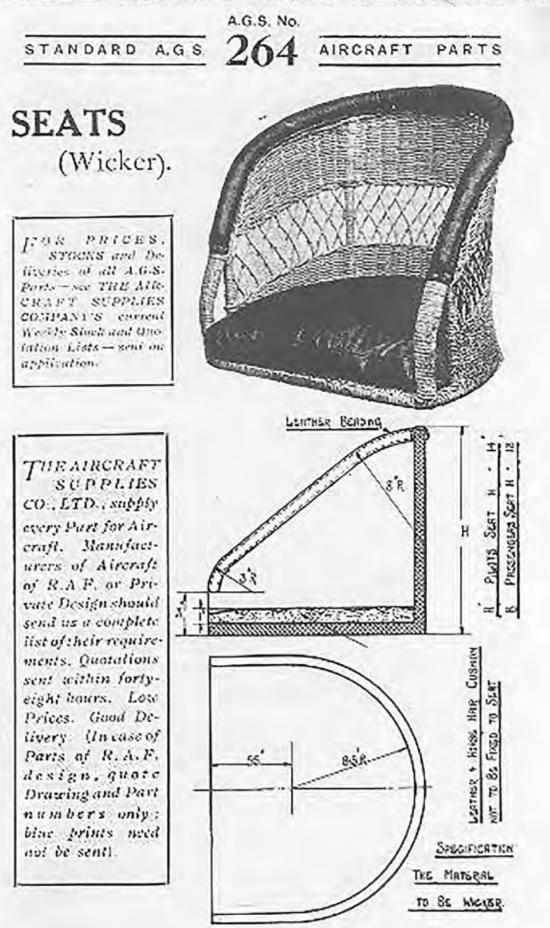


A replica of a First World War Sopwith Camel aeroplane, with a basketwork seat visible in the cockpit. To save weight, aircraft had openwork wooden frames with linen stretched over them. Courtesy of John S. Shaw:



## Aeropiarie Seats

At the outbreak of the First World War, aviation was still in its infancy. Aircraft were extremely flimsy and it was essential to save weight wherever possible to prevent the planes breaking up in flight. The earliest seats were made of wood, but by 1912 they had been replaced with basketwork seats. They were well-suited to the purpose, being both light and strong.

The seats were usually made of cane woven around a rattan frame. They were made to standard designs, with variations for the pilot and passenger. Some were solidly woven, while others had open weaving in the back, and some had handholds. The tops of the seats were covered in leather, stuffed with either horsehair or kapok, and secured to the frame with buttons. Each seat had its own loose upholstered cushion held in place by a strap. In some aircraft, such as the Sopwith Snipe, the pilot was positioned directly above the fuel tank, so the seat had a round hole in the base for the tank.

By 1916, seats were being made to a standard RAF design, AGS No. 264. While the material to be used was specified as 'wicker', the seats were usually made of cane rather than willow. Further details of the weaving were given in the Basket, Skip and Hamper Makers' Federation List of Sizes and Prices for Government Work throughout the London District of 1915. Courtesy of John S. Shaw.



Britain produced over 58,000 aircraft during the war, each needing either one or two seats. The seats were made by basketmaking firms and individual basketmakers from across the country. Known makers include Edward Bowser of Leeds and Dryad Cane Works of Leicester, which continued to make basketwork seats after the war for commercial aircraft.

Basketwork was also ideal for making strong lightweight balloon baskets, woven in either cane or willow. Balloons were used extensively during the war by both sides for observation.



This advert from 1917 extols the virtues of the basketwork aeroplane seat. Not only were they light and strong, they were also cheap and comfortable. (Aeroplane Magazine, 23 May 1917). Courtesy of the RAF Museum, Hendon.



Observation balloons were tethered to the ground a few miles behind the front lines, allowing observers to see targets at a greater range than they could on the ground. Note the parachute hanging from the basket attached to the observer's harness, to be used in the event of the balloon being shot down. © IWM (Q 12027).





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