

DETAILS

WHAT A former holiday cottage with outbuildings, now converted into a large single dwelling thanks to the addition of an extension which joins the two original buildings together **WHERE** In a valley on the edge of Aberfeldy in Perthshire, looking towards Ben Lawers **OWNED BY** Angus Ross, a cabinet-maker whose award-winning furniture is made from local wood at his nearby workshop (below)



THISLIFE



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Angus Ross

The furniture-maker put his carpentry skills and woodworking tools to good use in crafting a new home out of a cramped cottage and its adjoining barn in Aberfeldy

Words Anna Burnside Photography Mark Nicholson & Neale Smith

If the cobbler's children go barefoot, what happens in the furniture-maker's family home? His showroom may be full of the most exquisite pieces but are his kids making do with grubby beanbags? Does his wife sleep on a camp bed and watch telly while sitting on the floor?

Not if Aberfeldy-based Angus Ross is anything to go by. The family home, a converted and extended estate cottage, is a testament to his carpentry and cabinet-making skills. No rickety rejects here: the few pieces of furniture that did not start off in his sketchbook are from Heal's and SCP. Scarlet and Bluebell have their father's hand-made stools and tables beside the One Direction posters in their bedrooms. His handiwork is also part of the very structure of the house, from the iroko kitchen units to the built-in storage drawers under the stairs.

Angus came to furniture via industrial design; he spent several years at Mothercare tweaking pushchairs and refining potties. "In commercial product design you are working in mass production," he recalls. "You have to guarantee your object is going to sell in its thousands in order to justify the cost. Often the design is the lowest common denominator. That was not so appealing to me. I became more interested in developing my own work which would be upper end and higher quality."

Wood seemed a good place to start. "Using wood in a workshop ▶



[Above] The new extension, with views towards Ben Lawers and one of Angus's liner chairs in prime bird-watching position in the corner. The SCP sofa is covered in Bute tweed. [Left] Scarlet and Bluebell on the steps which link the new extension with the kitchen, converted from the barn. Made in Angus's workshop, they also include built-in storage for family clutter



is quite low-tech," he explains. "With injection-moulded plastic, you have to make a huge investment upfront, or manufacture elsewhere. I was keen to keep doing the manufacture, rather than become just a designer."

A cabinet-making course led to some early commissions and then setting up a workshop in Oxfordshire with two other graduates. When they relocated, one to France and the other to Brighton, Angus and his wife Lorna decided they too would move. Back to Scotland.

They wanted a rural location no more than an hour and a half's drive from Glasgow and Edinburgh. "Angus's old workshop in Oxfordshire was an hour and a half from London and people would come and see it and make a day of it," explains Lorna. Aberfeldy was ideal. "Customers like the area. It's all part of what they're buying into – the wood, the crafts."

Creating an experience is crucial. "No shop is selling hand-made furniture. Even if you go to Heal's, you're not buying something that's made the way we make it. We just can't compete on price. So we have to sell directly."

Angus adds: "In this business, you have to have a USP. There's no point making something that looks like what everyone else is making, or that you can buy in Habitat, because ours would be more expensive. So you have to have something desirable and recognisable." And if it can also be manufactured in small batches, so much the better.

Enter his range of Y-legged furniture, the first



[Above and below] Chairs under construction in the workshop, as Angus tackles the trickier parts of the process. [Right] The Ross family set off for a walk through the woods. The contrast between the new and original parts of the house is clear here



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small-batch range he has designed. He wanted to use the local timber, so experimented with techniques that would allow him to work with oak and ash while it was still green. That led him to steam-bending. While fiddling around with the wallpaper steamer and the hot pipes, he somehow bifurcated a strip of wood, leaving one part straight while the other gently curved. He had no intention of creating a Y-shaped piece of wood but, as soon as he did, his imagination fast-forwarded to many possibilities. The first Y-shaped legs went on a table. Stools, chairs, benches and desks came next: Y-leg enthusiasts can collect the full set. The writing desk was shortlisted for a Wood Award earlier this year.

Before he could start experimenting with alphabetical

motifs, the family needed to find somewhere to call home, with a joinery workshop nearby. The latter fell into Angus's lap when he discovered a workshop that had been used by joiners since 1876. He was sold. The perfect house, however, eluded him. Eventually they identified a small farm cottage with outbuildings that was being used as a holiday home. The elderly owners were not spending much time there. Angus wrote them a letter. Many letters. After a year as pen-pals, the sale of the house was finally agreed.

Although the two-up two-down was far from ideal for a family that included a six-foot two-inch man and a two-year-old child, they lived in it for a few years before embarking on the major refit. "You have to see what it's like in the winter, ▶



[Above] Wellies are essential footwear in this corner of Perthshire. [Below] Floyd, the family Gordon setter, guards his master's cowskin-covered liner chair. The birdwatching binoculars are close at hand. [Left] The stone walls of the barn are visible in this nook between the kitchen and new extension, with ceiling-height windows and a bold mix of family heirlooms and Angus's contemporary furniture

how to maximise the light and the views of the hills," says Angus. "That's not always apparent."

The position of the property – on the south side of the valley, but facing north – meant some lateral thinking was required. "In summer there is daylight from 5am to 11pm. In winter we are in the cold, shady side of the valley and get no sunlight for six weeks. It's like having two different houses. So we really had to think how to capture light."

After the extensive consultation period – during which Scarlet learned to swing around the scaffolding like a monkey – the family decided to join the cottage and the barn and add a modern extension. There was everything to do: the barn was falling down, the cottage was a basic holiday home and

there was a gap, with a fantastic view, between. In the old configuration, that was the only place to see down the valley. The old property had small rooms with even smaller windows. In the best traditions of the Highland architecture, it was designed to retain heat and protect the residents from the prevailing wind, not give stunning vistas towards Ben Lawers.

A lack of views is no longer a problem. The best ones, according to Lorna, are to be found in the new toilet added to the front of the house. When the only neighbours are migrating birds, it is possible to enjoy them without the intrusion of net curtains or frosted glass. In the new extension, a glass corner is more of a continuation of the garden rather than a part of the room. It's the perfect spot for one of ▶

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Angus's liner chairs, upholstered in cowskin. A pair of binoculars hangs close to hand and a bird book lives on the arm. One down side: the chair is really only comfortable for ornithologists of six foot and over.

Pieces like this, which can linger in the showroom because customers are too short to fully appreciate them, find their way back to the house. There is an unstable stool – Angus's aesthetically pleasing, core-working alternative to sitting on a bright green exercise ball – in the office area, beside one of his Y-legged tables. "I thought we should have one of these in the house," says Lorna. Should they need extra seating for Christmas dinner or large parties – and it's a fantastic house for a big old bash – Angus will bring more chairs home from the studio.

His contemporary designs sit happily with family heirlooms and favourite older pieces. (Lorna gives pride of place to one of her husband's first pieces of cabinet-making, a storage box for her aromatherapy oils.) One of the couple's strategies to homogenise the old with the new was to choose some timeless features, such as subway tiles and a stone floor in the kitchen. These smooth the transition between the new extension, old barn and smaller rooms of the cottage. ▶



[Opposite and above] The larder and kitchen, with flagstone floors, subway tiles and iroko cabinets. The larder's library-style shelves are accessed by an Angus-made ladder, while his Y-legged chairs surround the dining table. [Below] Old and new in harmony



PHOTOGRAPH: COLIN SMITH; CASA ARCHITECT



[Above] Angus with Floyd in the Aberfeldy workshop. Scale models of furniture commissions are on display in the cabinet behind him. There are also plenty of full-size examples for customers to try for size

Much of the furniture is built-in. The stairs leading from the extension to the old barn have drawers underneath. A wall of the master bedroom is devoted to storage. Every time a new person begins at the workshop – and Angus currently has a full-time member of staff, an apprentice and a part-timer – they start with a project for the house.

Those two years squished into the cottage gave Lorna time to think through exactly what kind of space would fit the family's rural lifestyle. No longer does the main door open straight on to her kitchen, accessible via a muddy bog. There is storage everywhere, a sizeable laundry room and two separate pulleys for drying clothes in the Scottish winter. A vast American-style fridge has plenty of room for perishables while a library-style larder wall is lined with bulk-bought staples. The blackboard wall displays the essential memos and phone numbers of family life.

Heating comes from wood-burning stoves, real fires and a wood-pellet boiler – which makes sense when you run a wooden furniture business and part-own 55 acres of oak wood. "Every time they tidy the workshop," says Lorna, "several more sackfuls arrive."

And on the rare moments when the sun shines and the wind drops, it's possible to open all the doors and spill out into the garden. "My birthday is in the summer," says Lorna. "It was a fantastic evening, really sunny and warm. Everyone was outside, walking around the border, swinging on the swing seat up there. A few days a year, it can be absolutely perfection." ■

www.angusross.co.uk

WHAT ANGUS LIKES

Favourite flea market? The Thrift Shop in Aberfeldy. This is a great local community project where everyone donates their cast-offs and then the shop is staffed by a different local charity each week.

Favourite smell? The head of a Gordon setter.

Best place to unwind? Our small oak woodland on the banks of the Tay. I love the changes throughout the year but especially the bluebells in spring and the colours of the leaves in autumn.

Best place to feel inspired? I find the rhythm of walking the best way to reflect on ideas. We are lucky to have so many woodland walks round about.

Favourite film? *Cabaret* starring Liza Minnelli: it is set in an interesting time and place (war-time Berlin) and is beautifully put together.

Favourite cocktail? I'm not a cocktail drinker. Give me a pint of Guinness any day.

Favourite piece of furniture? I love the sinuous bench

creations of Matthias Pliessnig, a furniture designer/maker based in Philadelphia.

Dream destination? The ancient walnut forests of Kyrgyzstan.

Favourite artist/designer? One of the best all-round designers of our time is Thomas Heatherwick. He has a genuinely innovative thought process.

Favourite comfort food? A home-made chocolate cake.

Favourite cooking tip? Don't skimp on the syrup in a steamed pudding.

Your home town's best kept secret? The Birks Walk during the winter. This is an exhilarating gorge walk with rushing water and amazing icicles when it's really cold.

Morning coffee stop? The lovely Watermill café-bookshop-gallery in Aberfeldy. It is such a great asset to the town.

Biggest indulgence? Buying sailing dinghies.

Absolute necessity? Family time. We all eat together most days and like to ski in the winter and sail in the summer.