



BASKETRY

Then and Now

THE FIRST WORLD WAR YEARS AND THEIR LEGACY

AUGUST 2017

As the project enters its final stages, Greta Bertram gives us an update on what's been happening since the last newsletter and tells us about what there's still left to do

It's been a busy summer with lots happening. We have almost finished all of the filming, and Adam Jones-Lloyd is now busy in the editing suite pulling the footage together with photographs and music. A short time-lapse film shot between March and May showing the spring regrowth of willow at the National Willow Collection at Rothamsted Research is now available on the website, and the rest of the films will be uploaded once they are ready.



The Willow Regrowth in Spring film is now available – [watch here](#).



Write-ups by the researchers can now be downloaded from the [website](#).

Our researchers are in the final stages of writing up their research. We've covered such a wide range of topics, from the very general to the very specific, including the import of cane during the First World War, the use of basketmaking in occupational therapy and blind workshops in Scotland, and the history of specific basketmaking families in the village of Castle Donington. Some of these are now available on the website, and I'm working to edit the rest.

Image above: Adam Jones-Lloyd sets up the timelapse camera in the willow beds at Rothamsted Research.

Putting together the pop-up exhibition banners is a huge challenge. We've got much less space than anticipated – who knew writing 250 words and four image captions could take such a long time! But they're coming together nicely and we're confident that they will be ready for our event next month.

Things have been rather quiet on the blog front over the summer, as everyone is away enjoying their holidays, but we hope to be able to share more posts with you next time.

The project will conclude with two events: the pigeon basket course on 22–23 September and accompanying display on 23 September at Coates English Willow, Somerset; and a weekend celebration of the history of basketmaking in Castle Donington and the East Midlands on 25–26 November in Castle Donington.

I'll be stopping work on the project at the end of September, and am hoping to have most things finished off by then – although I do hope to send out two more newsletters in October and December.

Since June last year, Adam Jones-Lloyd has travelled up and down the country to make five films for the project. Adam shares his experiences with us

My filming adventure with the Basketry Then and Now project began last summer as a one-off trip to The Museum of English Rural Life (The MERL) at the University of Reading to film Mary Crabb examining the artillery shell basket they have in their collection. However, this was soon followed by a trip to the Imperial War Museum, Duxford and to Mary's workshop in Sussex. This became the project's first film, *War and Remembrance*, about Mary's work to explore themes of memory and loss through basketry in relation to Cecil, her grandmother's boyfriend, who was killed in 1916 at the age of just eighteen. It was an incredibly moving subject, which showed me just how unique this project is.



Image: Mary Crabb and Ollie Douglas take a closer look at the artillery shell basket at The MERL. Courtesy of Adam Jones-Lloyd.

I was then asked if I would make a further four films for the project, each focussing on a different aspect of the research. The second film I got to work on was about willow. I visited

Rothamsted Research in Harpenden, Hertfordshire where we filmed a walking tour of the National Willow Collection led by William Macalpine. This tour enabled me to see the wide-ranging properties of the different varieties and how they are used by basketmakers, and led to the idea of installing a time-lapse camera in one of the fields. I wanted to capture the growth of the willow from its cut-back winter dormancy to full spring growth. I used a specific time-lapse camera with a weather-proof housing which can be left for weeks at a time. I programmed it to take one photo every minute between the hours of 7am and 9pm, between March and May. The results have been fascinating to watch – and it was great to get out into the field.



Image: Tim Palmer's basketwork seat inside Tony Dyer's replica Sopwith Camel cockpit. Courtesy of Adam Jones-Lloyd.

The next film, about the recreation of a First World War Sopwith Camel aeroplane cockpit and its basketwork seat took me across the country. I spent a wonderful day in Inverness filming Tim Palmer making the seat, met with Tony Dyer in Wiltshire to film him talking about his passion for making replica aircraft, and interviewed Bunty Ball at Martlesham Heath Control Tower in Suffolk to find out more about the use of basketwork in aviation during the war.

The fourth film was all made in the village of Castle Donington in

Leicestershire. The Trent Valley was one of the main centres of willow growing and basketmaking until the First World War. We filmed local basketmaker Maggie Cooper, who gave us a guided walking tour of key locations in the village's basketmaking history – although very few of the locations have any physical traces to tell us what they once were. We also filmed Maggie making a typical Castle Donington-style basket.

The final film looks at the therapeutic aspects of basketmaking and craft. I visited the former military hospital at Seale Hayne in Devon, where I filmed Raymond Bartlett describing the pioneering work done there in the treatment of the worst cases of shell shock, and how basketmaking was a part of this. I then made another trip to Scotland, to Aberdeen this time, to meet with Stephanie Bunn, Tim Palmer and Irene Patterson to film an 'in conversation' about the changing role of basketmaking in occupational therapy.

I have to confess that when I started out, I knew virtually nothing about basketmaking and its history. Through making the films, I've met so many fascinating people and have learnt so much. I've found the whole project really insightful and very rewarding.



Image: Adam filming Bunty Ball at Martlesham Heath Control Tower near Ipswich. Courtesy of Greta Bertram.

In the April newsletter, Dave Evans, Hilary Burns and Nicola Coate wrote about some of the historic uses for willow peelings or 'stripple'. Here they tell us about some further uses they've discovered

In April we wrote about some of the historic uses of willow stripple we'd found reference to: for weaving the cloth for windmill sails in Somerset before the First World War; as a compost or fertiliser in trials by Sutton & Sons of Reading in 1906; to make ink; and to cover willow bolts ready for stripping to keep them damp and cool.

Since then, we've been continuing our investigations, and have found out that there have been various experiments across the centuries and around the world in making paper from willow – both from the bark and the leaves. Paper production was apparently a big industry in thirteenth-century Mongolia, where they produced paper from willow leaves, amongst other things.

In 1788 a Mr Greaves of Milbank, Lancashire made fifteen reams of coarse paper from 'withen twigs' (i.e. 'withy' or 'willow') and nettles – although he decided that the nettles contained a woody substance which didn't mix very well. The bark was stripped from the twigs in September, then 'hackled' like flax or hemp and dried in the sun, and then mixed with the stripped leaves and given to the local paper mill. The paper was found to be considerably cheaper than that made from rope, which was used for making rough paper at the time.

Further experiments in making willow paper took place in the early-twentieth century, but were halted during the First World War. The paper produced was thick and coarse, with a creamy colour. However, it was

deemed to be financially unviable to produce because of the considerable amount of labour needed to pick all the pieces of wood which were stuck to the stripple. Writing in 1926, Fitzrandolph and Hay noted that: 'Further experiments with the bark from different varieties of willows might produce satisfactory results, and if good paper could be made in sufficient quantities to keep a factory busy near any district where willows were extensively grown, it might serve as a means of absorbing labour when work on the holts is slack. It is also possible that some substance coarser than paper, some kind of fibre suitable for mat making, might be manufactured from the peel.' But it's not thought that anything came of this idea.

More recently, an artist book group in Somerset have experimented with making paper from willow bast (inner bark), tried contact dying with willow stripple, and have made fine strong twine from willow bast.



Image: It turns out that willow stripple also goes down well as tortoise bedding. Image courtesy of Greta Bertram.

Other news

Research summaries

Our first three researcher write-ups are now available to read and download from the [website](#):

- Dryad and the MERL artillery shell basket by Mary Crabb
- Making an artillery shell basket by Mary Crabb
- The Orsett Basket Works, Essex by Selena Chandler

Pigeon basket course, 22–23

September: We still have space 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. Further information [here](#).

Somerset event, Saturday 23

September: Join us at Coates English Willow on Saturday 23 September for a one-day event about basketmaking and willow growing in the First World War. 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. Free, all welcome. Further information [here](#).

Leicestershire event, Saturday 25 and Sunday 26 November:

A weekend celebration of the willow growing and basketmaking history of Castle Donington and the East Midlands, including displays, talks, demonstrations, a drop-in workshop, film screenings and a guided willow walk around the village. 25–26 November 2017, 10.30am–15.30pm, at the Orchard Community Primary School, Grange Drive, Castle Donington, Leicestershire, DE74 2QU. Free, all welcome. Further information [here](#).

Contact us

Email: gretabertram@gmail.com

Twitter: #fwwbaskets