



All war-blinded servicemen were sent initially to St Dunstan's School for Blind Veterans. They started by making string bags and were then taught basketry by blind teachers. In this basketmaking workshop, those who could not bend easily, or had other injuries, worked with cane sitting at tables. Willow work was done 'on the plank' in the traditional way.  
© Blind Veterans UK.

# Meaningful work

The First World War saw unprecedented numbers of servicemen returning from the front lines with significant injuries. At the time, it was felt that constructive work which produced something tangible and provided financial security was very important for both mental and physical health. Anyone prevented from accessing this as a result of disability was seen as deserving of help. Existing institutions like the Royal Hospital in Chelsea were unable to cope, and new institutions such as the Royal Star and Garter Home in Richmond, St Dunstan's School for Blind Veterans, and the Lord Roberts Workshops came into being.

Basketmaking was one of a number of crafts used to provide meaningful work for disabled veterans. Others included brush making, mat making, net making, leather working, and shoe repair. Basketmaking was considered particularly suitable for blind servicemen, as the selection of materials and the pattern of weaving could be done by touch, and the craft had been taught in blind schools since the late-eighteenth century. When the veterans began their training, the basketmaking industry was flourishing and its future seemed guaranteed. However, within just a few years it was in a precarious state and many of the men struggled to earn a living.

Basketry is still used today as a therapeutic process for people who are newly blinded, as well as for a wider spectrum of disability, including autism, attention disorders, learning difficulties and physical impairment.



This willow basket with cane handles was made by Arthur Stevens in the 1940s. Mr Stevens was blinded by gas in the First World War and then trained to make baskets at St. Dunstan's.  
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After the war there were many disabled veterans requiring work. The Orsett Basket Works, established in 1921, provided employment for up to thirty men, ninety percent of whom were injured ex-servicemen. (Grays and Tilbury Gazette, 5 November 1921).  
Courtesy of Thurrock Museum.



This photograph shows the basket and mattress making workshop at the Northern Counties Institute for the Blind in Inverness in the early-twentieth century. Its successor organisation, Highland BlindCraft, continues to employ highly skilled visually impaired and disabled people to design, manufacture and sell beds and mattresses.  
Courtesy of Highland BlindCraft.