

Chairs bound for Scotland's oldest surviving classroom

Craftsman Brian Baird has completed a commission by the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE) to create a suite of Georgian style chairs for its historic Botanic Cottage, home to the oldest surviving classroom which dates back to the Scottish Enlightenment.

The chairs, which now pride of place in the Professor's Room at the Cottage, were crafted by Brian during the past eight years while attending the joinery workshop run by Garvald, a charity which offers creative workshops to people with disabilities.

Brian has delivered the last of the eight Garvald Chairs to the Botanic Cottage and he said he drew inspiration during a visit to the Georgian House in Charlotte Square. He wanted a design that would be fitting for the 18th century Botanic Cottage and appropriate for the Professor's Room, which was the classroom where Professor John Hope, RBGE's remove first Regius Keeper of the Scottish Enlightenment, taught Botany to medical students, when the Garden was sited at Leith Walk.

Brian (50) explained: "The seats of the chairs are crafted from a fallen beech tree which was transported from the Pentlands back to the workshop at Gorgie. The chair frames and backs are made from beech sourced from a timber merchant.

“It has taken me about eight years to make the chairs, although lockdown and covid restrictions did cause some delay. I have really enjoyed making them and I am proud to think that they will be seen and used by visitors now and in future.”

Laura Gallagher, Botanic Cottage Operation Co-ordinator, told Brian: “We have been very excited waiting for each chair to be delivered. They are beautifully made and will be used for many, many years to come. Who knows who may sit on them during a visit to the Professor’s Room.”

Garvald’s Chief Executive Mike Casey, who is retiring just before Christmas after 25 years with the charity, said: “This has been a very exciting and worthwhile project and I am pleased to see it come to fruition before I leave. Brian is very skilled and has worked tirelessly on the chairs. It is a proud day for Brian and for all of us at Garvald.”

The Botanic Cottage, which once stood at RBGE’s former site on Leith Walk, was in a derelict state when it was saved from demolition around 2007. It was dismantled stone-by-stone and rebuilt at the Inverleith Site. In May 2016, exactly 250 years after the first students were taught in the Botanic Cottage, it reopened. Commissioned as part of the sympathetic refurbishment of the Cottage in its new home, the early chairs have already been appreciated on countless occasions by community groups, television crews and even international political occasions and a royal visit.



