

By 1914 the willow industry was highly organised and involved growers, willow peelers, rod merchants, basketmakers and distributors. This photograph shows a group of willow peelers in Somerset, 1913. Peeling was usually done by women and children.

Courtesy of the Kingsbury Episcopi Time Travellers.

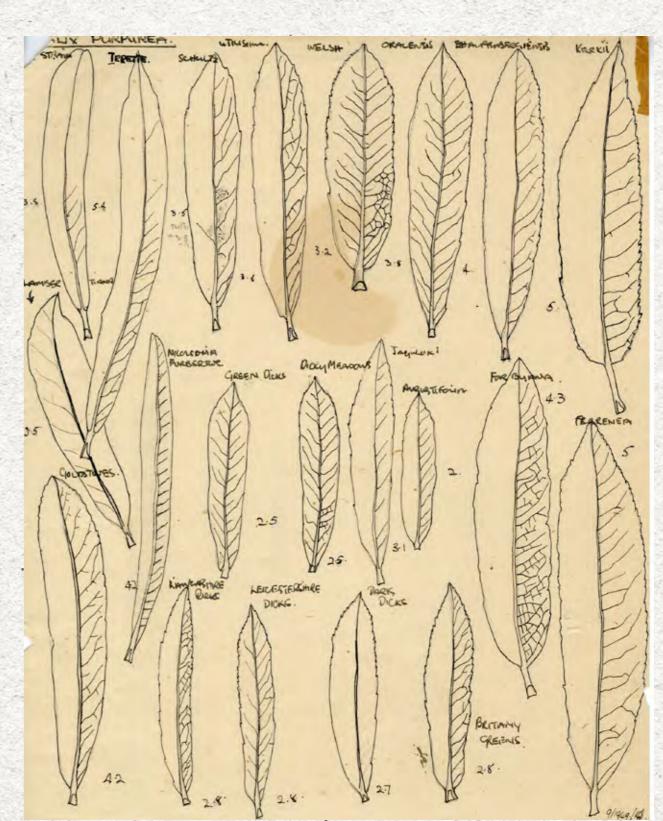
## The Willow industry

Willow growing as a commercial industry began in Britain around 1800. It flourished throughout the nineteenth century, when the Industrial Revolution created a demand for large numbers of baskets for packing, storing and transporting goods. By the First World War small-scale willow beds existed in most rural areas, but the main centres of willow growing and basketmaking were 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 following the war. This was due to the shortage of labour to maintain the willow beds, the transfer of basketmakers to the making of hundreds of thousands of artillery shell baskets in cane rather than willow, and increasing imports of materials and finished baskets from abroad.

At the end of the war, basket willow was identified as a strategic national resource by a War Office committee set up to review the war effort. At the committee's recommendation, a National Willows Officer was appointed to provide scientific support to the industry. The National Willow Collection was established at Long Ashton Research Station in 1923, moving to Rothamsted Research in 2002, and today includes over 100 pure species of willow (Salix).

Over the years, other uses for willow have been explored, including for windbreaks, bank stabilisation and paper pulp. More recently, willow has been identified as a valuable sustainable resource – as a source of bioenergy, bioplastics and pharmaceutical compounds.



Morphological studies of the leaf shape of Salix purpurea, one of the three main species of willow used by basketmakers. Each species has many varieties, and basketmakers favour different ones for their particular properties.

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Today the commercial willow growing industry is concentrated in the Somerset Levels. The Levels provide excellent conditions for growing basket willow, with deep, well-drained fertile soil comprising a mixture of silt and clay.

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A two year-old short rotation coppice stool in a biomass breeding trial at Rothamsted Research. Willow has been identified as a valuable sustainable resource because it is very fast growing, making it a good source of bioenergy.

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