

# No Smoke without Fire

What can be learned, what can be different in this outpost of our country where the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean meet? The local tourist body calls it "remote from the harassing turmoil of modern urban life" and certainly with a 225 miles drive north from Perth to catch a ferry to Orkney means it's well out of the way even to most Scots. When you reach Donaldsons' butchers shop in the centre of Kirkwall however, it is the totally unexpected that hits you.

The big shock is that this is a butchers shop without a display cabinet, without a window display and without butchers! Well that's maybe a slight exaggeration, none visible, but the first impression is a clean cut shop unit with six wall units and a check out.

Donaldsons of Orkney, previously known as George Donaldson & Sons, was established in 1955 by George Donaldson, the grandfather of the present partners, Ewan and Erik.



George, or Dod, as he was known, was already very experienced in the meat trade in Orkney. Having served an apprenticeship in Aberdeen with Reuben Laing, he came to Kirkwall to work in the early 1920s for James Leith who, by coincidence, had his business on the same site as the present shop.

Then, in 1930, he married Annie Norn and went back to Aberdeen for two or three years. It was there that George Junior was born.

Returning to Orkney in 1933, Dod was employed until 1940 by James Macdonald & Co.

After the war he became manager of the Co-op butchers, in Bridge Street. George junior - at the age of 14 - also started his apprenticeship in 1945. Following National Service he joined James Leith as his father had done, remaining there until his father opened his own business.



The company was originally based at 86 Victoria Street, where they also operated home deliveries and ran a mobile shop. The impact of supermarket shopping made both these services uneconomic, and the mobile shop was discontinued in the mid seventies.

George junior and his brother Bryce were later joined by another brother, Norn, who ran the travelling shop covering both East and West Mainland.

Dod retired in 1971, leaving George junior in charge. Ewan joined the firm in 1975 and Erik two years later.



**Albert Street, Kirkwall**



*Ewan and Erik Donaldson – Two butchers with a different outlook!*

George's wife Catherine was a partner in the firm and was responsible for book-keeping. When George retired in 1991, Ewan and Erik became joint partners.

Donaldsons moved to their present location at 38 Albert Street in 1982 when they took over "Porky" Horne's shop-commemorated still in the form of their "Porky Horne's, one of the 16 varieties of sausages they make.

Extending back from the rear of the shop is the extensive processing area, which was re-equipped and brought completely up to date eight years later. Then in 1995, customers noticed a big change when the shop was totally refurbished along modern lines with new transparent refrigerated counters.

A change of direction and a problem with finding staff, brought about the closure of the shop in November 2001, when Donaldsons concentrated on building up their wholesale trade, which involved supplying a number of the isles, rural and other town shops, where the firm's wide range of fresh meat and manufactured meat products were stocked.

According to Erik, they had seen how well sales of pre-packed meats had been at Cumming and Spence, and when that firm announced its forthcoming closure, they decided to take the plunge.



Then, in August 2003, just a day after they had re-opened for retail business in a new format, a fire caused by an electrical fault caused severe damage and thousands of pounds worth of stock was lost and equipment destroyed.

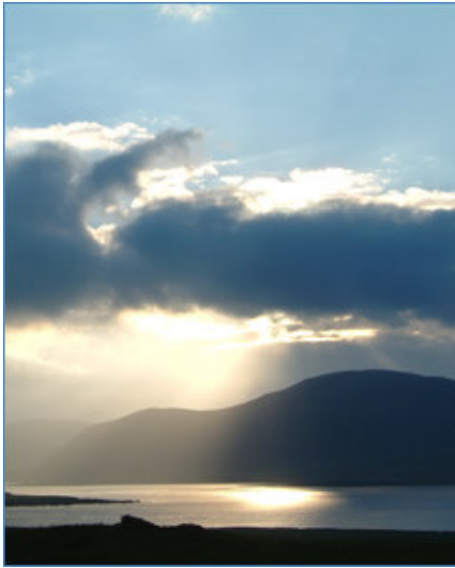
The shop opened again just over three months later, completely different from the way it had been before the fire, the opportunity having been taken to build in even more design and equipment improvements.

"The catalyst for the way the business has developed was the fire because it gave us three months to take a thorough look at everything," said Erik.

"When you are so busy working, it is quite difficult to stop and look at everything. It gave us the opportunity to decide where we wanted to go, how we wanted to do it and how it was to be presented," he added.



*There are 20 shelves of product including five of fresh meat, three of fish and one of each of sliced cooked meat, bacon and puddings, milk and drinks, pastries and yoghurt, sandwich fillers salad and pasta dishes, sandwiches, cheese, rolls and eggs, oatcakes, jars, and two of sauces. The shop trades from 8.30am until 5.00pm six days per week.*



Proud of living on islands renowned for quality food Erik explained: "In our advertising, we are promoting an Orkney image of sea-air clean freshness. Part of the current development is the change of name which appears in a simpler style, linking the firm to the decade of its origin."

The firm employs nine staff. There are two butchers and three process workers. Three shop staff and a secretary.

Customers may have noted a distinct chill in the air in the new shop. This is what gives the meat its excellent colour, through not allowing the temperature to vary. Erik has had tourists raving about the "beautiful" colour of the meat.

The even temperature is achieved by having the cooling equipment on an outside wall so that the heat extracted does not re-enter the building.

Two other shops in Kirkwall sell Donaldson's product and although the firm does not supply retailers in the isles now, their customers can still buy direct from Donaldsons, who will arrange delivery.



With top quality and excellence being considered the first priority, the firm is already supplying Skibo Castle with smoked meat and is hoping to extend its sales further south.

"We have changed more in the last five years than in the first 45. We are nothing like we used to be. I just wonder what our grandfather and father would say," says Erik Donaldson with a grin.

So what are the changes? He says: "We look inwardly more. For example we used to use one type of oatmeal. Then we experimented with umpteen different mixes and produced an even better haggis. Now we think in terms of different oatmeal's for different products.

"If we have a good product and are winning prizes with it, this makes us look at our other products to see if they are as good as they can be - it's no bad thing. And we are looking outwardly into things we never did before."

The brothers expect venison increasingly to appear on many Orkney tables. Their supply comes from the controlled red deer herd at Balmoral. Venison is low in fat, making it a popular choice and re-dress the healthiness, Erik has tasted it served with a chocolate sauce, using high percentage chocolate - a recipe tried out and suggested by George and Amanda at the Kirkwall Hotel.

"It was like a rich gravy with no hint of chocolate at the time, although afterwards I thought I could just get a taste of it," said Erik. "It was quite delicious. There is no reason to think of venison as a luxury buy."

Another innovation is their smoked meat. After the fire happened, the brothers bought a smoker, so that as well as marinating meat, they smoke it as well.

Erik explains: "Alan Craigie, at the Creel, had been smoking meat, and, working closely with him, we arrived at a recipe that hit the nail on the head. Without his help we would probably never have done it. Now we are doing pastrami and smoked meat and bacon.

"We decided to smoke with some different flavours and have had a lot of feedback and help from the Orkney Wine Company in this. We soak oak chips in wine and then dry them. The meat we are processing is marinated in wine and herbs, cured with the oak chips and then hung up to mature. It is not a fast process.

"We have done a gorse wine marinade with bacon and sell bacon that has been whisky or red-wine smoked."



Clearly a perfectionist like his brother, Erik adds "a good product takes time. A great product takes longer."

Among the accolades Donaldsons of Orkney has received in recent years is the Diamond Award in the Ready to Eat category of the 2005 Make it With Meat Awards. The winning entry was an innovative cured and smoked product called Beef Bruschetta.

*Left: Thinly sliced smoked beef marinated in Orkney Blaeberry red wine and herbs and then lightly smoked*

The Orkney public are increasingly looking for ready-to-eat or ready-to-re-heat products and the firm are kept very busy meeting customer demand for bowls of mince and tatties, clapshot and haggis, curry and pasta.

They still have considerable sales of traditional beef, lamb and pork but the brothers see the future in terms of "added value" to the excellent meat they work with, through experimenting with recipes and anticipating the needs of those engaged in today's busy lifestyle, who lack the time to prepare the meals their parents and grandparents took for granted.



*Above: Erik (left) and Ewan (right) receiving their Diamond Award from Scotch Beef's Glen at the 2005 Scottish Meat Trades Fair in Perth*

**Erik says: "You cannot rest on your laurels." At latitude 59°N it is obvious that they don't!**