



Basketry Then and Now

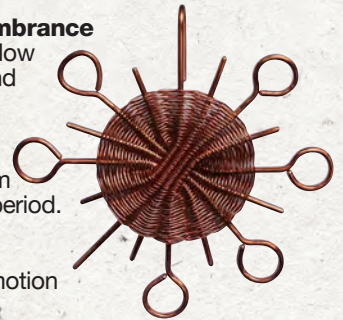
Basketry Then and Now explores the history and practice of basketmaking and willow growing during the First World War, and considers the long-term legacy of the war on the industry. The research team consists of basketmakers and those interested in the history of basketmaking from across England, Scotland and Wales. The project will culminate in a set of downloadable resources, five short films, and a series of pop-up events across the country.



Basketwork cases for artillery shells were made in the hundreds of thousands. They were used to transport shells to the front in limbers, attached to gun carriages or hung on the saddles of packhorses.
 Image courtesy of Castle Donington Museum.

Basketry as remembrance

Basketry Then and Now has both practical and research elements. Basketmakers are using their skills to recreate baskets from the First World War period. They are also using basketry to explore themes of legacy, emotion and memory.



This piece by Mary Crabb is based on significant dates and numbers relating to Cecil, her grandmother's boyfriend, who was killed in France in 1916.
 Image courtesy of Mary Crabb.

Baskets for the military effort

Baskets combine lightness and strength to an unusual degree. For this reason, willow and cane baskets were used extensively in the First World War for the transport of supplies, for cases for artillery shells, baskets for carrier pigeons, aeroplane seats, observational balloon baskets, and invalid chairs for the wounded.



Carrier pigeons were a vital form of communication during the First World War – in the trenches, in tanks, in aeroplanes, and on boats. They were transported in a variety of baskets designed specifically for the purpose.
 Image copyright Imperial War Museum, FEQ 813.

Basketry as therapy

Basketry was used as a remedial activity in the treatment and rehabilitation of soldiers suffering from shell-shock during the First World War, and went on to become a flagship craft for occupational therapy. It was also seen as a stable occupation for the huge numbers of men blinded and disabled during the war, and ex-servicemen were taught how to make baskets.



Basketmaking was found to aid the recovery of shell-shocked soldiers. Here, patients are making baskets in their beds at the 5th Northern General Hospital, Leicester, 1920.
 Image courtesy of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, DE3736/1127.

Willow as a sustainable resource

Willow was grown on a small scale across the country during the First World War. In 1914, the main willow growing areas were located around the valleys of the rivers Great Ouse, Trent and Soar. The industry collapsed in these areas after the war due to the lack of men to maintain fields and production, rising prices and falling wages. After the war, willow was identified as a strategic resource and a National Willow Collection was established in 1923. Today the willow growing industry is concentrated in the Somerset Levels.



By 1914 the willow industry was highly organised and involved growers, willow peelers, rod merchants, basketmakers and distributors. This photograph shows a group of willow peelers in Somerset, 1913. Peeling was usually done by women and children.
 Image courtesy of the Kingsbury Episcopi Time Travellers.

Baskets in everyday life

When war broke out in 1914, baskets were used in every aspect of life for storing and transporting goods – in agriculture, industry, fishing, and the home. Baskets were particularly important in ensuring the supply of food on the home front.



These 'broccoli crates' were worn on the back when harvesting cauliflower. They were also used to send the cauliflower crop to market by train.
 Image courtesy of Richard Moon.