

## Guild Monthly meeting Saturday September 11th with Johnny Shiels Wheel Maker Innishowen

Our Guild monthly meeting was well attended (twenty one members) to hear the engaging third generation wheelwright Johnny Shiels, talk about spinning wheel making and the interesting family history behind the business which was started by his father in the 1920's, working in the house and producing very dark wheels - an example of which is owned by one of our Guild members. In 2020, Johnny received a National heritage award from the Heritage Council.

He began by showing us the Donegal wheel, the style of which was originally from Holland and was called a Dutch wheel. Every household in Donegal would have had a wheel such as

Every household in Donegal would have had a wheel such as this.



Photo credit: J Shiels website: <http://www.spinningwheels.ie>

Johnny only uses double drive and not Scotch tension, using anything for the drive band which will not stretch too much and advised that anything could be used which was light in weight and 'gives the result required by the spinner'. He referenced his father's wheels which used one single band and one long band, as opposed to one continuous loop. His father would not put his own maker's mark on his wheels, whereas he has a mark on them which is sometimes branded in.

He showed how a wheel was in four sections and that a wheel with six sections was less likely to warp. The crank was hand forged by a local blacksmith, with whom he has a good partnership making parts including the bobbin threading, in "the old way" but other than that, all the pieces were made in house. The wood is steamed to make it bend, noting that the larger the wheel, the easier it was to bend. His wood is locally sourced and also repurposed from offcuts in Ash, mahogany, walnut, oak and beech. Johnny has just finished a wheel in walnut which is destined for export.

On discussing the range of wheels he had worked with, Mr Shiels said that there was no difference between flax wheels and 'wool' wheels. The only difference being that flax is spun from a distaff and takes longer. Interested members may like to look for YouTube videos of Johnny spinning flax - which is very informative on style and gentle mastery.

Members asked a variety of interesting questions. One member said that many of her wheels wobbled and didn't 'run true'. In Mr Shiel's view, all would wobble eventually and that it was important to check the axle and that it was sitting lightly. Essentially, only be concerned if 'the

bands came off'. A most reassuring and practical view which certainly resonated with my collection of antique wheels in varying states of 'wobble', but retention of their drive bands!

His wheels are constructed with tensioned spokes - so that twelve spokes are pushed in gently a little at a time. Where some are socketed, this will take warp out of a wheel. He sometimes uses some tweed in his restoration work to keep a leg in place on the wheel.

He maintains wheels with linseed oil and natural wax, occasionally. He has painted wheels on request but clearly prefers them in their natural state. A wheel he had restored from the 1930's was coated with a reddish paint which had stained the wood underneath.

Sheila asked how much of his work was restoration and how much making. It was probably 50/50. He enjoys restoring wheels and will continue with classes when restrictions are lifted. Johnny has taught the art of spinning in primary schools, using a CD spindle, which was much enjoyed by the children, who had a lasting craft to take home with them and hopefully develop.

Johnny introduced his son Paul who would continue the family tradition in wheel making as he had from his father and grandfather. Indeed, he was currently repairing a wheel from 1910 that he thought was made by his own grandfather which was described as a heritage wheel (with only six spokes) and that he would be keeping it with him.

His grandfather was a Cooper, who also made churns as well as wheels, reflecting a time when skills were maintained locally in the community. Johnny continues to live in his grandfather's house, with the addition of a workshop.

We were delighted to be introduced to Mrs Shiels senior who had spent some time in the Ardesier area when the children were small. Now in her 90's, the wonderful Mrs Shiels regaled us with stories of spinning and weaving in the 1980s, where she had made plain weave scarves in natural colours for visitors to take home.

Without Zoom we would not have had such an insight into Johnny Shiel's craft skills, workshop, and a fascinating family history. He is clearly passionate about the craft of spinning wheel making which is on a critical list in England where grants are available - but not Ireland.

In a time where the Slow consumption movement becomes more commonplace, the need for lasting design and the skills to reuse and repair has never been more critical. The talk this morning was a gentle reminder of those ethics in action.

It was a lovely morning and the Guild's thanks to all those who attended and to Mr Shiels and his family for sharing their knowledge and family stories.

For further information, please see The Journal ed.279 Autumn 2021.