



During the project basketmakers explored issues of legacy, emotion and memory through creative practice. These pieces by Mary Crabb are based on significant dates and numbers relating to Cecil, her grandmother's boyfriend, who was killed in France in 1916.
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Basketry Then and Now

Basketry Then and Now explores the history and practice of willow growing and basketmaking during the First World War, and considers the long-term legacy of the war on the industry.

Baskets are both light and strong. 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 and spinal carriages for the wounded. Baskets were also used in every aspect of daily life for storing and transporting goods – in agriculture, industry, fishing, and the home.

Basketmaking was seen as a stable occupation for the huge numbers of men blinded and disabled during the war, and was also used as a remedial activity in their rehabilitation. From these early beginnings, basketry went on to become a flagship craft for occupational therapy.

Willow was grown on a small scale across the country during the war, with centres of willow growing located in the Trent Valley, the Mawdesley area of Lancashire, the Thames Valley and the Somerset Levels. With the exception of Somerset, the industry all but collapsed in these areas after the war due to the lack of men to maintain fields and production, rising prices and falling wages.

From the 1920s, the demand for baskets began to decline with the introduction of plastics and alternative containers, and increased imports of baskets from abroad. Basketmaking experienced a brief resurgence during the Second World War when willow once again became a strategic resource, but it never regained its pre-war importance.



The research team consisted of basketmakers and those interested in the history of basketmaking from across England, Scotland and Wales. They visited various museum collections for their research.
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Five films were made as part of the project and are available on the website. They reveal personal stories and reflections on the research themes. Here, film-maker Adam Jones-Lloyd sets up a timelapse camera to record the spring regrowth of willow.
Courtesy of Adam Jones-Lloyd.



Basketmakers used their skills to recreate baskets from the First World War period. Here, Tim Palmer makes a seat for a Sopwith Camel aeroplane.
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Several events were held as part of the project. In November 2016, Rothamsted Research in Hertfordshire, home to the National Willow Collection, hosted a day of displays, talks and a tour of the willow beds.
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