



A QUIET INDUSTRY

Sarah Thomas

'I've got one, you know,' says Walter.

'A *Neolithic axe*?!' I confirm.

'Oh yes. Well a rough-out at least.'

It is hot outside. I am sitting in the shaded, sticky interior of Walter Lloyd's static caravan living room – one of a cluster of wheeled rooms that make up his home, parked this way and that at the edge of a field in Cumbria. Two of these are bow top wagons, hand built by Walter and painted in carnivalesque colours. One of them is his bedroom.

He is well spoken and erudite, and piles of books cover every surface, towering around our wicker chairs. On the wall hang seven fiddles. Out of the window a bird eats peanuts from the feeder, and a barn that has been here longer than Walter rusts into the ground.

The kettle squeals. Walter pushes himself up from his chair and hobbles over to turn off the gas, continuing out of the door to the barn. I follow. The smell of rancid cooking oil hits my nose just before the wild flowers in the field do – the legacy of many fried meals and little cleaning.

What I have just learned about Walter is remarkable. His unconventional domestic set-up and bright-eyed clarity in telling a story belie his 90 years. A former farmer, emergency planning officer for Greater Manchester, Fell pony breeder and charcoal burner, he built the wagon that is now his bedroom to live in when he took up residence in the nearby woods to make charcoal. This career change was an impulsive response to a frustration with his role in Manchester. Not one for authority in the first place, the nail in the coffin had been finding out that the existence of a nuclear emergency bunker had been kept from him by 'the powers that be'. One day he simply decided to leave. He walked out of his door, not locking it, tied some ponies to a wagon and headed north to Cumbria, where he has remained ever since.

Dayve Ward

A blacksmith inserts the heated steel tang of a billhook into a new ash handle

In the darkness of the barn I make out a two-metre-high pile of rusting miscellany that covers the entire floor plan. At a glance I can see broken willow baskets, cast iron pots, rusting saws, enormous bellows, the remnants of several scythes and a few fridges. Through this there is a path of sorts, forming a cross section through the layers of Walter's existence – a living archaeology. Walter weaves along it, pointing with his walking stick to identify various 'zones' in his collection, which he clearly knows inside out. He stops in a corner where hardening leather horse harnesses hang from rusty nails and reaches directly for a plastic shopping bag which he brings outside into the light.

A few days earlier I had been perched on the loose scree slopes at the top of the Pike of Stickle in Langdale, attempting to find a Neolithic axe factory I had been told about. Not knowing how far down it was and hearing a passing walker shout, 'What the *hell* are you doing?!', I had decided to turn back. But I was left with a burning desire to see one, to hold one.

Walter brings out a multi-faceted lump of green volcanic tuff the shape of a large flattened egg. I cradle it in my palm. My imagination can hear the knapping of stone flakes, clinking onto the scree.

'Apparently they've been found as far afield as Poland,' Walter enthuses. 'Some have been found without a mark on them, which indicates that they may have been votive objects or exchange goods.'

I imagine the axe makers perched on that high slope, looking down on the long glacial valley below, shaping this beautiful stone with only their hands and other pieces of stone. I imagine those rough-outs then being carried to the west coast of Cumbria, to be polished on the sandstone cliffs. I wonder if for the axe makers the act was imbued with an almost sacred significance, whether their role afforded them a higher status than the people of the valley.

I am impressed by Walter's ability to find anything in that barn, which to the untrained eye contains mostly piles of rusting junk.

'We've applied for a grant to sort it out. Make all these tools usable,' he said.

I could only hope whoever 'we' was were successful.

A few months later, I found myself back in this barn with the newly acquired role of co-ordinator of a project to restore Walter's tools. Suddenly these piles were my problem.

Following a summer walking in Cumbria, I had moved there myself rather impulsively because I had found it to be a landscape that resonated at the same frequency as I did. I did not have a job lined up, but one day received a phone call from a lady who, it emerged, was an integral part of the 'we' seeking the tool restoration grant and who I had also met coincidentally on my travels on foot that summer. She had been struck by my curiosity whilst she made hay bales by hand in an orchard with some friends. By my wish to understand this place I was walking through, and the relationship with it of the people I met along the way.

The aim of the project, she said, was not only to transform a collection of rusting hand tools into functioning ones, but to document their provenance and technique of use, whilst Walter was still here to tell us. The documented tools would ultimately form a tool library available for use by the public, and here in Cumbria there was an active coppicing community who could and would make use of these tools. In addition, artisans would be brought in to run a series of workshops in the trades for which some of the tools were made so that their use may be learned and applied practically, as well as documented in a database. The project was unique in its aim not to suspend these objects as relics of a past now lost, but to revive them into an active present.

For a long time I had been interested in the noiseless ways of working – noise equating in my mind to the consumption of fossil fuels and a disruption of the perfected relationship between tool, skill and matter that has characterised rural trades for millennia. That same relationship that made those Neolithic hand axes such beautiful, potent and sought-after objects. The relationship that made each tool slightly different, shaped by its maker's character and its user's needs. The relationship that made the act of working with the noiseless tools a deeply fulfilling one, that with time and practice led to a mastery of it, rather than accomplishment being measured by simply getting the job done. The noiselessness that allowed work to be a social activity, that might be made lighter by song or banter, rather than the worker's contemplations and interactive nature being drowned out by the fuelled machinations of modern tools.

When we unearthed the tools that would comprise the library, with Walter's ability to identify them and describe their use, each maker's mark, each individual adaptation of tool to user, each mark of use and wear and the evidence of previous repairs, could



Dayve Ward
Billhooks

all be stitched together to form a rough biography. Each and every tool then became distinct and with its own significance. Over the course of naming and cataloguing the tools, we were able to regain a specificity of language that allowed us to appreciate the continuum between humans and their environment and the creation of tools related to particular tasks and locales.

Billhooks made up a large proportion of the collection, and the broad range of their shapes took us across the landscapes of their use: *Dorset, Epsom or West of England shape, Suffolk pattern, Yorkshire pattern, Isle of Wight pattern, Newtown Pattern, Broom or Nottingham pattern, Shropshire woodman's pattern*. Laid out, their steel blades resembled a flotilla of Viking longboats. Some were pitted and blunt, their hard cold surfaces pocked with traces of use like the ruins of an ancient settlement seen from the sky.



Others were smooth and caked in darkened grease, almost ready for use. The handle ends were as diverse as a crowd of people, and it was clear that both blades and handles made well, were made to create balance in the user's hand. Some handles were factory-made and light in colour. Others were rough-hewn by hand and stained with use. Some had no handle at all and the tang lay exposed, awaiting completion to bring it back into balance. Each had a slightly different story to tell, but all of their stories were made of steel and wood.

Notes in the catalogue made by volunteers:

Tool name: *Bill hook. Yorkshire pattern, says Walter. Tool use:* *Backward pointing hook can be used for gathering next piece of wood. Handle may have been shortened, making the tool a slasher. Manufacturer's name: Spear & Jackson.*

Dayve Ward
Blacksmith's hammers
 Cumbria.



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Shadow board layout

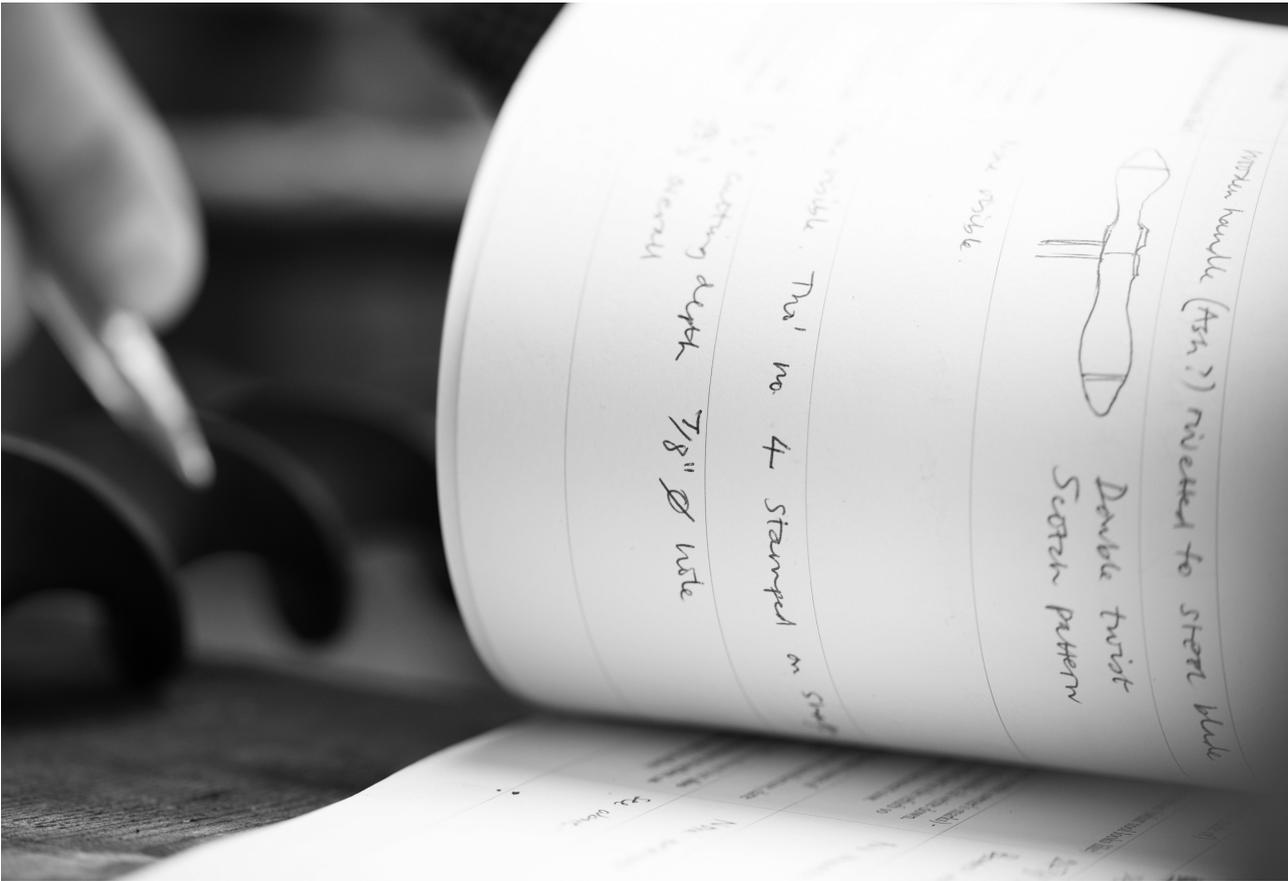
Tool name: *Bill hook. Newtown style. Materials:* Steel blade.

Ash handle. Caulked handle is swelled at the end to stop it flying out of your hand. Tool use: Hedge laying etc.

Manufacturer's name: *Morris of Devon – still in business.*

The names of other tools in the collection read like distant relatives in a family tree: it was known that they were partly responsible for getting us here, yet so little was known about their accomplishments and personalities. *Spoke shave, downright, buzz, rounder plane, bark peeling iron, adze, axe, sickle, spiral auger, bodkin, deep mortice chisel, bung hole borer, heading swift, croze plane (hawksbill teeth and guard), stock knife, hay knife, hoop driver.*

We are living through a unique time in our history where these specificities of place, language, skill and purpose are being lost to a



homogenised and dislocated ‘being’ and ‘doing’ in the world, as we have largely relinquished responsibility for our existences to people and systems we have never met or held in our hands. It was a rare and significant opportunity to have at hand in Walter a man who had used these tools in the various landscapes in which he had lived and worked – and been interested enough in other tools from other landscapes to collect them and make their acquaintance.

This project allowed that knowledge to be embodied and perpetuated in various ways. Where he could remember them, Walter’s recollections of provenance and use were told like stories for each tool. More technical information was read about the tools in books – our Bible being R.A. Salaman’s *Dictionary of Woodworking Tools* and John Seymour’s *The Forgotten Arts*. When the fair weather came in summer, outdoor workshops in tool

Dayve Ward
The catalogue



Dayve Ward
Cleaning a scythe blade

handle making and blacksmithing aided in the restoration process. Then, some of the newly restored tools were used in a series of workshops in scything and haymaking, charcoal burning and willow basket making.

On the day Walter had shown me his Neolithic axe, I had asked him about the seven fiddles hanging in his static caravan.

‘Do you play?’ I said.

‘Oh yes. I taught myself the fiddle living in the woods burning charcoal, while I was waiting for the smoke to change colour. It’s best to be by the kiln through the night. At first the smoke is thick and white as it’s full of steam. Then it goes a brownish yellow as the tars and gases burn off. Finally it becomes blue and translucent. And that is when it is done.’



I knew that I was standing beside a man who had lived a life understanding how things done well took time.

Over the course of a year, that rusting barn I had first encountered on my wanderings became a nexus of technologies, places and eras. There had been stored a Neolithic axe made 6000 years ago on the slopes of a mountain 20 miles away. There had been kept a collection of 20th century hand- and farm-tools from Europe and North Africa, made by Walter over 27 years. Their restoration took place under a tarpaulin shelter beside the barn, where with the help of volunteers and specialists they were brought to life again and put to use. The meadow around the barn was mowed with scythes and hay made using hay racks, hay rakes and pitchforks that had lain suspended in disuse, and the hay was used to feed Walter's son's Fell ponies in the neighbouring field. The

John Ashton
The waiting:
a charcoal earth burn

tools – restored, catalogued and mounted on shadow boards – were finally taken to a 19th century bobbin mill three miles away, whose machines still function for the benefit of visitors to the museum.

Next to the *clack-whirr* of this Industrial Revolution era machinery, Walter's tools now sit quietly, awaiting their quiet industry.



Walter Lloyd
and his fiddles