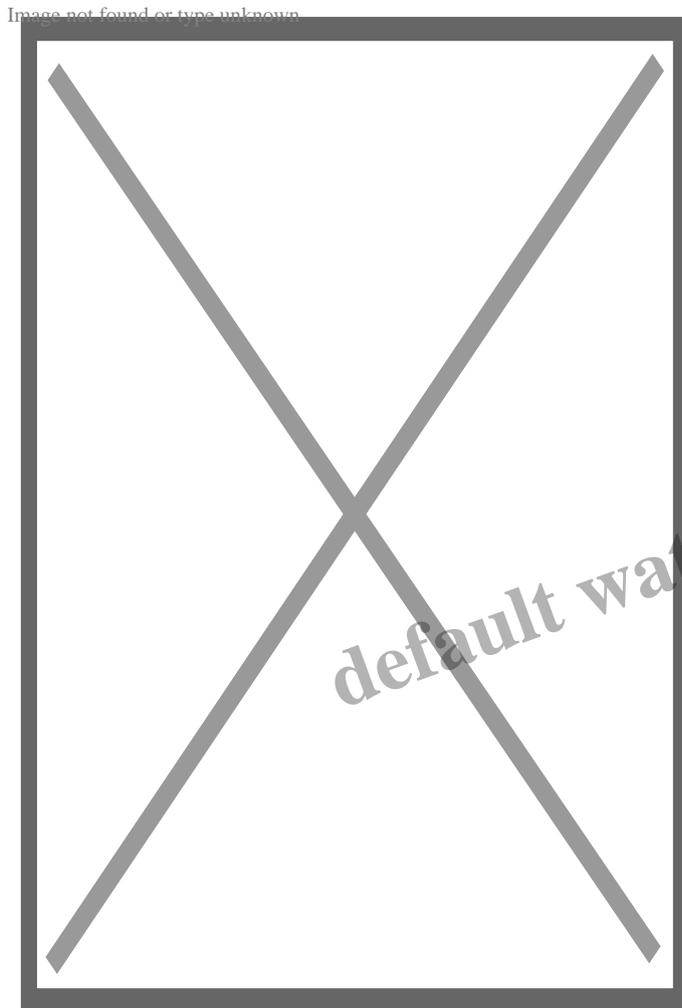


Mighty oaks, whisky and guitars

Description



Fylde Guitars Single Malt Ariel

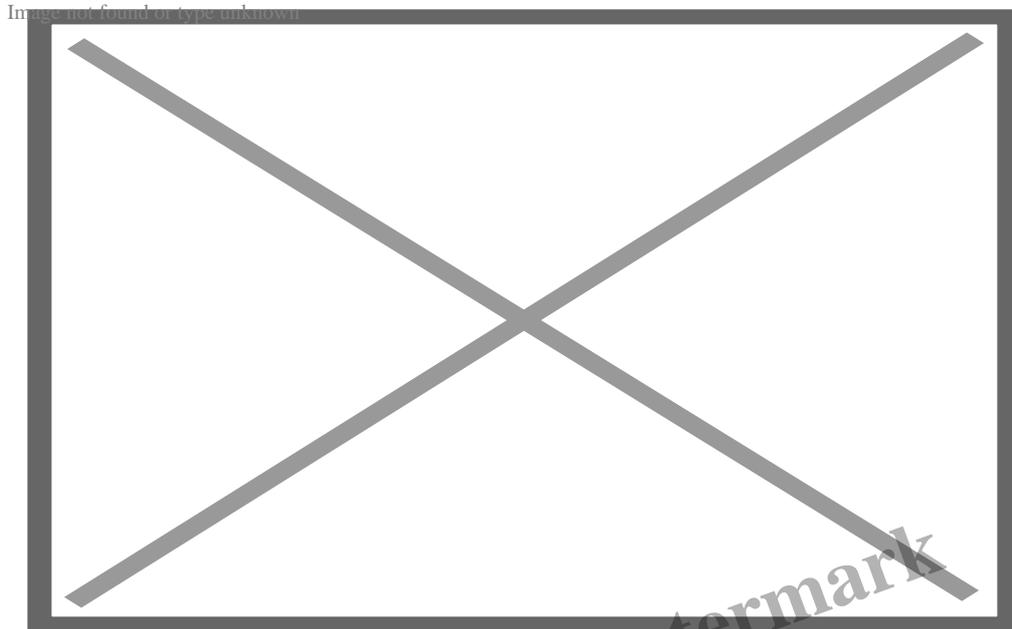
Guitars and whisky barrels? The oak wood in the Fylde Single Malt Ariel started life in Kentucky and cycled through bourbon and single malt whisky barrels.

Why whisky?

And the answer is: “Why not?” Although I live in Australia, I grew up in Scotland and still maintain a strong affection for my home country. Many fine things originate in Scotland, not the least of which is Scotch whisky, and I also maintain a strong affection for good single malt whiskies. My wife, Gillian, grew up in Grantown on Spey, in the Highlands and in the heart of Speyside – apparently the area [most densely populated with distilleries in the world](#).

There are many different kinds of whisky – not just from Scotland, of course, but even within Scotland there are over a hundred distilleries producing hundreds of different single malts. The characteristics of

the whisky vary from region to region, among distilleries and even within single distilleries – depending on the water used, whether the barley is smoked or not, how long it is left to mature, and what sort of barrel it matures in.



So many single malts, so little time...

Making whisky, like making guitars, depends on an almost magical combination of factors, resulting in an almost never-ending variety of choices. And, in same way that different people like different makes and types of guitar, preferences for single malts vary greatly – and, in both, objective reality mixed with subjective perception make for plenty of lively discussion and analysis! Single malt whiskies and guitars provide the same opportunities for a lifetime of experimentation – and the same potential to spend large amounts of money.

So, what's whisky got to do with guitars? Well, what indeed? – apart from the observations that a lot of guitar players also seem to enjoy whisky, whisky often features in the lyrics of blues, rock and country songs. Whisky and the blues are often considered to go together pretty well – there's even a series of music collections on YouTube called "[Whiskey Blues](#)".

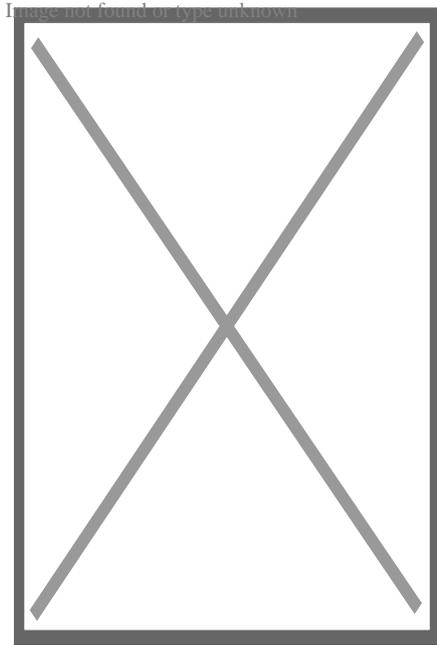
The barrel connection

The connection I'm going to explore in this post relates to the barrels that whisky is matured in. I'm interested in exploring [the various options available to guitar makers](#) in terms of materials including new and used wood.

So, you can perhaps imagine my excitement when I came across a guitar maker in England who makes guitars using wood from used whisky barrels. The combination of two of my passions was too much to resist.

Roger Bucknall and [Fylde Guitars](#) can be found in Penrith, in the English Lake District, and have a reputation for producing some of the finest guitars around. Roger is a lively character with a dry sense of humour and a love of single malt whisky. He's written a beautiful book about the guitars he's made,

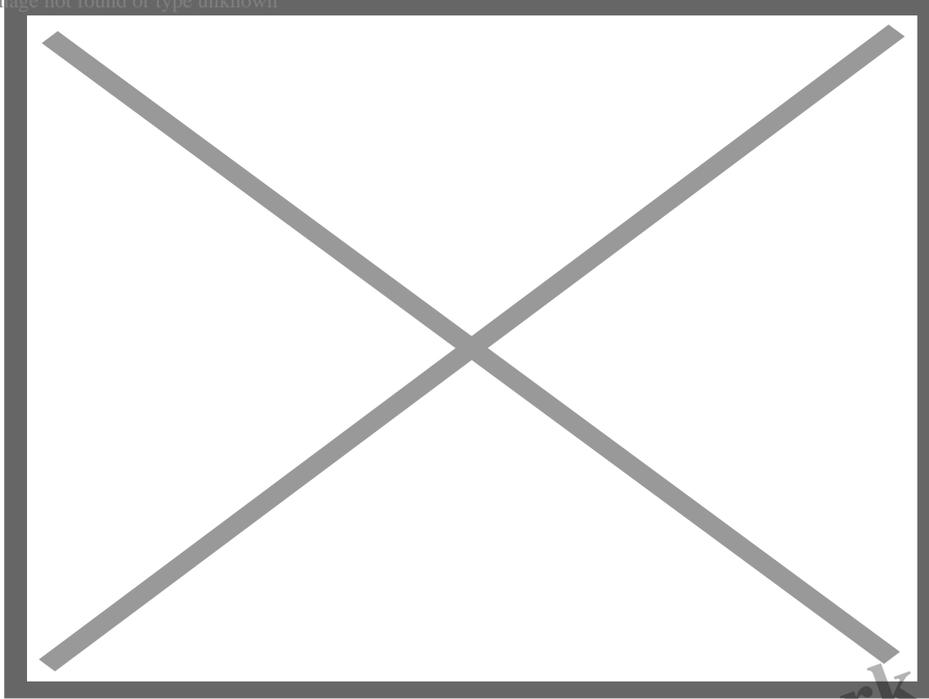
titled "[Wood, Sweat and Tears](#)"



Roger Bucknall. Photo: [Wikipedia](#)

Roger writes about his quest to find alternative sources of wood for the guitars he makes, and how this led him to using oak from used whisky barrels to make his [Single Malt Ariel](#) model. When he started making these, he used barrel oak for the back and sides, and for the top used timber recycled from the washbacks used at distilleries – large vats where the initial fermentation process is carried out. Curiously, the wood used for these was Douglas Fir (also known as Oregon Pine) – despite my comment in [an earlier post](#) that Douglas Fir is not really used much as a guitar wood, the wood from the washbacks, having been soaked in hot alcohol for decades, made for interesting patterning and, apparently, not bad acoustics.

Image not found or type unknown



Washbacks at Cragganmore Distillery

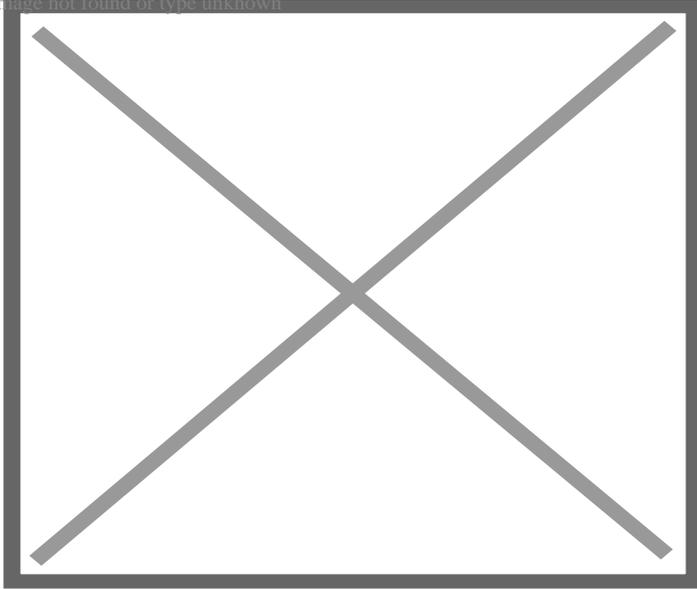
I wrote to Roger, asking if it would be possible for me to order a Single Malt Ariel, and so began another journey into fine guitar making. By that stage, he had mostly run out of usable washback wood for the top, and so suggested using sinker Redwood instead. Sinker Redwood is California Coastal Redwood that was harvested a long time ago that got stuck underwater during the process of floating logs downriver. The whole topic of submerged timber will appear again in future posts, but for now it's suffice to say that the sinker Redwood presented a pretty nice alternative to the washback wood.

As with most good guitar makers, Roger has orders piled up, and it would be nearly 2 years before the guitar would be ready. As luck would have it, we were planning a big family trip back to Scotland in September 2019, which more or less fitted the timeline, and so I organised to travel to Scotland via the Lake District in order to be able to pick the guitar up in person.

I am always amazed when visiting guitar makers that the premises they inhabit are usually rather unassuming on the outside and often tucked away in the far corner of an industrial estate – not giving away anything about the magical process underway inside where raw chunks of wood are transformed into wonderful musical instruments. Fylde Guitars was no exception, being located in a light-industrial area on the outskirts Penrith.

Roger graciously gave me a tour of the workshop and his wood collection – including a stash of old barrel staves and piles of mahogany legs from snooker tables salvaged from no longer frequented snooker halls.

Image not found or type unknown



As well as making guitars, he also makes most of his own machinery and has a keen interest in understanding the science behind what makes a guitar sound good. So much so, that he's been participating in [an experiment](#) run through Lancaster University that aims to compare the acoustics and perceived tone of guitars made from different wood combinations – more on that another time.

My Single Malt Ariel is really beautiful in the way it looks, sounds and plays. I was happy to be continuing our journey up to the Highlands of Scotland for a stay in Speyside and a chance to explore the origins of the oak that make up the guitar's back and sides. Roger sources his barrel wood from the cooperage in Alloa, west of Edinburgh. The wood he gets comes from barrels that were either European sherry casks or North American bourbon barrels before they went on to be reused and filled with whisky for maturation in bonded warehouses.

Image not found or type unknown

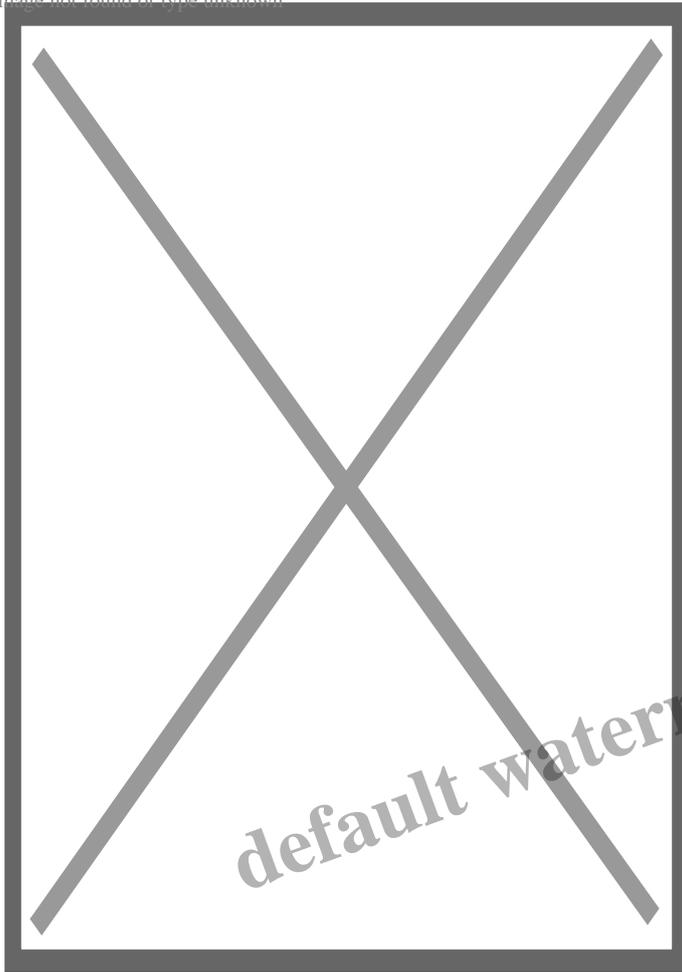
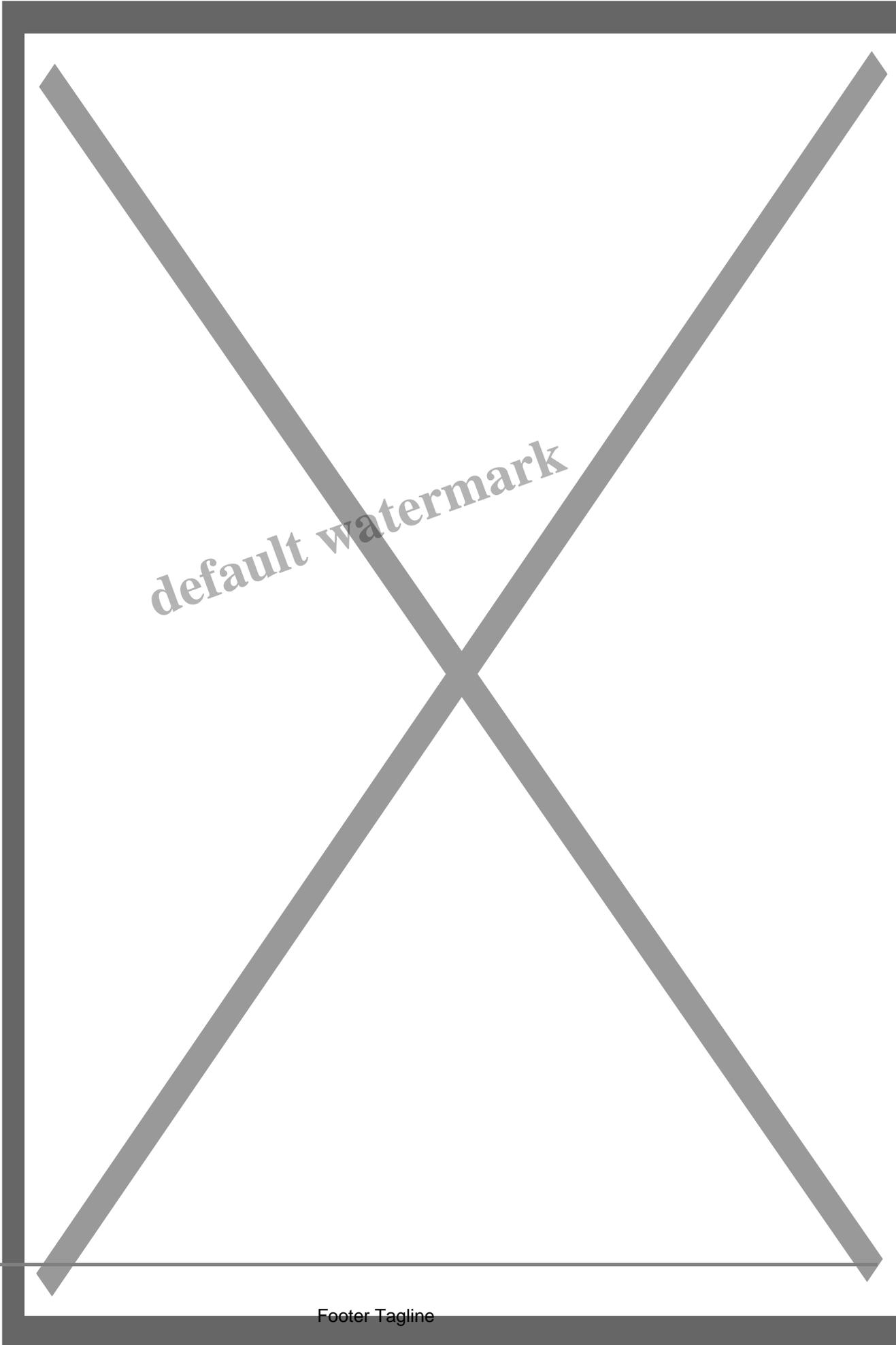


Image not found or type unknown



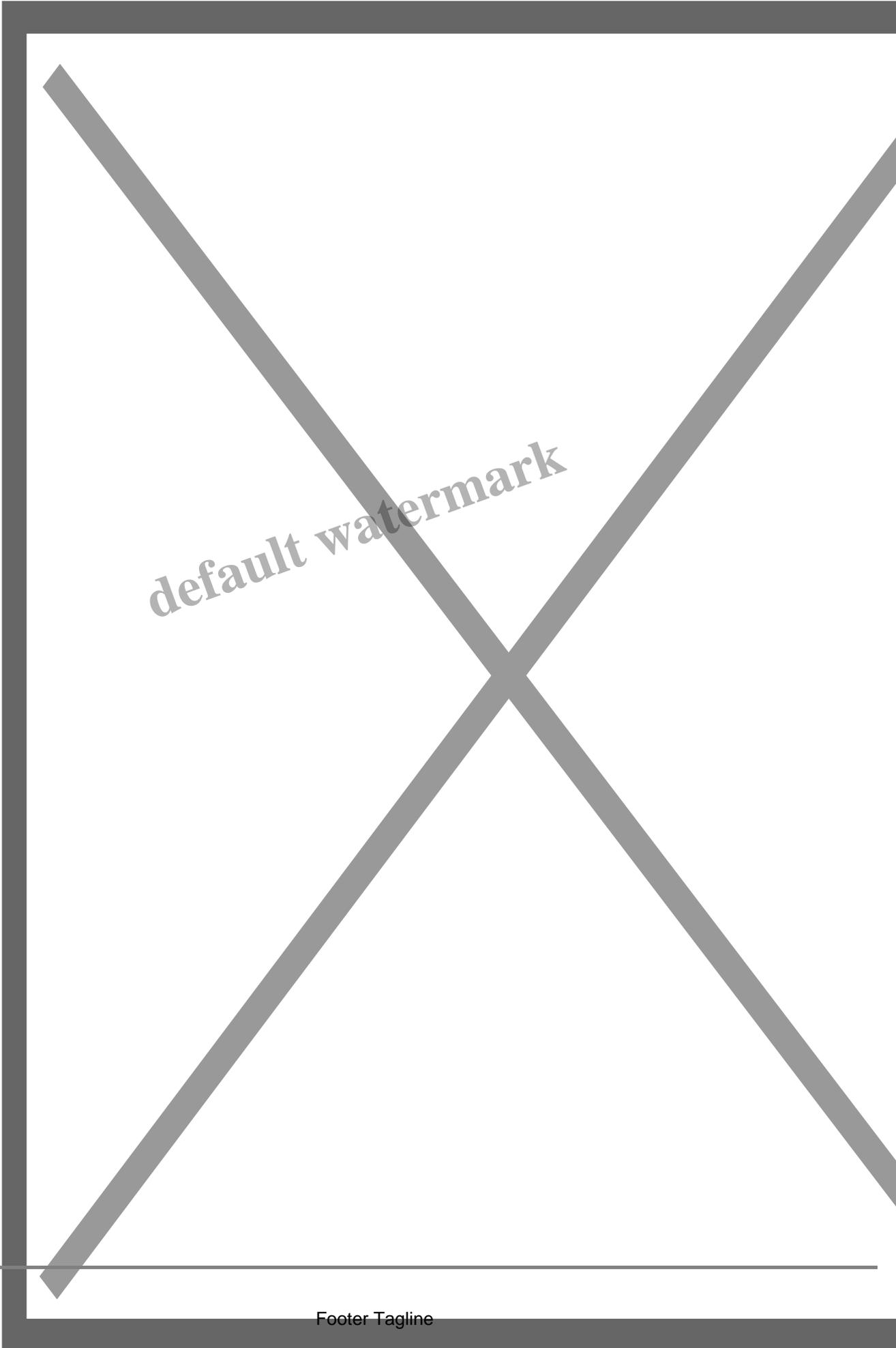
Oak in Britain

So, hey, wait a minute. How come single malt Scotch is matured in barrels that aren't made from local oak? Britain has two species of oak tree, and oaks feature large in [traditions and history](#) – legend has it that Robin Hood and his men sheltered under a giant oak in Sherwood forest and the future King Charles II hid from Roundhead soldiers in an oak tree in 1651.

default watermark

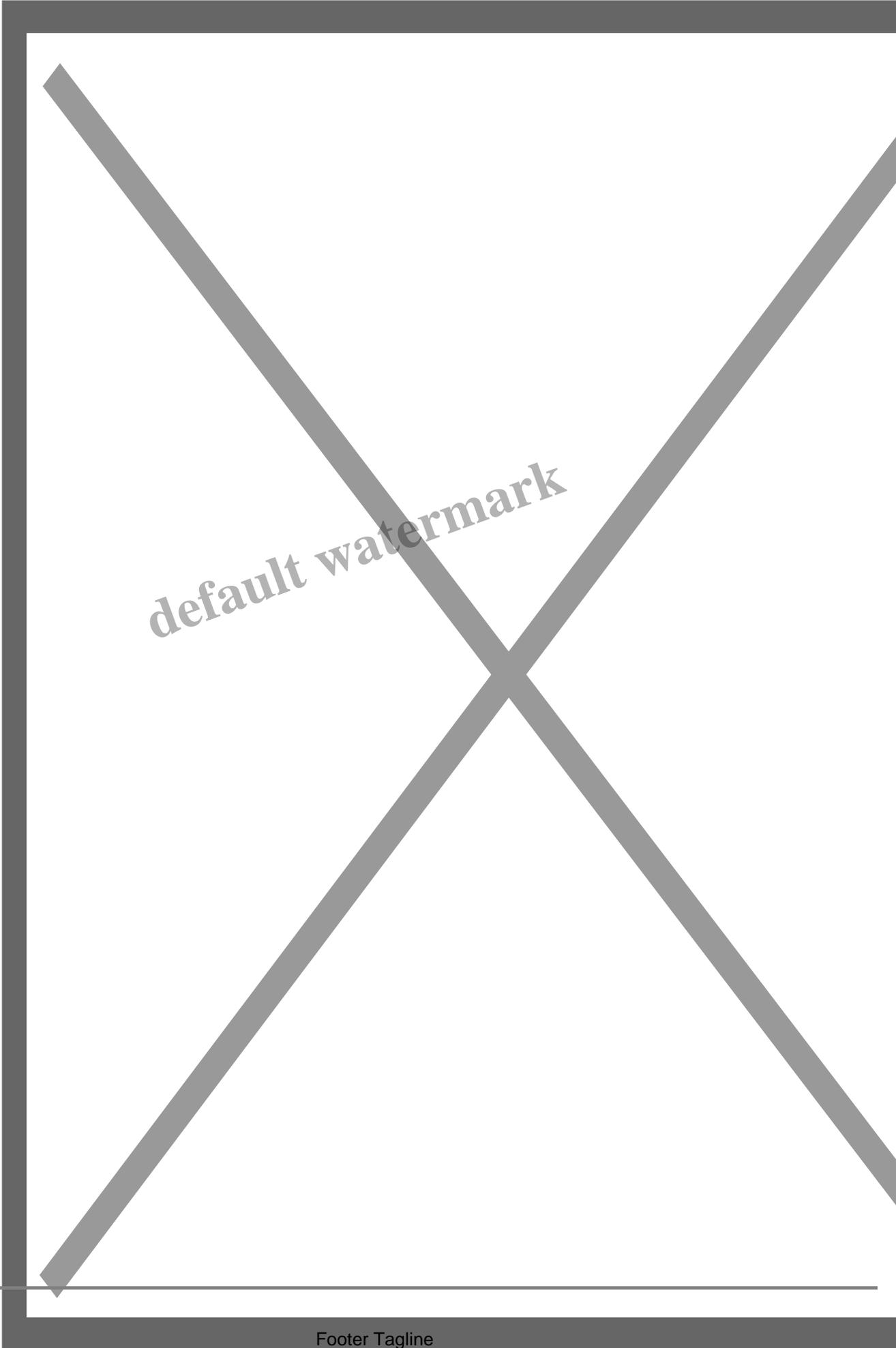
default watermark

Image not found or type unknown



default watermark

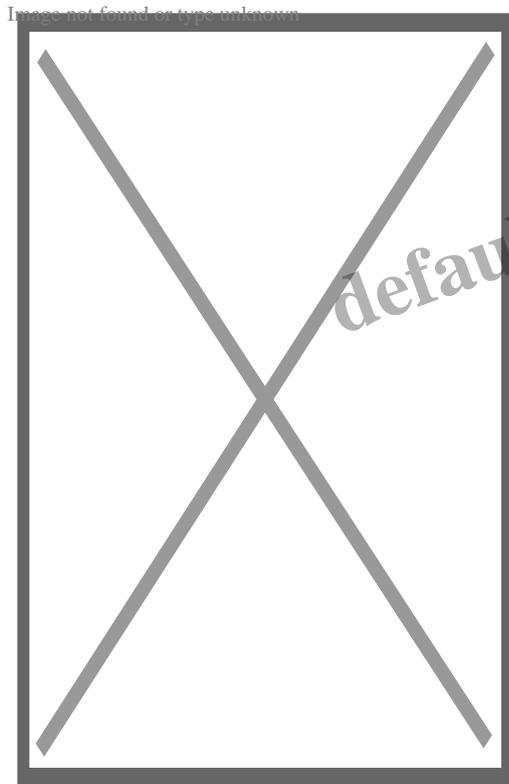
Image not found or type unknown



Fine old English oaks in Oxfordshire (Photos: Hamish Hobbs)

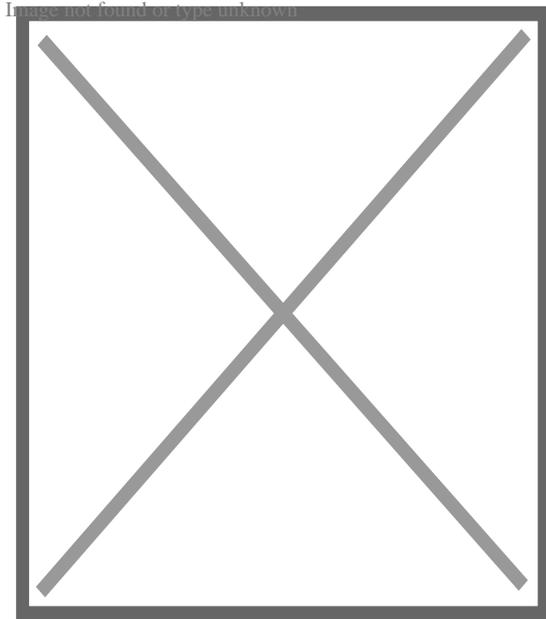
Oak was the preferred wood for [buildings and ships](#) – and therein lies the first clue to why local wood is not used for barrels these days. As ocean trading routes became more important and ongoing conflicts with other European countries necessitated the development and maintenance of a large navy, shipbuilding was an ongoing necessity.

For instance, during the Napoleonic Wars, the Royal Navy maintained a fleet of around 100 battleships and hundreds of smaller vessels, not to mention a huge merchant fleet. At the [Battle of Trafalgar](#) in 1805, 27 Royal Navy ships matched up against 33 French and Spanish ships. The construction of each of those ships required large volumes of wood – for instance around 6,000 trees were used in the construction of [HMS Victory](#), and 90% of these were oak. Because of lack of effective preservation techniques, ships didn't necessarily last very long, even if they weren't blown out of the water during battles. So, there was an ongoing relentless demand for timber, with an equivalent relentless exploitation of forests.



HMS Victory – lots of oak trees

The history of forest management – and mis-management – in Britain is well documented by [J.V. Thirgood \(1971\)](#), and he also compares the British and French forest management systems. The French system resulted in relatively large tracts of managed oak forest remaining in recent times, whereas the British system has resulted in mostly relatively small pockets of oak forest remaining. One of my first summer jobs during my undergraduate years was working with the (then) Nature Conservancy Council in [Glasdrum](#) and [Glen Nant](#), two small oak woodland reserves in the west of Scotland – beautiful places, but not extensive!



Home base under the oaks for a few weeks at Glen Nant Nature Reserve (ca 1973)

In both Britain and France and, indeed, across most of Europe (where demands for timber were equivalently pervasive), the oak forests of today are mere shades of their former selves. Only in a few eastern European countries, particularly Poland, do extensive old-growth oak forests persist. The difference between historical and modern forests was highlighted recently in the aftermath of the fire that severely damaged the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris.

ASIDE: The Forest of Notre Dame

When the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris caught fire in 2019, one of the world's most famous buildings was in danger of complete destruction. The good news was that the whole building did not collapse, but the bad news was that there was serious damage done. The cathedral roof, in particular, was completely burned. Completed 800 years ago, the roof was a technological marvel in its own right. Constructed from large numbers of oak beams, the roof was known as "[the forest of Notre Dame](#)".

Image not found or type unknown

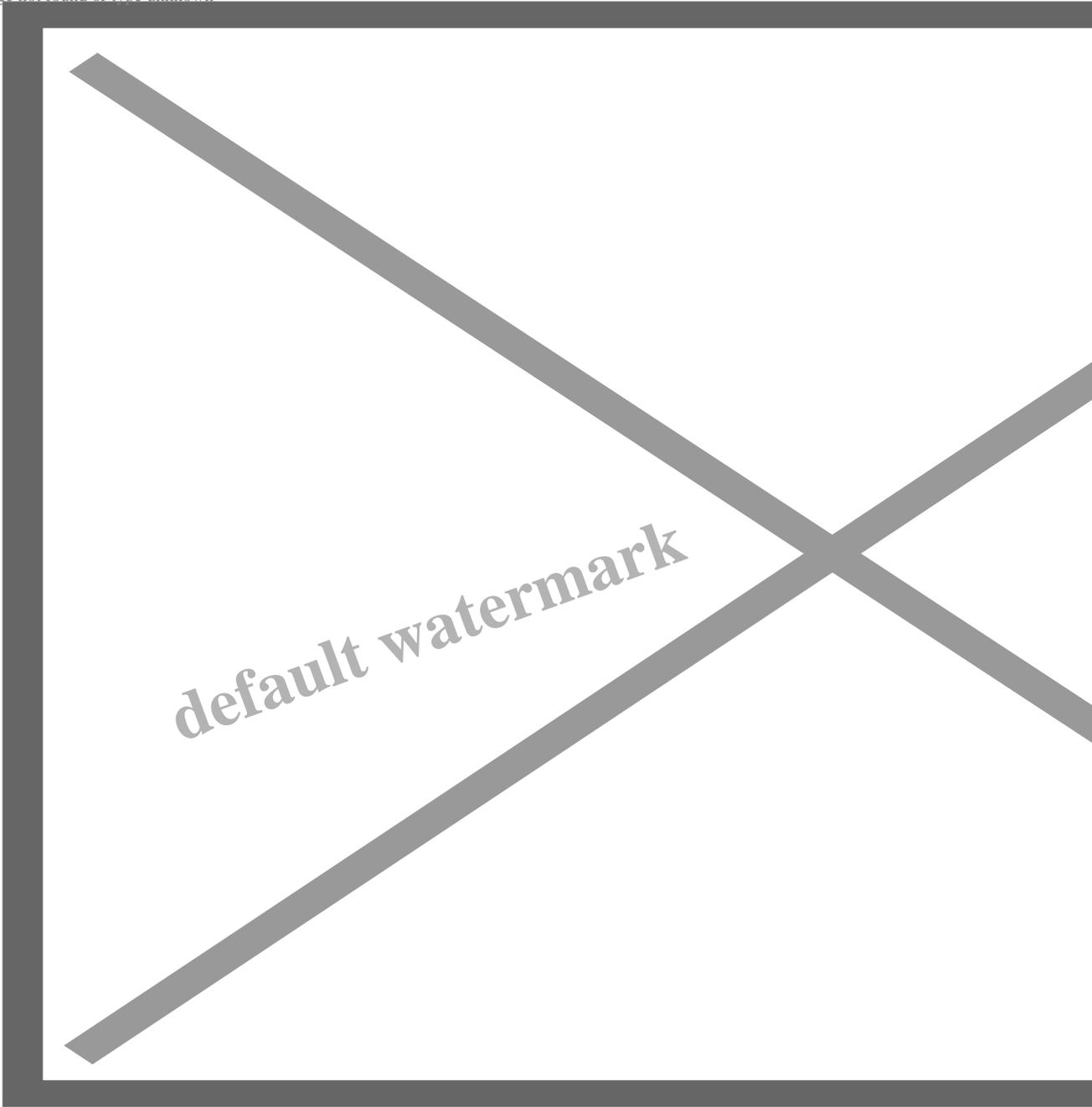
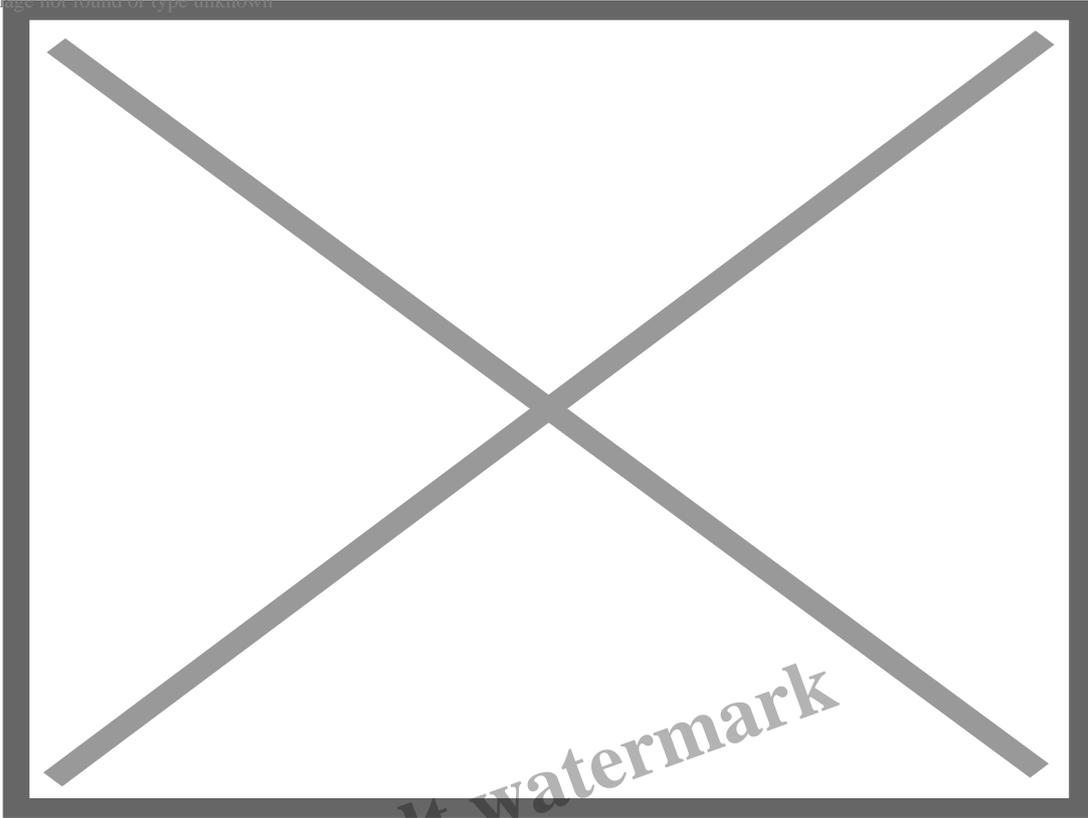


Image not found or type unknown



default watermark

Image not found or type unknown

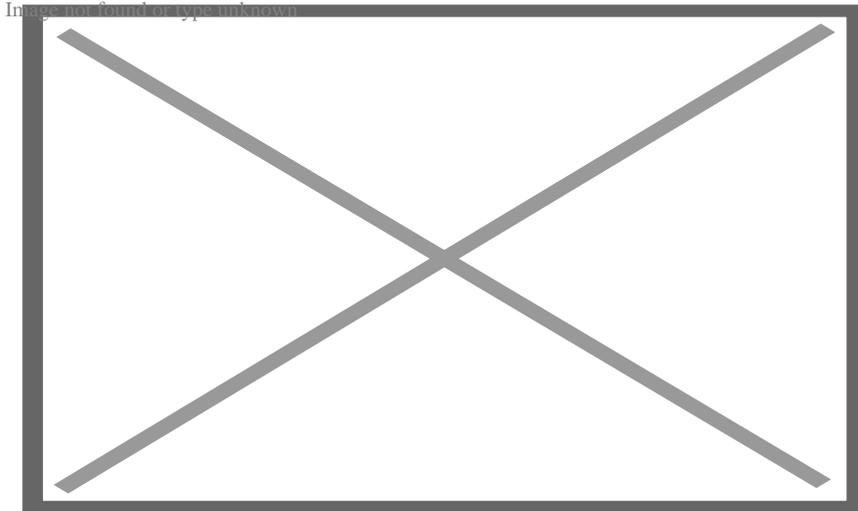


Inside the roof of Notre Dame

Each beam came from an individual tree, and an estimated 13000 trees, or 21 hectares of forest, would have been felled. The size of tree needed to produce beams of the required size probably means that the trees were 300-400 years old.

Since the fire, there has been much discussion regarding the restoration and rebuilding of the cathedral. The roof has been one of the main points of discussion, with many people wanting it to be restored to exactly the same as it was before the fire. However, there is a large obstacle to overcome if this is to happen – there are [no longer sufficient trees](#) of the right size and age anywhere in France to rebuild the roof as it was when constructed 800 years ago.

Indeed, there are few places in Europe that might have enough large oaks to do the job – and the remaining old-growth oak forests are all considered very valuable from a conservation perspective. An [ethical dilemma](#) would arise if it were decided to chop down ancient forests to rebuild an ancient building.



Old growth forests such as this in Bialowieza Forest, Poland, are now a rarity

Hence, there is a quest for alternatives. Either large enough trees have to be sourced from elsewhere, or the design has to change. Would there be enough oak in US forests (see below), for instance? [Probably not](#), is the answer – although still large areas exist, trees that would be big enough are not plentiful and are scattered through the forest. Are there other alternatives? Another suggestion has been to use [wood from Ghana that was submerged by an artificial lake](#) – there's that topic of submerged wood again.

Whatever the final outcome, the Notre Dame roof is a salutary reminder that the “nature” we see today is very different to that present in the past, largely due to overuse and transformation.

Back to the Barrels

Turning back to whisky barrels, in the 18th and 19th centuries Scotland and Ireland, both extensively deforested, took to [recycling old barrels](#). In the first instance, these came from imports of various French, Spanish and Portuguese wines, particularly sheries. Increasingly, though, used American barrels became available as steamships reduced the costs of shipping across the Atlantic. A mixture of both is used today, with many distilleries in Scotland offering both sherry cask and bourbon cask whiskies. The origin of the barrel, and how it is treated, affect the characteristics of the resulting whisky in a myriad of ways.

Roger couldn't tell me which type of cask my guitar was made from – it's often not possible to distinguish by the time the wood reaches Roger's workshop, except by subtle differences in smell. Sherry cask wood apparently smells of raisins, and you can occasionally still pick it up if you leave your guitar in its case for a while and sniff it as soon as you get it out again. I've sniffed my guitar multiple times (confirming my wife's suspicion that I am becoming weirder as I get older), but have never detected anything approaching a fruity or raisin aroma. So, I'm inclined to conclude that my guitar is made from an old bourbon cask.

From Kentucky to Scotland

While staying in Speyside, I took my guitar on a visit to the [Speyside Cooperage](#) outside Craigellachie.

The company that runs this also runs the Alloa cooperage where Roger sourced his barrels, and it also has associated cooperages in Kentucky and Ohio, where the barrels are made for bourbon. The Speyside Cooperage is a wonderful place to visit, and you can do a small guided tour that lets you see the whole process of reconditioning used bourbon barrels for use by Scottish distillers.

Image not found or type unknown

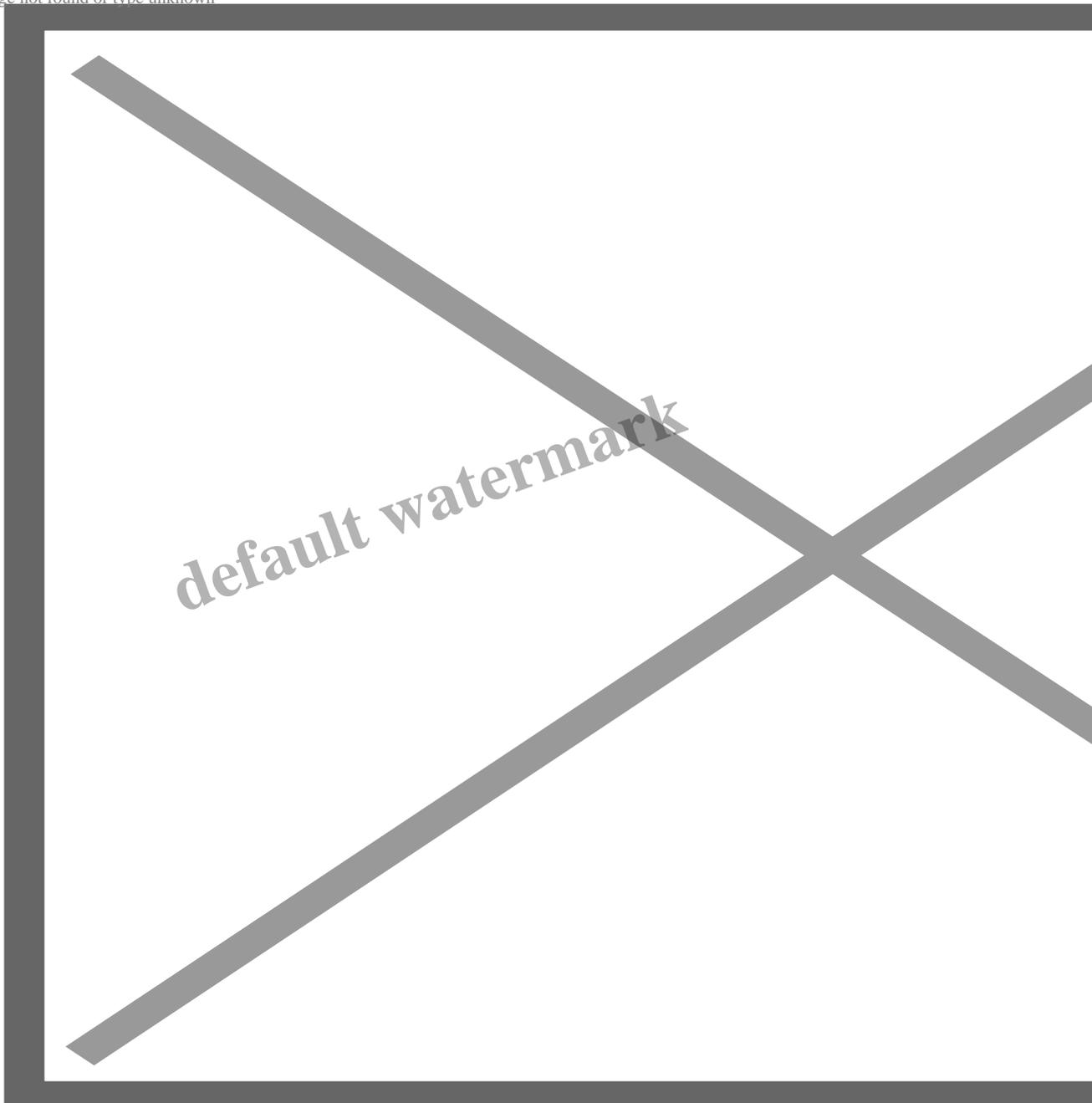


Image not found or type unknown

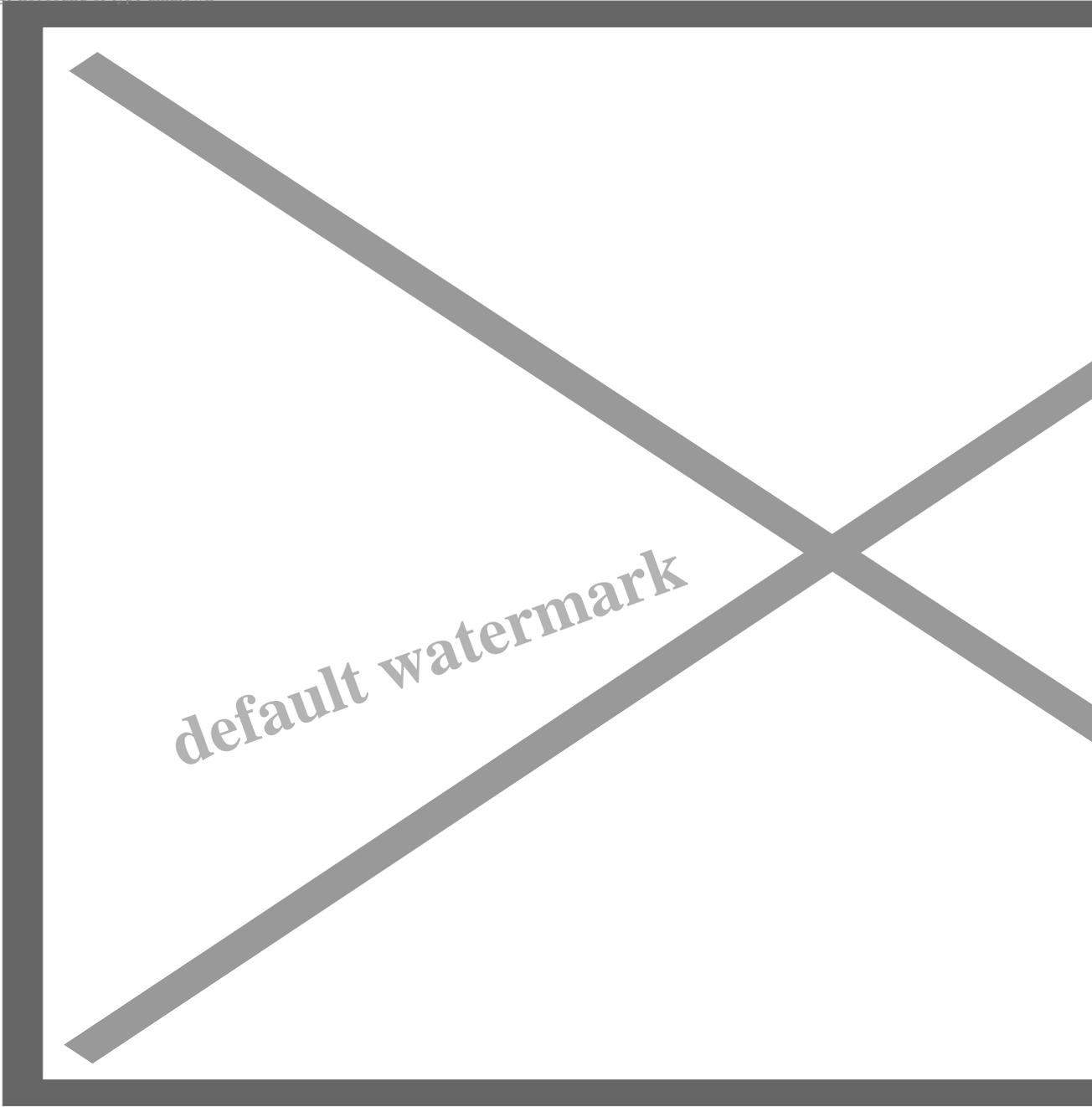


Image not found or type unknown

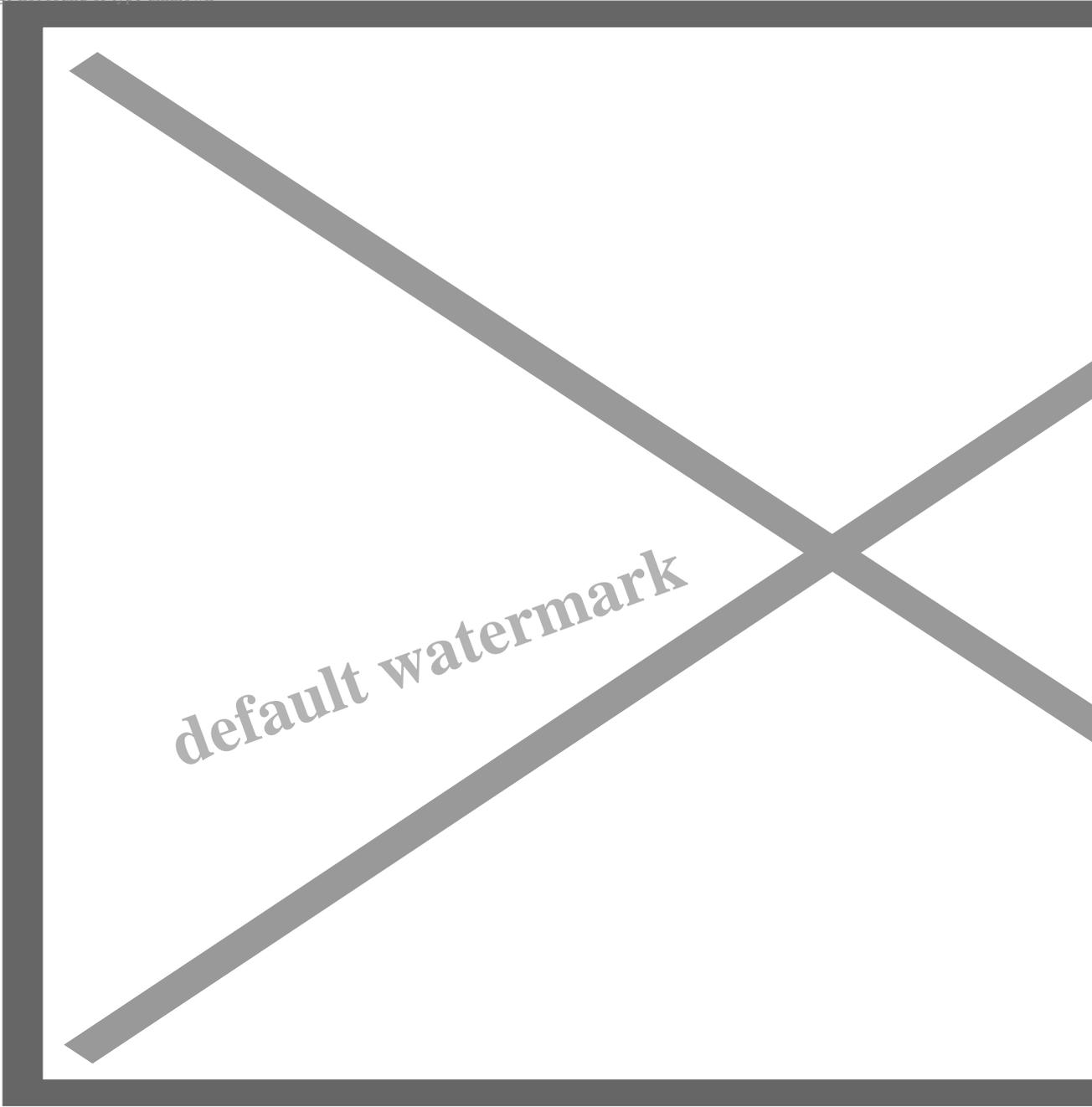
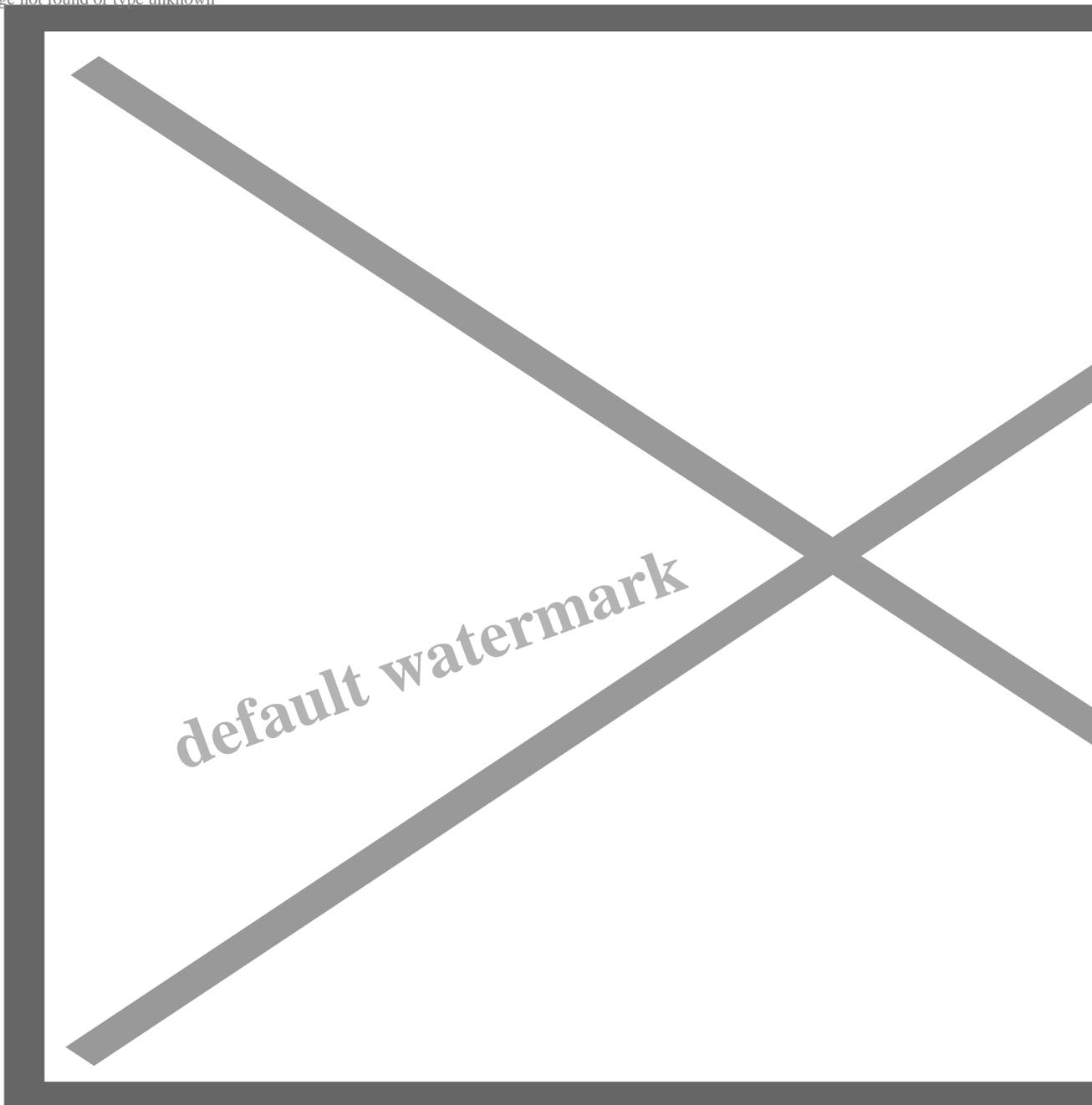


Image not found or type unknown



Barrel heating and flaming are important parts of the process of preparing a barrel for use – creating a charcoal layer inside the barrel and altering the way the barrel interacts with the maturing whisky

Interestingly, bourbon barrels can, by law, only be [used once](#). While there may be good reasons for this (such as ensuring consistency of product), the practice may also simply be a historical artefact or a means of ensuring an ongoing demand for new barrels.

It certainly seems to be an early manifestation of the US infatuation, later to spread worldwide, for single use. And it may eventually lead to [depletion of the white oak \(*Quercus alba*\) woodlands](#) that produce the barrel wood. Exploitation, conversion and [climate change](#) are all important influences on

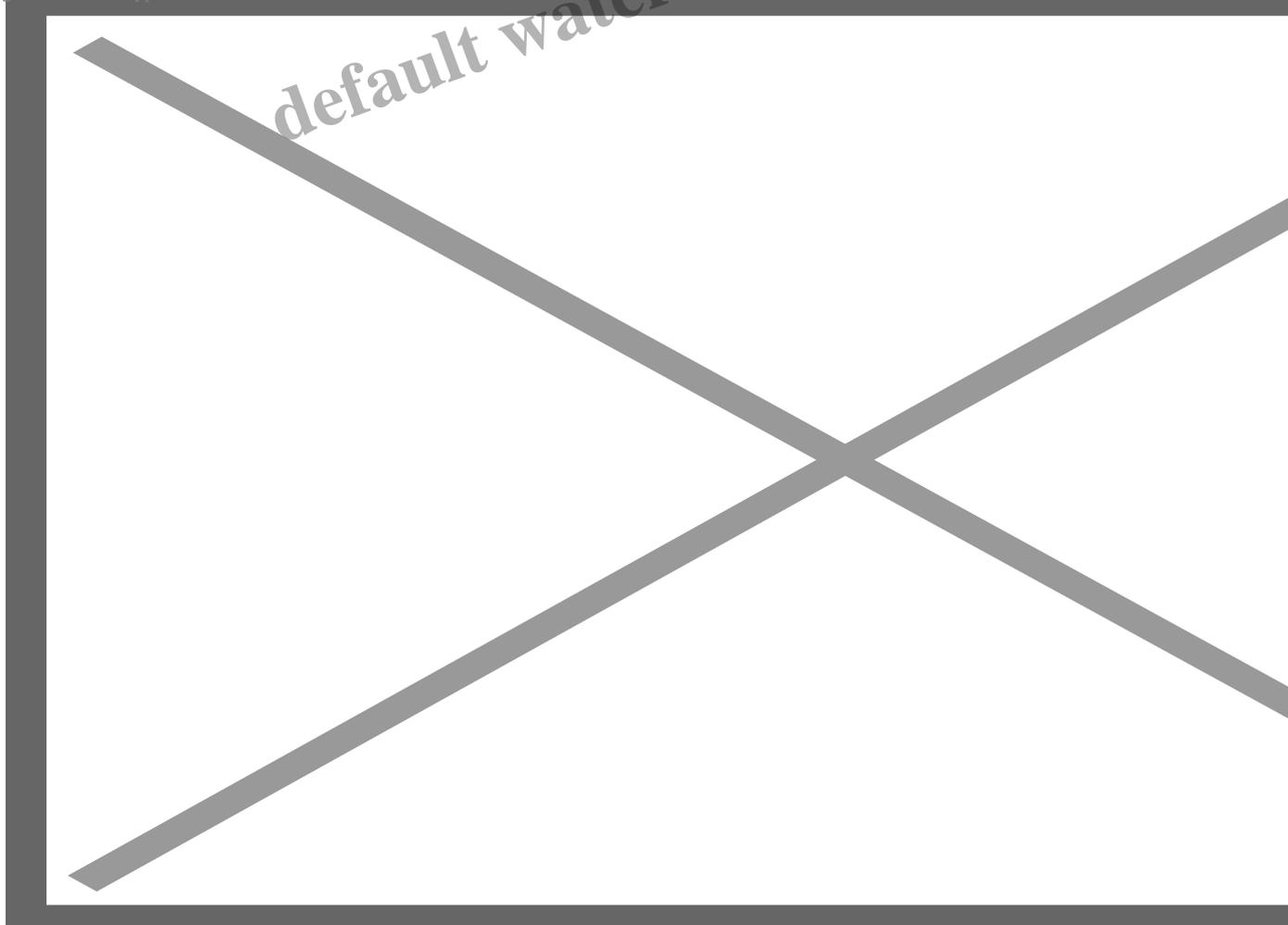
these woodlands, which are [important habitat](#) as well as the source of barrels. The potential for their decline has led to efforts to develop [effective management and conservation practices](#).

The Scots have no such similar hang-ups about using pre-used barrels – the Speyside Cooperage is, in effect, a vast recycling plant that is maintaining the centuries-old craft of cooperage to supply the distilleries with barrels to keep pace with growing production levels. A good way to prevent all those used bourbon barrels from going to waste!

When you visit the cooperage, they start the tour with a little 15 minute film about the whole process, starting with the oaks growing in Kentucky. That got me thinking about the story behind the wood for my Single Malt Ariel. I knew that the oak for the back and sides came from a whisky barrel used by one of Scotland's many distilleries. But before that?

I think the story must have gone something like this. At about the time of the American Civil War in the 1860s, or even before that, an acorn – perhaps one that had been hidden and forgotten by a squirrel – germinated in the still vast oak-hickory forests of Kentucky. The white oak seedling grew tall and straight, probably along with numerous other new young trees. It grew for 100 years or more, before being felled and transformed into staves for a bourbon barrel. Filled with bourbon, the barrel sat in a warehouse for a number of years until the bourbon inside had reached the required maturity, at which stage the contents of the barrel were bottled.

Image not found or type unknown

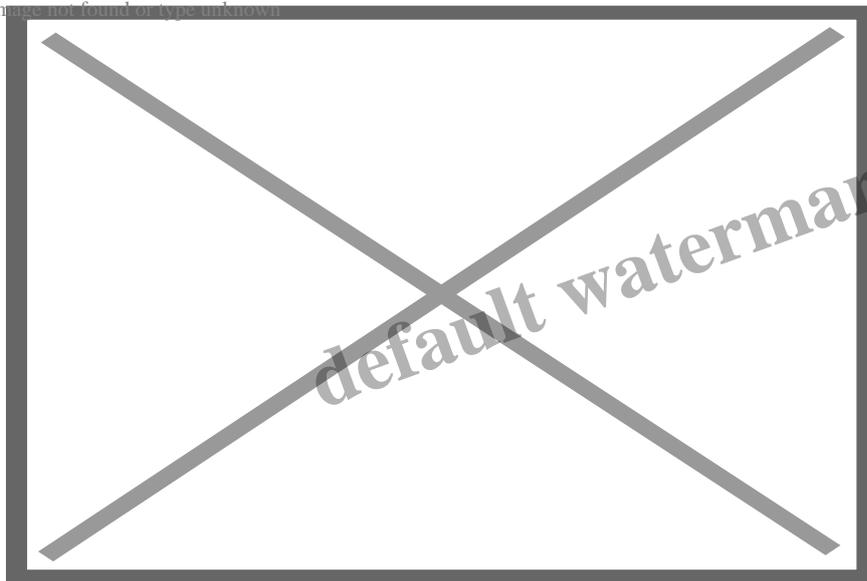


The journey from acorn to guitar

No longer useful for bourbon, it was sent on its way for the next stage of its life – a long sea voyage to Scotland and a passage through the Speyside Cooperage where it was reincarnated as a barrel to be filled with single malt whisky. Whatever distillery it ended up at, it would then sit in a bonded warehouse for probably 12 years or longer before its precious contents were bottled and shipped all over the world. There's every chance that the same barrel might have one or more return trips through the cooperage to be repaired and reconditioned, ready to mature another batch of single malt.

Eventually, the barrel ended up at the Alloa cooperage and was bought by Roger Bucknall. A century and a half or so after the acorn germinated in the woods in Kentucky, part of the oak tree was now a beautiful musical instrument.

Image not found or type unknown



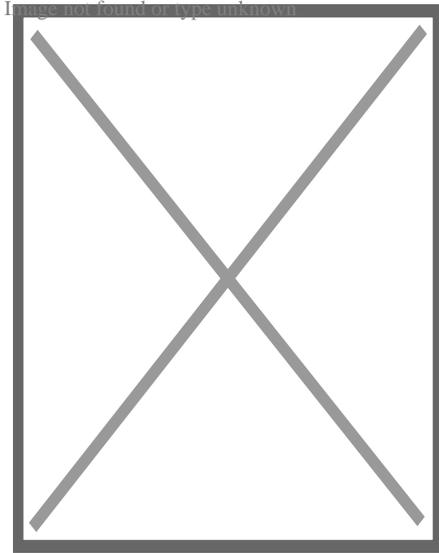
Coda: A distillery visit for the guitar

While in Speyside, it seemed appropriate to visit a few distilleries. I also hoped to be able to do some photography with the Single Malt Ariel, and so I got in touch with a few of the local distilleries to see whether they might allow me access for a photoshoot. Thus I ended up at [Glenfarclas](#), one of the few remaining independent distilleries in Scotland, which has been run by the Grant family since 1865.

Callum Fraser, the Production Manager at Glenfarclas had agreed to give me access to one of their bonded warehouses, where the barrels of single malt whisky sat and aged before bottling. While I waited for Callum in the visitors' reception area (Glenfarclas does one of the best distillery tours in the region), I had a look around and came across a glass case displaying the distillery's "Family Cask" range – from 1954 onwards, a cask from each year was kept and limited edition bottles are available.

I was born in 1954, and so I was quite chuffed that there were bottles of whisky available that were the same vintage as me. The display case contained bottles from every year from 1954 through to more recent times, and also had a price list. Bottles from the early 2000s could be bought for prices in the mid-200 British pounds (about \$300US) and prices slid ever upwards towards the older bottles,

reaching a peak with the 1954 bottles at 9,000 British pounds each (approximately \$11,000US).



Callum appeared just as I was picking myself up of the floor after seeing the price. After we'd introduced ourselves, I explained my interest in the 1954 bottles. I asked whether people normally would buy a bottle of one of the older whiskies to drink or to keep as an investment. Callum replied without hesitation that they happened to have two bottles available, and I was welcome to buy one to drink and one as an investment.

It's clear that there are people who collect fine and rare single malts in just the same way that others collect guitars. I guess the difference for me is that I can pick up one of my guitars, play it for a while, and put it back. It will still be there the next time I want to play it. With the bottle of whisky, I would be faced with the ongoing dilemma of whether to sit and look at it on the shelf, hoping it was gaining in value, or whether to open it and luxuriate in enjoying the finest water of life available. I think the decision would be obvious. I think it's sad to simply possess a wonderful guitar and keep it in a case and never play it. In the same way, having an exquisite bottle of whisky and never drinking it would be a great pity – even if it was a good investment.

Anyway, after declining Callum's kind offer of two bottles of 1954 Glenfarclas, we made our way over to one of the distillery's warehouses so that I could set up for some photos of the guitar. Callum patiently waited while I sorted out positioning and lighting (guitars are tricky to photograph because their polished surfaces reflect anything that is around: I've discovered that there is a real art to getting the lighting right, and it often takes a while). It turned out that Callum could turn out a decent tune on the guitar, and we both took turns sitting on a barrel and playing a bit.

Image not found or type unknown

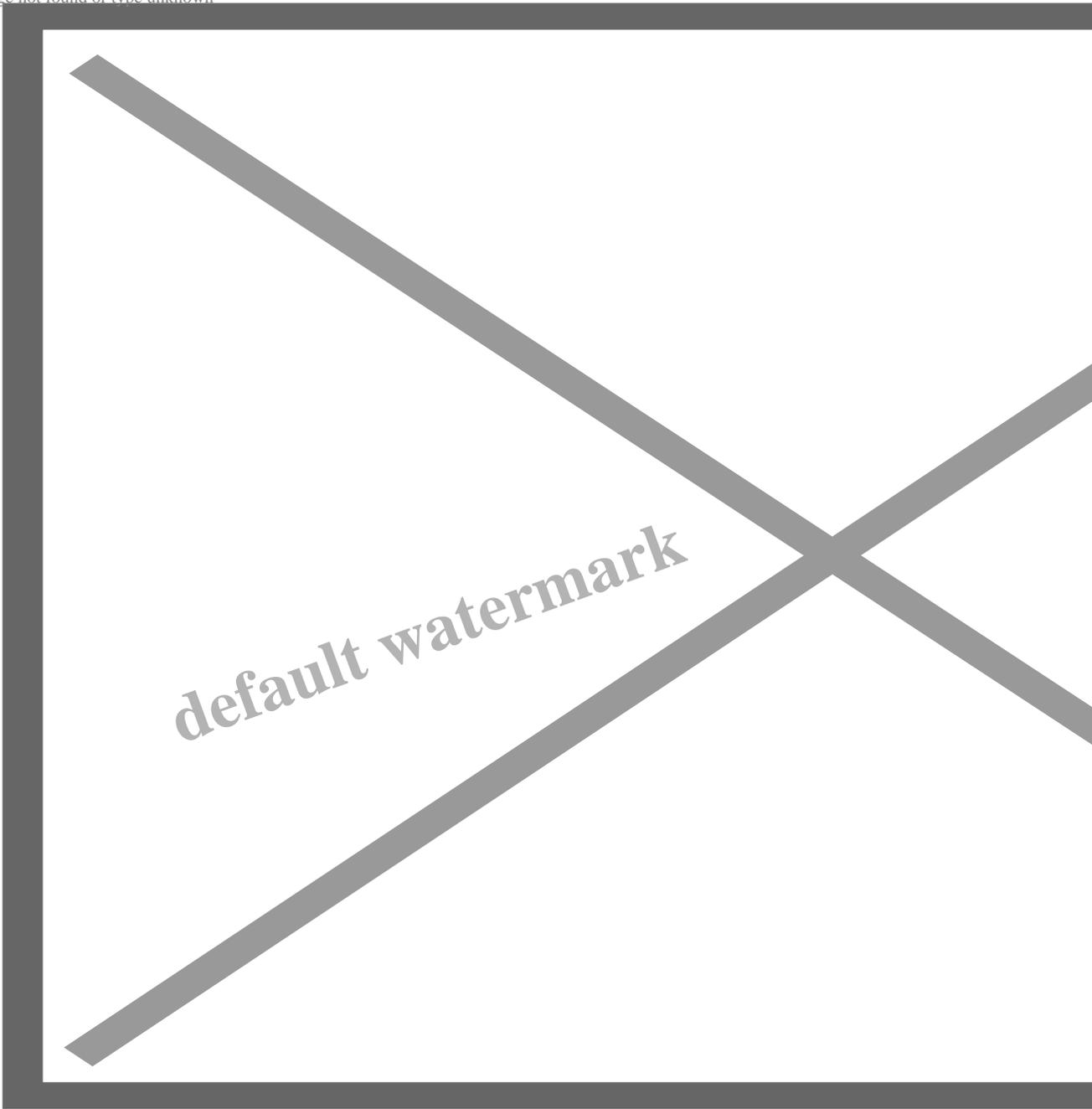
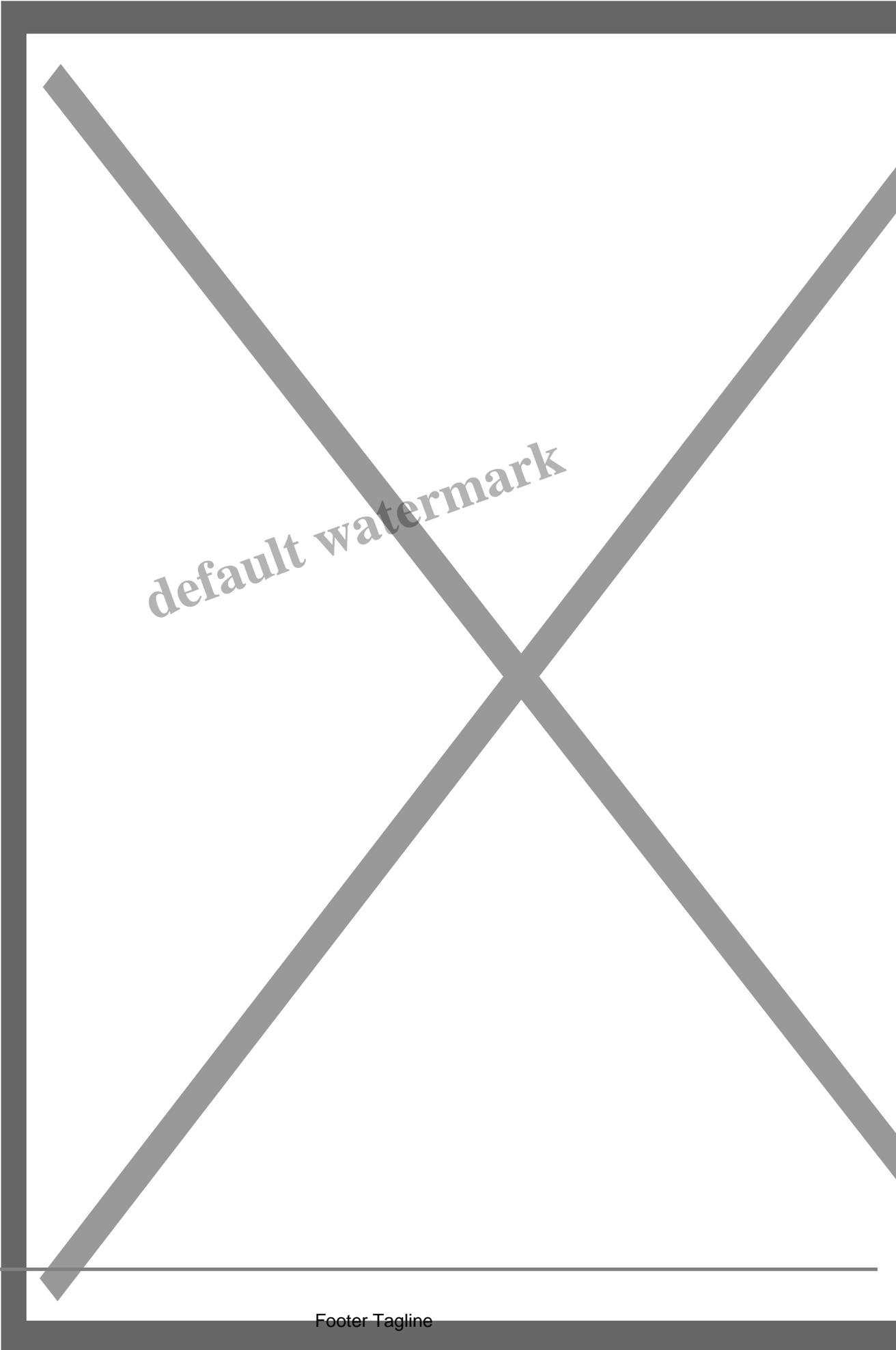
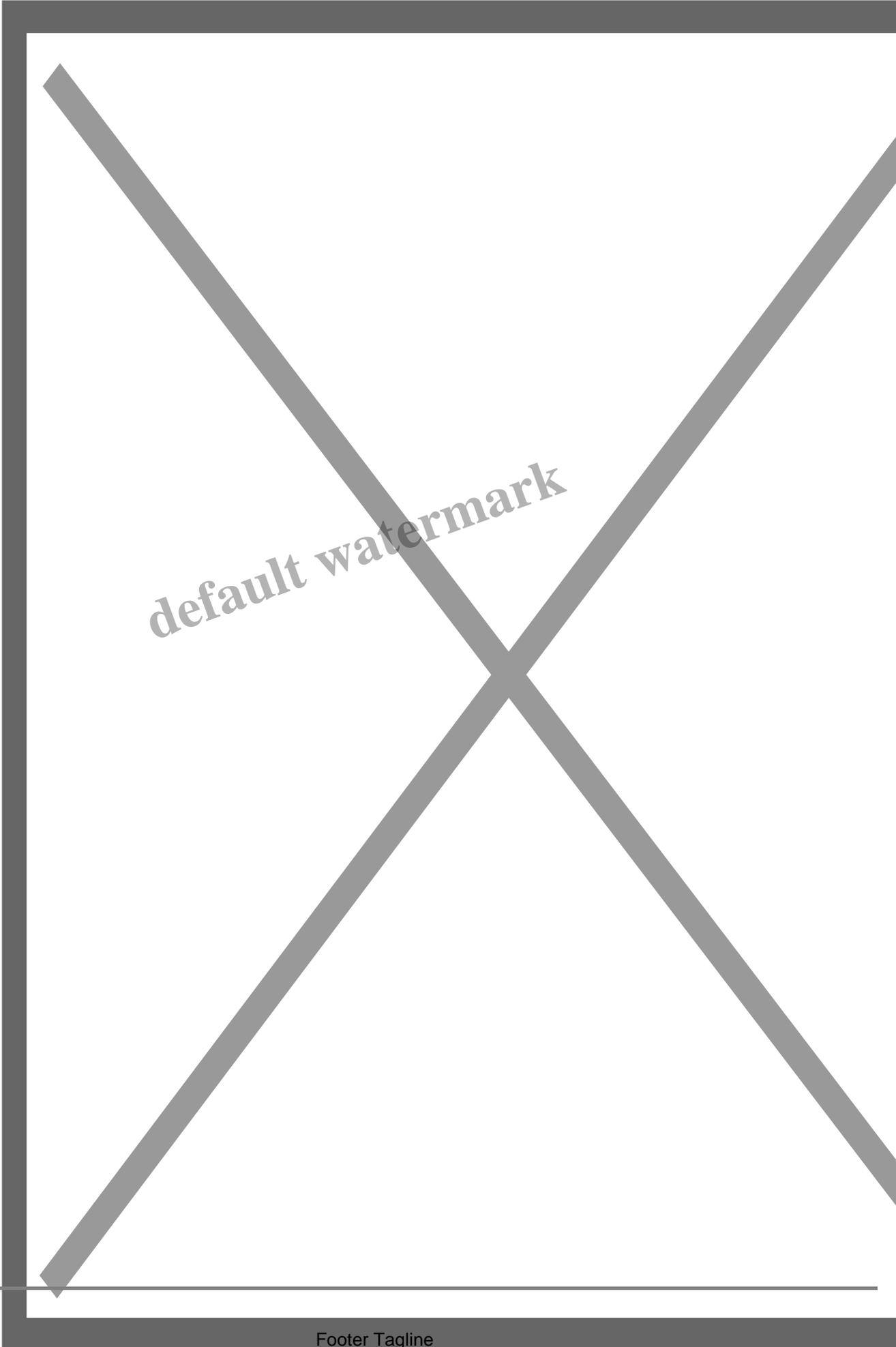


Image not found or type unknown



default watermark

Image not found or type unknown



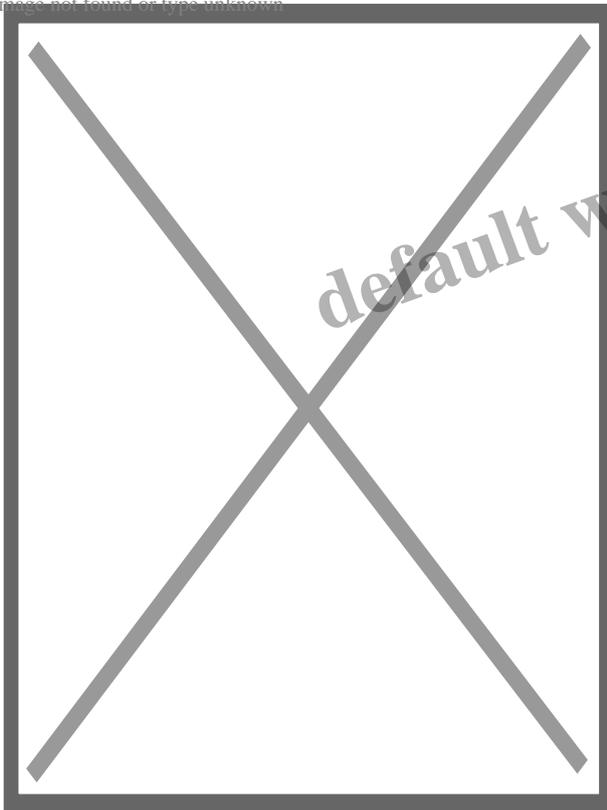
The Glenfarclas warehouse, and Callum trying out the guitar

As chance would have it, one of the most prominent barrels in the part of the warehouse where I was doing the photographs was the 1954 cask that the bottle in the display cabinet had come from. I'd been asking Callum if the older whiskies actually tasted proportionately better than the more standard 12-15 year olds, since I'd heard that longer ageing does not necessarily lead to a "better" whisky. Completely out of the blue, Callum asked if I'd like to try a taste. After picking myself up off the floor again, I said "Of course!" or words to that effect, and Callum drew a small amount of the 1954 for me to sample.

The answer to my question was obvious – the taste of the 1954 was probably the closest to heaven I am going to get. Its warm glow topped off a truly wonderful guitar and single malt experience in amongst the whisky casks in the cool Glenfarclas warehouse. Some of the photos turned out not bad too.

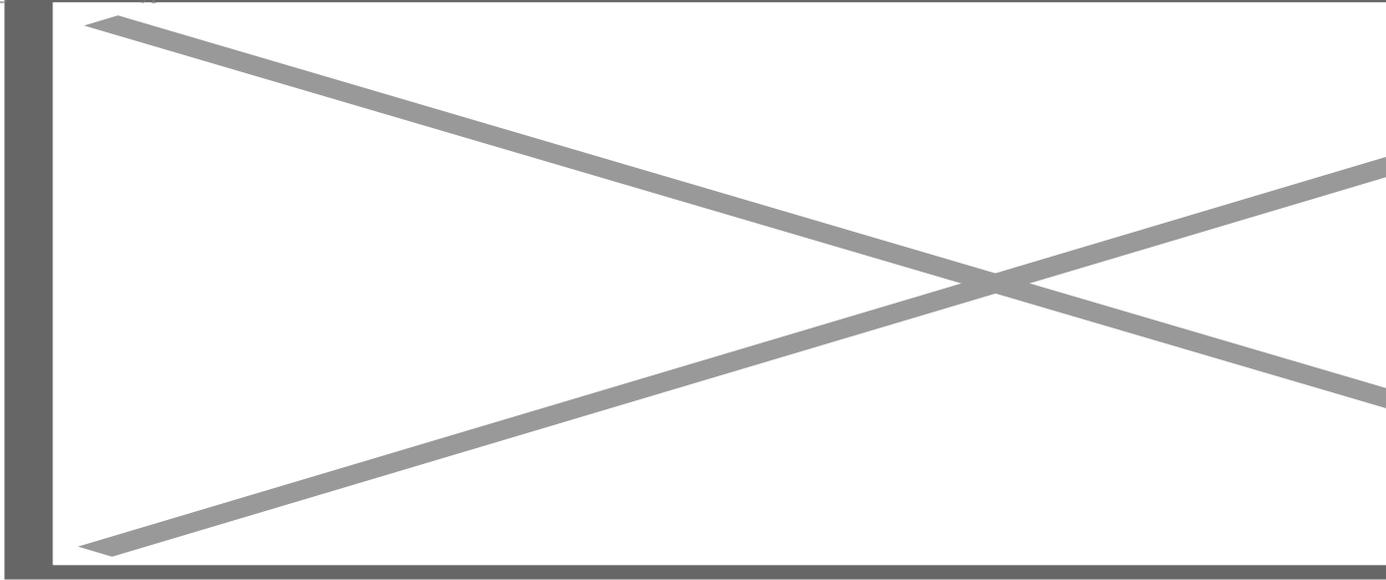
Many thanks to Callum and Glenfarclas for their welcome and hospitality.

Image not found or type unknown



Happiness

Image not found or type unknown



Sign up for updates on new posts:

Email address:

default watermark

Category

- 1. Uncategorized

Date Created

July 13, 2020

Author

the-nature-of-music