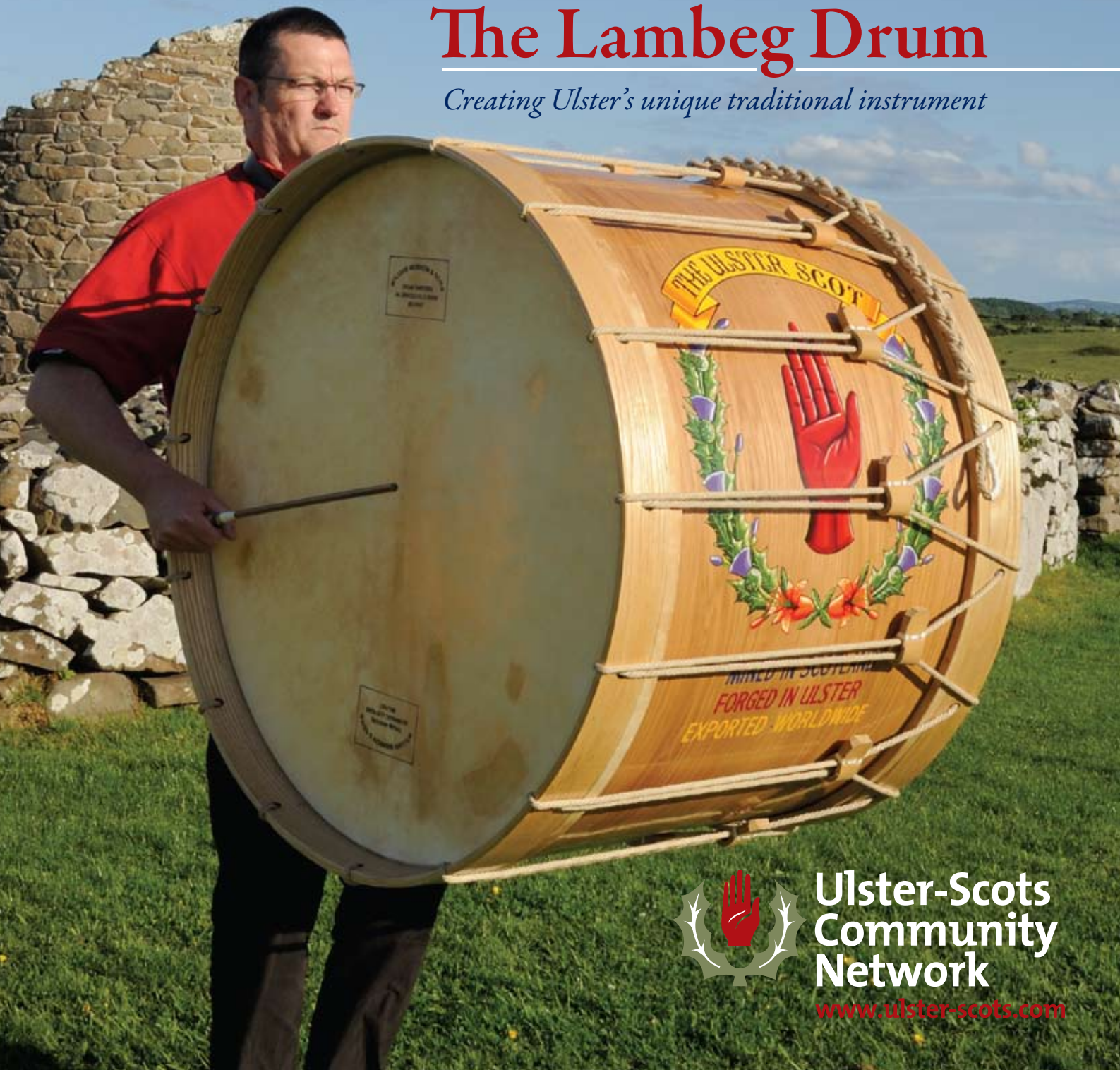


The Lambeg Drum

Creating Ulster's unique traditional instrument



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Few other instruments can match the Lambeg drum for size and sheer volume. This impressive percussion instrument is unique to the Province of Ulster, and is not made anywhere else. It is in fact the largest double sided rope tension drum in the world, and is thought to be the loudest folk instrument on the planet! The Lambeg drum is perhaps most usually associated with the Orange tradition, where it is often used to accompany marchers on parade. However drumming matches and competitions are held independently by drumming clubs the length and breadth of the Province.

The true origin of the Lambeg drum remains unknown, as there is very little historical evidence documenting this peculiar percussion instrument. However, the mystique surrounding its invention and creation has given rise to many different stories and folklore, which have become as much a part of the Lambeg drumming tradition as the music itself.

There are several different theories surrounding the origins of the Lambeg drum. One such theory that explains the title “Lambeg” suggests that the drum was first built in the village of Lambeg, near Lisburn.

Another popular theory is that the drums were first beaten with canes at a meeting in Lambeg in the 1870s. Lambeg drums are traditionally beaten with curved Mallacca or Bamboo canes, as opposed to ball-headed sticks.

Some argue that the drum was first introduced by continental Williamite soldiers in the summer of 1690, and that the drum was played by these troops whilst camped at Lambeg en route from Carrickfergus to the Battle of the Boyne.

Another prominent story in Lambeg folklore connected to the Battle of the Boyne explains the unique rhythms that are traditionally played on the drum. Legend has it that King William’s drummer boy had fallen asleep after eating a supper consisting of bread. An opportunistic Wren flew down and began to peck at the crumbs lying on the drum head. This noise caused the boy to wake from his sleep just in time to discover that the camp was under attack. He was then able to raise the alarm in time to prevent defeat.

Whatever the origins of the Lambeg drum, there are only a few very dedicated and skilled craftsmen who now make this instrument. Drums are made to order and take several months to construct. It is simply not possible to purchase a Lambeg drum from a music shop in the same way one would buy a piano or guitar!

This booklet aims to highlight the various processes and skills involved in the traditional manufacture of the Lambeg drum, from the selection of suitable timber through to decoration of the finished instrument.



Second-generation Lambeg Drum maker, Dennis Morrow, in his workshop. All the Lambeg drum making processes detailed in this booklet are Dennis’s preferred methods and techniques, handed down to him by his father, William Morrow.



At the very start of the drum making process, suitable White Oak boards are selected. A suitable board needs to be at least 12 feet long by 13 or 14 inches wide. Each board is checked for defects in the grain of the wood which could potentially cause the timber to crack when they are bent into shape.

The edges of the oak boards are straightened with a jack plane.



One of the oak boards (half of the drum shell) on a piece of equipment called the "centre". This custom made implement allows the board to be curved into the drum shape. The board is soaked in water until it contains sufficient moisture to allow it to be bent under pressure around "the centre." Each half of the drum needs to remain on the drum centre for a minimum of three weeks in order to retain its shape.

Various Hoop timbers in the steamer.



In the drum making process , several “hoops” are required for different purposes. A “Centre” hoop is required to join the two drum shell halves together. These are made from oak. “Mouth” hoops are added to the outside edge of the shell to strengthen the “mouth” of the drum where the goatskin head is to be attached. These are made by timbers such as Redwood Pine or Silver Spruce. Silver Spruce is a “tone wood” often used in violin bridges because of its favourable resonant qualities. It is used in Lambeg drum construction for the same reason. The other type of hoops required are “flesh” hoops, which the goatskin heads are fastened to, which are made from Piranha Pine or Poplar/Tulip wood. The final hoops used in the construction of the drum are “Brace” hoops. These are the hoops through which the rope passes and allow sufficient tension to be applied to the heads of the drum. Brace hoops are usually made out of Ash due to its’ shock- absorbing qualities. All these hoops are manufactured by the same process.

“Scarving” the oak centre hoop timber. This process ensures that the two ends of the timber merge neatly after being bent into shape.



Removing hoop timber from steamer. (Note how the end is tapered or “scarved.”) The timber is extremely hot and needs to be handled with gloves to protect the hands.



Starting a flesh hoop on the “wheel”, another custom-made piece of equipment. For all the hoops, the timber is taken straight from the steamer and turned on the wheel, then clamped and held in position with G clamps. Speed is of the essence when turning timber on the wheel, as the wood is more malleable or supple whilst it is still hot and fresh from the steamer. The cooler the timber gets, the harder it is to manipulate into shape.



A lot of pressure required to bend the timber around the wheel!



Clamping hoop timber to the wheel.



Close up view of the two scarf joints coming together.



The two scarf ends of the hoop are nailed together and left on the wheel for some time for the wood to retain the circular shape.



Sometimes defects in the timber cause the wood to break instead of bend!

After a sufficient period of time, the hoop is removed from the wheel and the two scarf ends are glued, clamped and nailed. Brass nails are traditionally used in drum making, as steel nails tend to oxidise and cause a blue discolouration to the appearance of the wood.

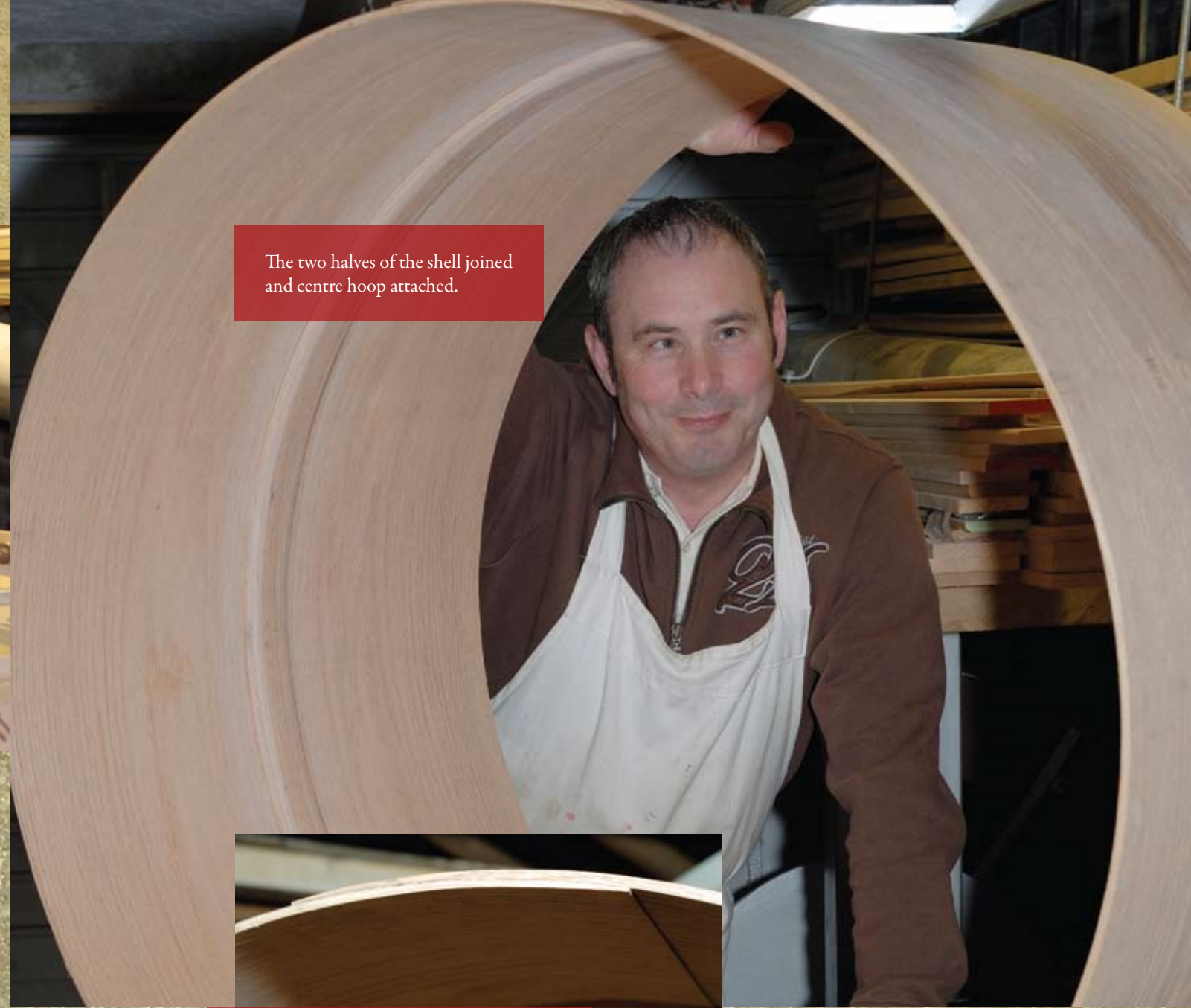




The two halves of the drum shell ready for jointing.
A cabinet scraper is used to remove any blemishes on the shell.



The centre hoop is fitted to one half of the shell. The diameters of the shell and centre hoop are checked. This drum's diameter is 3ft ¼ inch. This is the preferred size of shell, as any increase in diameter larger than this makes it more difficult to find sufficient quality goatskins to match to the drum.



The two halves of the shell joined and centre hoop attached.



A close up view of the scarf joint of the shell.



The mouth hoops are attached to the shell and the edges are “trued” or levelled.



The finished shell, with centre hoop and brace hoops clearly visible. The shell of the drum is then sealed with a very light coating of varnish, then it is ready for painting.



This picture shows William Magowan, professional drum and banner painter in his “Brush Creations” studio in Garvagh, Co. Londonderry. The area to be decorated is primed with a special coating, then acrylic paint is applied to the shell of the drum.



The Ash brace hoops are bored using a red-hot poker. The holes are pre-drilled, but the poker seals the grain of the timber to ensure that the rope passes through freely without any undue friction.



A finished brace hoop is given a light coat of varnish.

The goat skin is set on a special board to be smoothed out before being “lapped” onto the flesh hoops. Hoof glue is applied to the flesh hoops and the skin is then lapped around them and fastened with copper tacks. Goat skins from female “nanny” goats are preferred for drum heads, as they tend to be a lighter and cleaner skin, making them easier to work with than a male or “Billy” goat hide.



Hoof glue (made from cow hooves) is a natural wood working glue traditionally used in all aspects of Lambeg drum making. It has remained so through the years despite the development of modern poly-urethane glues. Hoof glue, unlike modern glues, can be unfastened after setting by applying heat to make it melt. The glue comes in the form of solid granules, which are then melted in a glue pot over the pot-bellied stove as shown above.

Freshly lapped skins are inspected for any potential flaws.



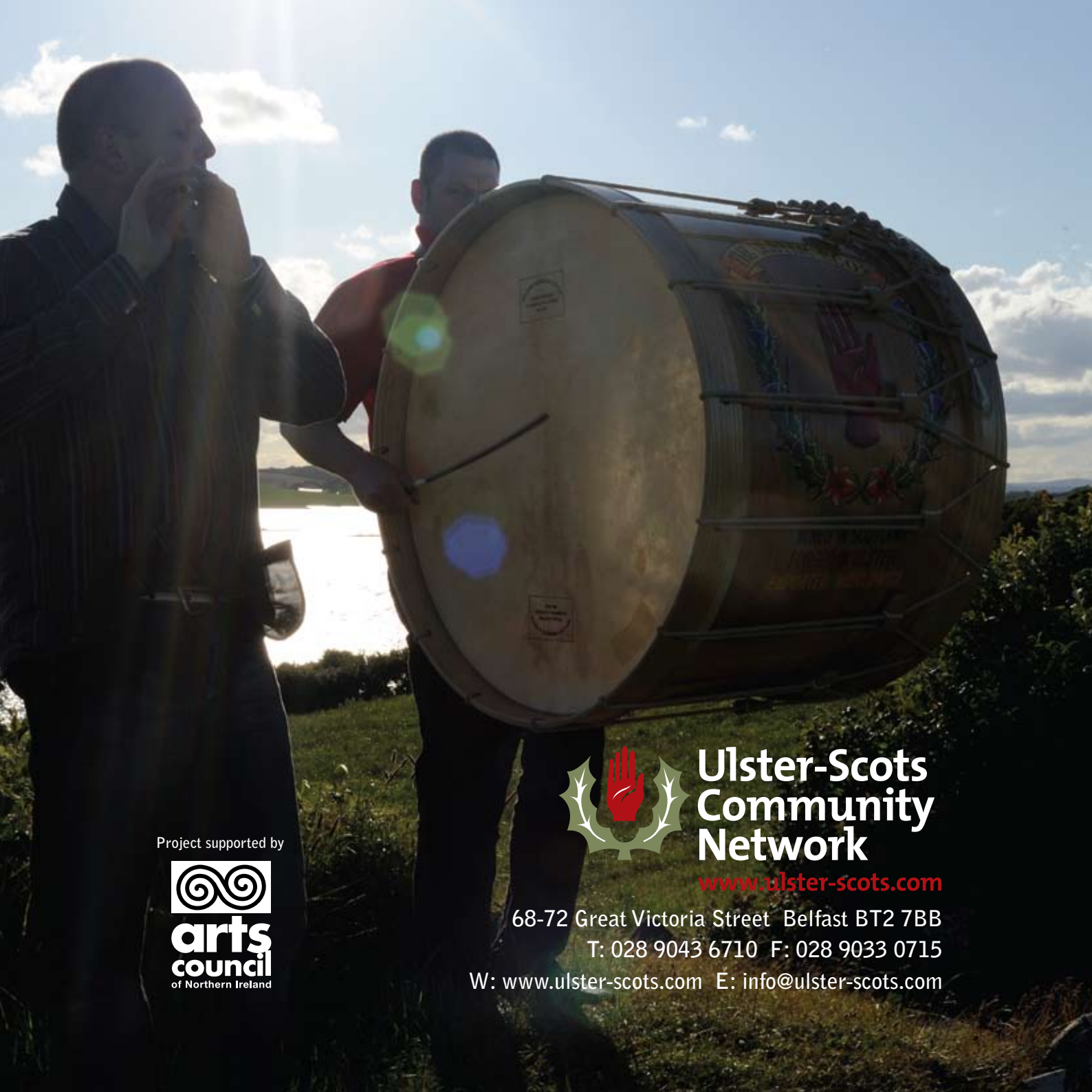


Here Dennis is finishing off the “buffs” of the drum. Buffs play an essential part in achieving the required level of tension in the drum heads. Modern Lambegs have fifteen buffs per drum to ensure the even distribution of tension around the drum head. These buffs are made from industrial belting, although in the past buffs were made from leather.



The finished Lambeg drum, fully assembled. The ropes used for tensioning Lambeg drums are traditionally made from hemp with some linen woven in to add strength and durability. Approximately 27 metres of rope is required to thread through the brace hoops and buffs to secure and tighten the drum heads.





Project supported by



**Ulster-Scots
Community
Network**

www.ulster-scots.com

68-72 Great Victoria Street Belfast BT2 7BB

T: 028 9043 6710 F: 028 9033 0715

W: www.ulster-scots.com E: info@ulster-scots.com