



# a craftsman



WINTER 2003/4 ISSUE 3 RESEARCH REPORT FOR THE WORK OF THOMAS HAWSON DESIGNER/MAKER

## Summary of the New Exports from Iceland Project to Date

The objective of the New Exports from Iceland Project is to demonstrate what potential for export lies in the hands of the Icelandic craftspeople. I also want to expose the skills and knowledge of the Icelandic and other Nordic craftspeople to an international audience and to provide an opportunity for this very important area of Icelandic culture to be recognised and preserved.

I first visited Iceland in January 2001 as part of a Department of Trade and Industry mission seeking to develop a new export from Iceland, to be designed and prototyped by craft practitioners. Having got a better idea about what sort of assistance I could offer, on my return I managed to secure a bursary from Brunel University to develop an Icelandic craft-based prototype over three years as a Ph.D.

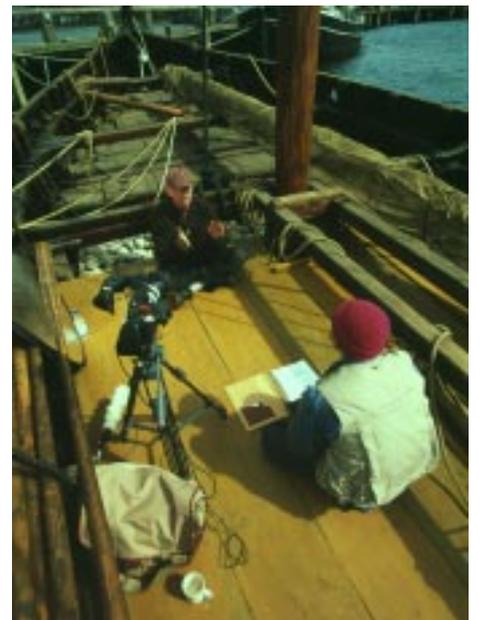
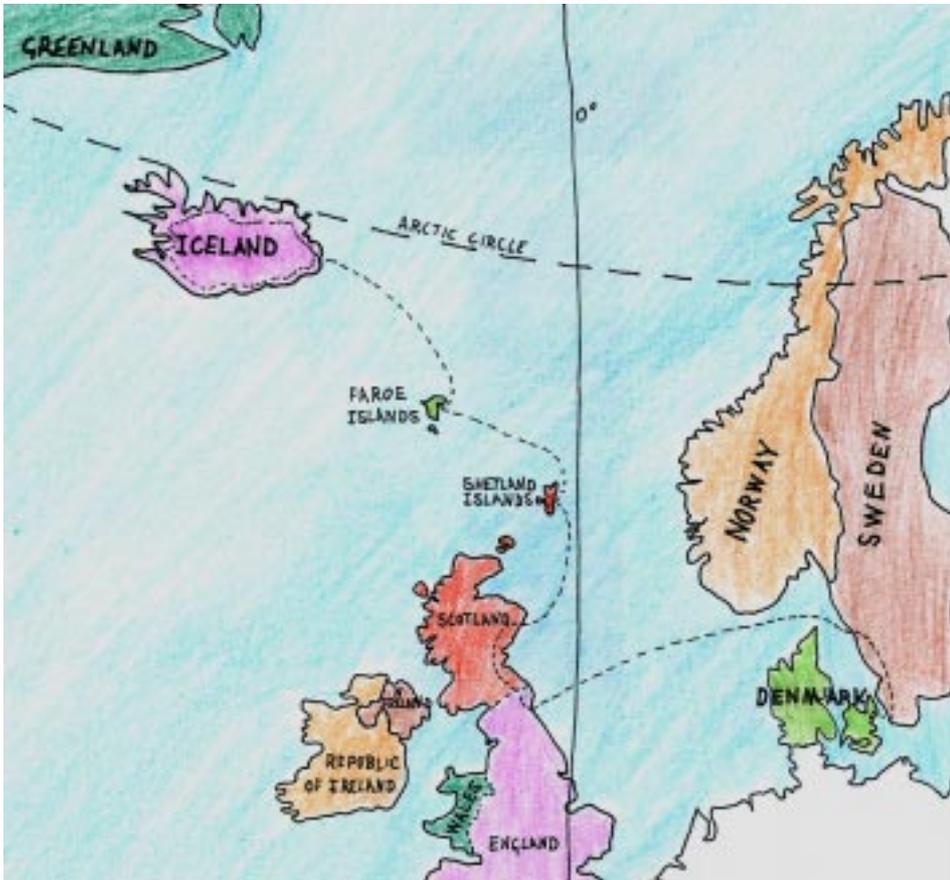
On a follow-up trip in the spring of 2002 I established that there was support for my project among the Icelanders and I returned to Iceland once again, in the summer of 2003, to learn some of the Icelandic craft practitioners' skills. Following this visit I have drawn up design proposals for a prototype export from Iceland.

## On the road to Denmark, Iceland and back Apprenticeship under Nordic craft practitioners

On the 21 April 2003 I set off on my first journey of the year to work as an apprentice to one of the six Nordic craft practitioners who had agreed to help me with the New Exports from Iceland Project.

In return for my hard labour all of the craft practitioners had agreed to be interviewed about their work and how they might influence the design of a product for export from Iceland.

This first trip was a 19-day visit to the Roskilde Viking Ship Museum in Denmark. I was to work as an apprentice to Birger Andersen, a shipwright, helping him and a team of shipwrights to build a 70-foot replica of a Viking war ship. The experience was great. Working wood with axes in the Viking method was just my thing. The interview with Birger, the first of the six, was a challenge for both us, but we made it.



Birger Andersen being interviewed by Thomas Hawson on a Viking trade ship replica at the Viking Ship Museum, Roskilde. Photographed by Werner Karrasch.



View from Ása's cottage in the Faroe Islands.

On the 23 June 2004 I left Hundalee Mill Farm in my little car. This time I was off on a seven-week trip to Iceland to see what I could learn from five more Nordic craft practitioners who had kindly offered to work with me as part of the New Exports from Iceland Project. Having spent one night on the boat from Aberdeen to Shetland, a day in Shetland (where I met the local museum curator and discussed the possibility of exhibiting there), and another night on the boat from Shetland to the Faroe Islands, I finally arrived at Tórshaven's port. There I was met by Randi S. Vang, a leading light in the Faroese craft community, who had generously offered to put me up for a few days.

I left Randi to visit the first of the craft practitioners participating in the Iceland Project. Ása Hatún is a respected wool-working specialist in the Faroe Islands. She had well understood that I was to work for my keep, to gain experience of the craft and to earn her respect in exchange for the interview. Within the first few days of our working week I made a work table for Ása, put up shelves in her studio and assisted in making an experimental chair-seat of felt for the project.



Making experiments with Ása on her new table.

I left the Faroe Islands on the 3 July having received some of the best hospitality of my life, on my way to Iceland, to work with and interview the remaining four craft practitioners.

Fjölñir B. Hlynsson is a sculptor and craft practitioner in the east of Iceland. He and his family warmly received me at Miðhús,

his family's home and workshops near Egilsstaðir. Here I spent a very enjoyable week helping Fjölñir to make a sculpture, being taught how to make knives, carrying out my interview and much more.

Following an enjoyable stay with Fjölñir, my journey west began with a visit to the most extensive museum of Icelandic crafts that I have seen, the Skógar



Fjölpir B. Hlynsson's, 'fence song' in the east of Iceland's desert.

Folklore museum. Þóðður Tómasson, the lifelong curator of the museum, showed me great hospitality and helped me photograph some of the museum exhibits as reference material for my interviews.



Spoon-carving knife and skean-dhu, made at the Miðhús workshops. Thomas Hawson.



Lady's Viking Knife, made at a forging workshop in Egilsstaðir, Fjölpir's hometown. Thomas Hawson.

After a brief stay at the museum, I continued west to Reykjavik where I met the goldsmith Þórhildur Þorgeirsdóttir. In exchange for working with the builders on her new house and taking down her exhibition, Þórhildur taught me how to make a spoon in her workshop. Working in Þórhildur's workshop was inspiring to me as a woodworker who had done little metal work. Learning so many new skills in such a short space of time was very exciting. The interview, now well practised, was made light work of by Þórhildur who has very good English.

My next interview was with the foundryman and pattern-maker, Gretar Mar Thorvaldsson, at the Malmsteypan Hella Foundry in Hafnarfjörður near Reykjavík. I was very grateful to be able to learn with Gretar. As a qualified practising foundryman and pattern-maker he is a



Silver and beach-found bone spoon made in Þórhildur Þorgeirsdóttir's workshop. Thomas Hawson.



Aluminium spoons, cast at the Malmsteypan Hella foundry.

very rare individual in northern Europe. I worked hard and I learned a lot, casting experimental pieces for the project and carrying out a good interview.

My last interview was with Geir Oddgeirsson and his assistant, Björn Hrafnsson, at Geir's rural cabinet-making workshop near Reykjavik. I was only able to spend a short time working for Geir as he was in the process of building a new workshop but the interview went well, thanks to Björn's translation. After helping to construct the workshop roof, Geir decided that my time would be better spent collecting reference material from the National Museum and Library rather than working in cabinet-making with which I am already very familiar.



Aluminium sculptures and pattern made to explore different surface finishes at the Malmsteypan Hella foundry (and relieve my wish to have babies of my own). Thomas Hawson.

After this long and demanding set of interviews I was looking forward to getting home. Jenny, my wife, came out to join me for the nine-day drive and ferry trip home. It was great to have her company and to be able to share some of my experiences in Iceland and the Faroes with her.

I have not mentioned here all of the people that helped me with accommodation and some fun trips out and about while I was travelling, but I would like to thank all of the craft practitioners and everyone else who made my experience a deeply rewarding one.



Contents of my car after returning from Iceland. The rear axle of my car needed replacing after driving the full-circle main road of 1352 km around Iceland, which includes a lot of dirt track.

## Exhibition Tour Schedule

Below are the proposed dates for the touring exhibition of the New Exports from Iceland table and chair prototypes. If all goes to plan these will be the dates and venues where the public will be consulted for their thoughts on the design. The consultation findings will go into the final write-up of my PhD thesis.

**16-19 August**  
**HANDVERK OG HÖNNUN**  
 (Handwork and Design)  
 Reykjavik, Iceland  
[www.handverkoghonnun.is](http://www.handverkoghonnun.is)

**22-29 August**  
**GUNNARSSTOFNUN**  
 Skriðuklaustur, Egilsstaðir, Iceland  
[www.skriduklaustur.is](http://www.skriduklaustur.is)

**4-8 September**  
**WITH THE FAROE'S CRAFTS**  
**COMMUNITY**  
 Tórshavn, Faroe Islands

**11-16 September**  
**SHETLAND MUSEUM**  
 Lerwick, Shetland, Scotland

**20-24 September**  
**THE LIGHTHOUSE**  
 Glasgow, Scotland  
[www.thelighthouse.co.uk](http://www.thelighthouse.co.uk)

**30 September-4 October**  
**THE VIKING SHIP MUSEUM**  
 Roskilde, Denmark



Landscape in the east of Iceland.

## Long Shadows: thoughts on the effects of landscape

A six-hour round trip to deliver Fjölñir's friend's niece to a party in neighbouring Hoff is Fjölñir's idea of a nice afternoon out. Fjölñir is a sculptor and artist living on Iceland's east coast and one of the five craft practitioners that I visited and interviewed last summer for the Iceland Project. He and his friend saw the trip to Hoff as an opportunity to show off some of the local landscape to me.

On the way home Fjölñir asked me what was on my mind to keep me so quiet. I was mesmerized by the open, rolling and fertile landscape of the east of Iceland. It had occurred to me that I could study the undulations and the forms of the landscape especially intimately because the low sun was creating long descriptive shadows that revealed the nature of the land. This far north, the July sun barely

dips below the horizon at night. Since we were driving in the early evening the sun hung only a few degrees above the horizon, indefinitely it seemed, and the long shadows held steady in the landscape.

The effect of the shadows was a new experience for me. I was able to study the lie of the land under shadow for much longer than I ever had before. So my answer to Fjölñir's question was the thought that Icelanders may gain great wisdom from living with the long shadows in their landscape. Having the opportunity to so closely study the forms and nature of the land in the summer, in the winter I imagined that they would look for comparable depths of intimacy in all that they did, in compensation for the loss of the shadows during the long dark nights.



A craftsman.

## Crafts Jamming

When musicians get together, instead of having a conversation about their musical interests they can have a conversation through music simply by playing their instruments to and in response to one and other. This is commonly called a jam session. Craft practitioners can also jam.

A few weeks ago, Halla Bogadóttir, a goldsmith from Reykjavík, Bruce Luckhurst, an artist from Edinburgh, and I, met at Hundalee Mill Farm for a Burns Night dinner. The following day we spent in the Mill Studio making tree jewellery from found materials and objects. We worked from the title 'Tree Jewellery'. No sketches were drawn and very little was said. All communication was made through small experiments with the materials and



Halla, Bruce and Tom pose with their creation.

objects found around us. The finished piece took the form of a crown, including spinning components, wind chimes and decorative stones. It hung from a mature local oak tree like a large bauble and was well received by the tree, we thought. It was the product of a craft jam.

Participation in this craft jam was an inspiring and rewarding experience. It was probably the most important element of the project.

The experience inspired Halla to recommend a tree jewellery workshop to the Icelandic goldsmith's union, to be carried out by willing goldsmiths in Iceland this summer.

Halla and Bruce at work on Tree Jewellery at Hundalee Mill.

She suggested that the workshop jewellery should decorate the trees around the Tjörninn pond in the centre of Reykjavík.

This practical communication session or 'crafts jam' at Hundalee was a warm-up for me before my trip to Iceland in March. There I will be working with four Icelandic craft practitioners to develop and make the final prototypes for the New Exports from Iceland Project.

## Why Not Eat Whale Meat?

In the Faroe Islands the local population has been catching and eating pilot whales since the 10th century. The way that the Faroese people now kill whales is as humane as the very common mass slaughter of beef stock. It is also considerably more humane than it was in the past. The old method of catching whales was to round them up into a bay with boats and then stab them with harpoons until they bled to death. Now the whales are rounded up onto a beach and killed with a fatal stab to the spinal cord. This takes about 10 seconds. Killing these whales in their natural environment is less stressful for the whales than the experience of much European livestock which is transported hundreds of miles on roads to abattoirs before being killed.

Pilot whale -catching in the Faroe Islands is an annual community event. When the whales are spotted inshore and close to a village and suitable beach, an alarm is raised. Able men go out in small boats to herd the whales onto the beach to be killed. Many other people stop what they're doing to watch or assist in the proceedings. Once the whales are caught, the local sheriff takes stock of the catch and distributes vouchers for the meat.

These go to the people involved in the catch, to other members of the community and to remote villages that do not have the opportunity to catch whales for themselves.

There are approximately 800 000 pilot whales in the North Atlantic. The 47 000 Faroese people take approximately 1000 pilot whales a year. This number does not put the pilot whale population at risk and the whale meat contributes considerably to the local economy. Limited grazing is available in the Faroes so few cows can be kept. Imported meat is expensive and so, for the small population of the islands, whale meat is an important part of their diet.



A whale meat picnic on my travels in the Faroe Islands.

'So why not eat whale meat?' you might say. Recent research has found that pilot whale meat has such high concentrations of heavy metals and polluting chemicals that it is dangerous to eat more than once a month. Ironically, while the conscientious European may consider eating whales barbaric, it is European industries that pollute the North Atlantic with heavy metals and chemicals putting at risk both the pilot whale species and a sustainable source of meat for the Faroese people.



An early 20th Century whale catch.

## The Three Ways to Watch and Learn

Having been an apprentice to my father and to many other skilled craftsmen after him, and now being a skilled craftsman in wood furniture myself, I have been reflecting on the experiences of my short apprenticeship with the different Nordic craft practitioners involved in the Iceland Project.

When I set out to be a craftsman it took me a very long time to learn the skills that I needed. Now I practise with great confidence in my specialist area, fashioning my own tools and developing my own working practices. When I had the opportunity to learn new skills from craft practitioners in other fields and in their own workshops for the first time, I was very surprised at how transferable my skills were and how quickly I could learn.

When considering new and acceptable forms of academic reference for craft practitioners, it is impossible to ignore the importance of observation. Craft practice is learned predominantly by observation and mimicking craftspeople's skills in using tools and manipulating materials.

Inuit children are taught many activities when they are very small and before they are physically able to try the real thing. To learn how to paddle a kayak a child is sat on the parent's knee facing forward, while the parent mimics the action of paddling a kayak with the child's hands inside their own.

My father taught me to saw a piece of wood in the same fashion but with a real saw and a real piece of wood. He simply put my hand inside his on the saw handle. Any child that learns skills by mimicking physical actions must learn more quickly.

While observing another craft practitioner at work the unskilled apprentice does not easily understand what they are looking at, or what telling signs will give them the clues to do the same. A skilled craft practitioner learns easily and copies the same actions successfully with a little practice. The artistic and skill-seeking craft practitioner not only learns the skills of others quickly but can identify the transferable elements of a practice and successfully combine them with their own skills knowledge.



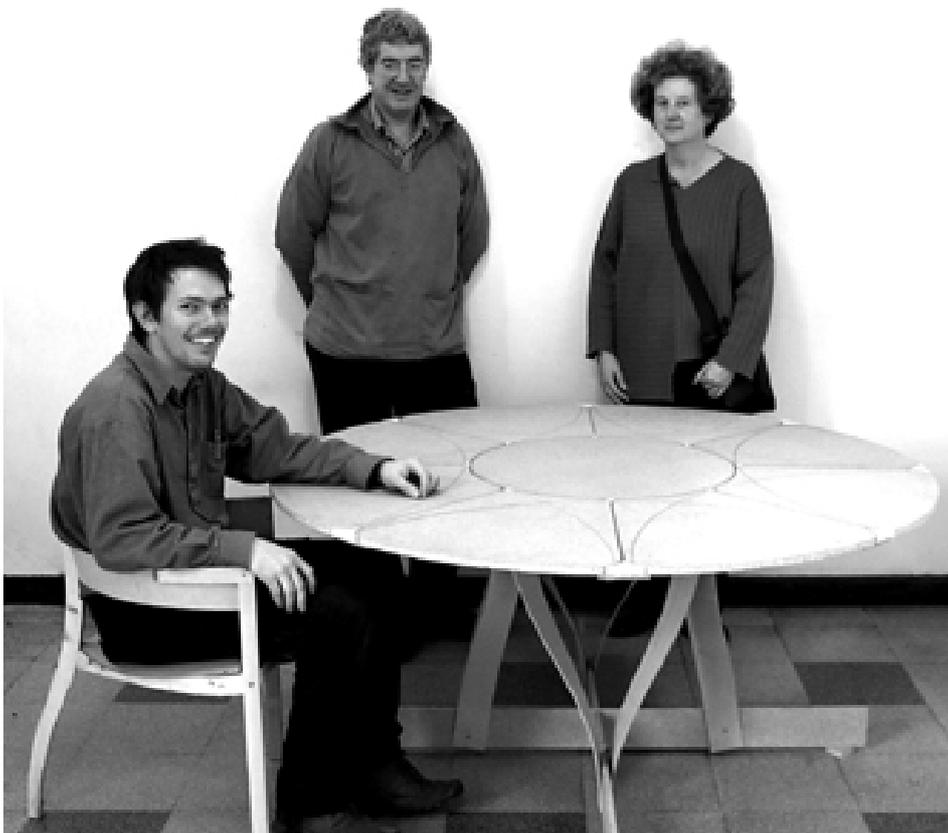
iceland project proposal

thomas hawson 04

## Design Work for a New Export from Iceland in Progress.

The design work for a table and chair to be exported from Iceland began in October 2003. By the beginning of December I had made full-scale mock-ups. This is the long-awaited part of the project and I and my supervisors, Dr Simon Thorne and Professor Polly Binns, were especially excited to see the first realisation of all my work.

The process of producing the prototype has only just begun. All the participating craft practitioners are now being consulted for their opinion on the proposed design. I will then amend it in accordance with their recommendations and will then make a six-week trip to Iceland (28 March-9 May) to make the finished prototype with some of the collaborating craft practitioners.



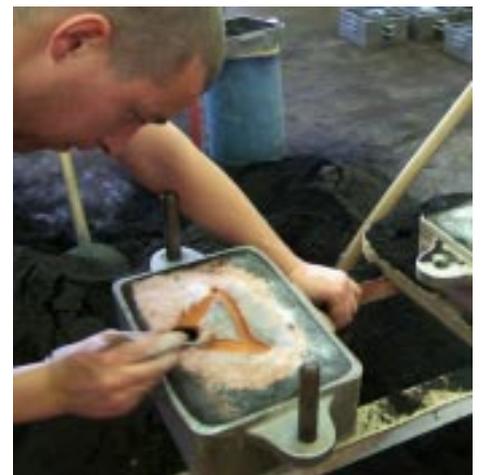
Dr Simon Thorne and Professor Polly Binns consider the full-size mock-up with me.

## Digital References for Craft Practitioners

Crafts practitioners take their references not from books, but from other craft practitioners. Within a Ph.D. project, how do you make the experience of working with and consulting other craft practitioners into an academic reference? You make a video about the experience.

An important outcome of the New Exports from Iceland Project will be the DVD presentations that formally record and present my experiences of working as an apprentice to six Nordic craft practitioners and of carrying out interviews with them.

In the interviews each craft practitioner talks about their motives, cultural connections, working methods and how they would answer the design brief for an industrially-produced table and chair for export from Iceland. Alongside the interviews I have recorded complementary visual reference material. The final DVD presentations are visually orientated for the benefit of other craft practitioners and students.



Aluminium casting, at Malmsteypan HELLA, photo taken for DVD presentation.

Literature-based reference material is inadequate for the craft practitioner seeking to learn a craft. Typically a craft practitioner looking at a reference book to do with craft practice will simply look at the pictures. The text is often misleading or hard to understand. It is nearly impossible to learn most crafts by reading books or watching videos. The physical action of practice by the student/apprentice cannot be replaced.

The DVD presentations express the many benefits of working as an apprentice to a master craft practitioner, and demonstrate how craft practitioners can intuitively combine their practical and cultural knowledge into the development of new industrial methods of production.

## A Poem to Her Majesty Queen Magrethe II

boats are made in the faroe isles,  
by men with eyes that see  
the lines that make them fit for whales,  
while they row and sail at sea.

these men of the sea build a beautiful boat,  
from their mind they measure all parts.  
boats like these are made from the heart  
and are very rare works of art.

the art and philosophy of the faroese culture  
lives greatly in boat building.  
museums can not preserve it for the future,  
only the hands of boat builders living.

boat builders need work to keep living.  
from the faroes it is hard to promote  
their talents to europe and start singing  
'we export the most beautiful boat'.

dear sovereign your faroese boat builders  
could do with an order from your pen.  
a royal appointment from across the waters  
would open new markets for them.

An illuminated poem, hand-scripted in half-uncials, to Her Majesty Queen Magrethe II of Denmark. Inspired while travelling in the Faroe Islands and Iceland.

## Letters

In 1999-2000 Thomas Hawson designed and made a chair for the Icelandic Parliament as a gift from Scotland during the celebration of a thousand years of Christianity 2000. The following letters illustrate the continuing chair story.

—Original Message—

**From:** Thomas Hawson  
[mailto:tom@hawson.fsbusiness.co.uk]  
**Sent:** 18. nóvember 2003 11:23  
**To:** Belinda Thury Theriault  
**Subject:** chair story

Dear Belinda

Thank you for your letter and consideration concerning the chair. The



IC1 and IC2

chair sits in my office and I am not sure what to do with it. It means such a lot to me I will have to keep it unless a nice home can be found where lots of people may appreciate it. It was made for public appearances and to be a partner to its taller brother (the chair that you have in the Althingi). I feel sad while it gets dusty.

It is a long way this chair has been, on its travels to Iceland and back, but it would be no trouble to bring it back to Iceland next year when I come over to put on exhibitions for my PhD project. If the Althingi would be willing to give it a home next to its brother, it would be great and you are welcome to have it!

I know that really the chair now has no place to go, it has no occasion to mark and has no dignitary to give it away. I am, (and it is), at a loss what to do.

yours

tom



Coming home from Iceland this via the Faroe Islands this summer, the chair went on a rowing trip with the Nólsoy regatta.



The mayor of Nólsoy on the chair.

22 January 2004 14:35  
Reply from:

Belinda Theriault,  
Director, International Department  
Althingi Secretariat

Dear Tom,

Thank you for your e-mail and thoughts regarding the chair, as well as the pictures. Althingi would be honored to accept your gracious offer and give the second chair a home. We agree that it would be most fitting to have the two chairs together. If you wish to bring the chair with you on your next trip to Iceland, Althingi could host a reception to mark the occasion. Is this agreeable to you?

Regards,

Belinda



THOMAS HAWSON DESIGNER/MAKER  
HUNDALEE MILL FARM  
JEDBURGH  
TD8 6PA  
TEL/FAX: 01835 869931  
Mobile: 07801 653830  
E-mail: tom@hawson.fsbusiness.co.uk  
www.thomashawson.com