

# BASKETRY

## Then and Now

### THE FIRST WORLD WAR YEARS AND THEIR LEGACY

JUNE 2017

In this newsletter, we look at pigeon baskets in the First World War and share research tips for basketmakers

We've been making good progress since the last project update, and the project features in the latest Basketmakers' Association Newsletter (NL 161, pp.40-42).

The filming has all gone according to plan (see April newsletter). We will be filming Tony Dyer, who has been reproducing a Sopwith Camel aeroplane cockpit, at the end of the month and will then have all the footage for our basketry in the skies film. We will be starting work on our final film, about the regional willow growing and basketmaking industry in the Trent Valley, in July. This will focus on Maggie Cooper's research in Castle Donington.

We've produced a poster about the project and are now starting to put together our pop-up exhibition banners. There will be eight in total, each covering a different aspect of the project. It's quite a challenge to

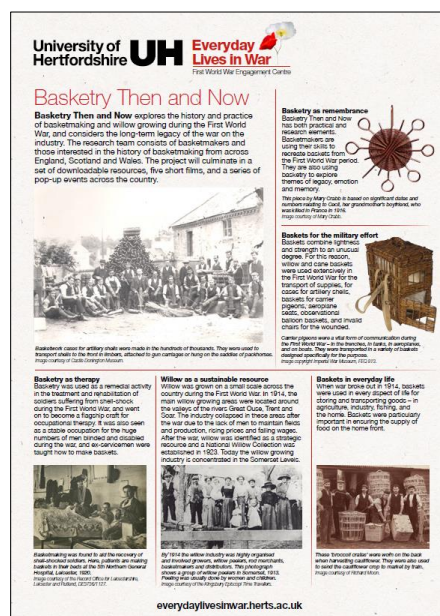


Image: The poster will soon be available to download from the website, and we also have some hard copies to give away.

condense the huge amount of research into less than 300 words, and to pick just five or six photos for each one! We hope that these banners will be available for groups to borrow for events in the future.

We held a very successful event at the Devon Heritage Centre in April

Image above: Courtesy of Trowbridge Postcards and Ephemera on Flickr.

and are starting to plan our next events, including a one-day exhibition at Coates English Willow in September and an event in Castle Donington in November.

Unfortunately we haven't yet been able to update the *Basketry Then and Now* web address, so it's still:

[https://everydaylivesinwar.herts.ac.uk/?page\\_id=3066](https://everydaylivesinwar.herts.ac.uk/?page_id=3066)

On 24 April, nine basketmakers from across Devon and Cornwall took part in a research skills development session at the Devon Heritage Centre. Daniel Carpenter tells us more.

This session was set up to help provide basketmakers with the knowledge and skills to root their practice within the history of basketmaking in the local area. It was run by Brian Carpenter, Community Learning Officer at the Devon Archives and Local Studies Service.



*Image: Looking at indentures. Courtesy of Daniel Carpenter.*

The day began with a general overview of the history of the Centre and the nature of the archives held there. This was followed by a demonstration of how to use the online catalogue (searching for the word 'basket' brought up 51,000 results!), and an introduction to the other records referenced on index cards and available to view on microfilm and microfiche, including the newspaper archive, property deeds, indentures and poor relief records.

Most of the records were about basketmakers rather than the baskets they produced. The indentures and apprenticeship records were mostly from the nineteenth century, but the earliest example dated from 1631. Records detailed apprentices as young as nine, setting out the extensive and laborious work they had to fulfil as part of their apprenticeship.

Beyond the indentures, most of the records related to disputes, thefts, assaults, bankruptcy and poor relief. Brian pointed out that these records alone were likely to provide a skewed impression of basketmakers, as official channels were often only resorted to when things went wrong; the majority of reputable and successful basketmakers would have little reason to be recorded by the authorities in this way.

Brian also showed us a photograph

album of ex-servicemen at Seale Hayne military hospital in Devon during the First World War (see December newsletter) which had been collected as part of a heritage project called Devon Remembers.

We were treated to a behind-the-scenes look at the strong rooms and conservation facilities at the Centre. We were struck on entering the strong room by the cool temperature, the smell of old paper and the warning that, in the case of fire the room would seal itself and fill with an inert gas in order to expel all the oxygen and quell the flames! Lastly, we were introduced to Senior Archive Conservator Deborah Phillips who showed us a tithe map she was working to conserve.

Some useful resources available to basketry researchers:

- Online catalogues are always a good first port of call where available – but remember that they might not necessarily cover the whole collection
- Newspapers – adverts are a good way of finding out about the types of baskets on sale at various periods
- Gazetteers and trade directories can help identify basketmakers – a good one is Kelly's Directory, which lists all the businesses/tradespeople in a particular town or city
- Census records and birth, marriage and death records are the best means of accessing otherwise unrecorded individuals – there are various online family history tools which can help with this
- Property deeds, indentures and poor relief records
- Indentures and apprenticeship records

Remember that while an increasing number of resources are available online, there will still be many things that can only be searched or accessed in person in your local library/records office.



*Image: The group were just as interested in the string that had been used to tie the documents as they were in the documents themselves! Courtesy of Daniel Carpenter.*

**320,000 carrier pigeons were used by all sides during the First World War and many were transported in wicker baskets. Greta Bertram has been researching these baskets.**

Carrier pigeons were a vital form of communication during the First World War, when wireless and telephone communication was often unreliable or unavailable – in the trenches, in tanks, in aeroplanes, and on boats.

The Carrier Pigeon Service was formed in 1915, with divisions for the Army, Air Force and Navy and, from 1918, an intelligence service. Its infrastructure was highly organised, with a mixture of stationary and mobile pigeon lofts at the front, as well as a series of lofts along the English coast for intelligence work. Pigeons were transported to the front lines, and then released when needed to carry their messages back to the lofts. At the end of the war there were 22,000 pigeons in the service, with 150 mobile lofts and 400 qualified 'pigeoneers'.

A huge number of containers was required for transporting the pigeons around, and baskets were an obvious choice – although many other materials were also used. There was a wide array of baskets in use for various purposes – from large





Image: © IWM (Q 18617)

panniers carrying 20+ pigeons used aboard trawlers, to baskets carrying 5–10 pigeons worn on the backs of motorcycle riders to take them to the front lines, and to baskets for just one or two birds used in the trenches. Within the intelligence service, small baskets attached to parachutes and containing a single pigeon with a message on its leg were dropped by balloon into occupied France and Belgium.

I've been looking through lots of photos of pigeon baskets and have been trying to understand what the different baskets were used for, how many pigeons they could take, whether there were standardised designs, and who was making them. Two known makers are Shepherds of Leicester and Loxleys of Trowbridge, who had supplied the racing pigeon market prior to the War.

The *London Union of Journeymen Basket Makers: Trade List* of 1916 lists three types of pigeon basket. The 'Homing Pigeon Basket' was available in five sizes, from 15 x 10 x 9 inches to 30 x 8 x 9 inches, and was available in two designs – the first with a large lid to open and a trap lid in the top, and the second with a drop lid on the front and an open-work lid on the top. The 'Society Homing Basket' had a fall-down front, and was available in three sizes, from 34 x 19 x 10 inches to 42 x 21 x 10 inches. It had a randed and open-work lid, with a trap lid. The 'Pigeon Basket' was divided into two,

four, or six compartments, with each being available in two sizes. The smallest had two compartments and was 12 x 8.5 x 8.5 inches; the largest had six compartments and was 32.5 x 12 x 8.5 inches. Each compartment had a small lid.

However, looking at photographs from the period, it seems that there were numerous other designs in operation as well. A Loxleys advert from the 1916 *Racing Pigeon Annual* offers the 'Indestructible pannier' in nine sizes, the smallest at 22 x 13 x 11 inches for 10 birds, and the largest at 45 x 26 x 12 inches for 50 birds! I have yet to find any information or dimensions for non-pannier type baskets.

Although it concentrates more on the role of pigeons in the Second World War, the Royal Pigeon Racing Association's exhibition at Bletchley Park, *Pigeons in War*, is well worth a visit. The feats of the pigeons and the ways in which they were used are often barely credible! One case is dedicated to the pigeons of the First World War, and includes an original WW1 two-pigeon basket.



Image: This WW1 basket for two pigeons has a door at each end, with an internal divider which could be removed when transporting only one bird. It has a wooden base and is lined with canvas, and has a leather handle on the top.

#### Other news

**Save the date:** Basketmaking in Castle Donington and the East Midlands event at Castle Donington, Leicestershire 25–26 November 2017.

**Places still available:** Places are still available on our pigeon basket course at Coates English Willow in Stoke St. Gregory, Somerset, 22–23 September 2017. The course is suitable for those with some basketry experience, and will cost £160 (including all materials, light lunch and refreshments). To book your place please email [hilary@basketryandbeyond.org.uk](mailto:hilary@basketryandbeyond.org.uk).

**Exhibition, talks and films:** A free, one-day event at Coates English Willow on Saturday 23 September to accompany the pigeon basket course. The day will include a pop-up exhibition about the work of the project, a talk repeated at regular intervals throughout the day, and screenings of the films. All welcome.



Image: Transporting pigeons to the front line, France, 1918. © IWM (Q 8878).

#### On the blog:

<https://everydaylivesinwar.herts.ac.uk/?cat=75>

- Basketmakers' lists of sizes and prices by Greta Bertram
- Research skills development session in the Devon archives by Daniel Carpenter
- Industrial processing of cane during the First World War by Mary Crabb
- Pigeons in War exhibition at Bletchley Park by Greta Bertram
- The Kingsbury Episcopi Time Travellers: Withies in the curriculum by Adrian Wills

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