip years ago, has found a place in the couple's bedroom.

Jenny, an emerging artist whose work has recently taken a new direction into ceramics, was responsible for decorating the wet room, located within an old larder and benefiting from under-floor heat ->



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