



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.

Aeroplane 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.

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.

