

# BASKETRY

## Then and Now

### STYLES OF BASKETS IN CASTLE DONINGTON

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This research gives an account of some of the types of baskets made in the Trent Valley, particularly in the parishes of Castle Donington and East Leake.

In the early-twentieth century the Trent Valley in the East Midlands was considered to be one of the most, if not the most, important basketmaking areas in the country. The years leading up to the First World War were a golden age for baskets, and they were used in every aspect of daily life for storing and transporting goods – in agriculture, industry, fishing, and the home. Despite its small size, the parish of Castle Donington, on the border of Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, once had as many as 200 basketmakers, labourers and apprentices.<sup>1</sup>

The willow grown in the Trent Valley was once considered to be the best in the country.<sup>2</sup> Willow had been grown in the region for centuries and varieties were developed to meet the requirements of particular types of baskets: fine slender rods for split woven work, robust and sturdy rods for hampers, and ‘thick-topped’ rods grown for two years to make furniture frames. Rush harvested from the Rivers Trent and Soar was used for infill weaves of baskets and furniture.

Historically, Castle Donington was a reasonably self-sufficient community with good natural resources. Basketmakers made an uncertain living supplying the local market, but the time invested in growing willow and learning the trade meant it was a precarious occupation. The growth of industry in the mid-1800s led to an increased demand for functional baskets from a national and international market. Castle Donington was able to meet this demand because of the local inland port at Shardlow, and later the railways and road network.

Since at least the 1850s, lists detailing the standard sizes and construction of various baskets have been produced.

*Image above: A typical basket shop in East Leake, showing many of the types of baskets that were made in the area. At the rear of the shop are bushel baskets for transportation of fruit. The workers on the left are making square hampers. Cribs, cutlery baskets, knife baskets and chairs are also shown. The worker in the centre is making skeined baskets. Courtesy of East Leake History Society.*

The British Amalgamated Union of Journeymen Basket, Cane and Wicker Furniture Makers’ list of 1916 contained a price guide and details of construction for over one thousand different designs of basket.<sup>3</sup> The list not only recorded the complex designs to ensure the baskets could be mass-produced in a standardised manner, but also to ensure there was a standard rate of pay for each basket. Many areas, such as London, the North West and the Midlands, had their own lists.

Some of these lists from 1915 and 1916 had sections and supplements devoted to work for government departments, hospitals, the General Post Office and the War Office.<sup>4 & 5</sup>

#### **Baskets made in the Castle Donington area**

Many of the basketmakers in and around Castle Donington specialised in particular types of baskets and basketware, from agricultural baskets for picking and transporting produce, to furniture, and to fancy shopping baskets.

**Fishing baskets:** Basketwork fish traps from the sixteenth century have been found in a number of locations on the site of an archaeological dig at Hemington Quarry. Made of willow, they were used to catch eels or salmon. The individual traps would have been positioned in a weir of woven willow.

**Baskets for harvesting fruit and vegetables:** There were commercial fruit growers in and around Castle Donington, growing soft fruit, apples and pears. Practical and robust willow baskets were used in the orchards for picking the fruit. A local man, Stan Barker, remembers picking gooseberries after school, when they had to pick two hampers full in 2.5 hours. When filled, the hampers weighed 42lbs – an impressive amount of work.<sup>6</sup>



*Image: Practical and robust willow baskets were used to pick fruit, which was then transferred to larger baskets for road or rail transport. Basket from the collection of Maggie Cooper. © Maggie Cooper.*

**Baskets for transporting fruit and vegetables:** After picking, the fruit was transferred into strikes or hampers for transportation by road or rail to wholesale markets. The 'strike' was a round basket used to measure the volume of apples and pears and was the Midlands equivalent of a bushel basket. A strike held 68lbs of apples or 72lbs of pears. It got its name from the stick used to 'strike' the contents of the basket to make them level. Strikes were mostly used in the nearby village of



*Image: A strike basket, made of cane, probably from the early 1950s. It has the initials 'WEJ' painted on it, and belonged to the fruit grower and distributor, William Jackson, in the neighbouring village of Melbourne. Basket from the collection of Maggie Cooper. © Maggie Cooper.*

Melbourne, which was an important centre for market gardening. In the early 1900s, large fruit baskets were made by Lamberts (Claggun Street) and Crampton, Ward and Stokes (Tan Yard) in Castle Donington.

**Pigeon baskets and fowl hampers:** Crampton and Ward made pigeon baskets and fowl hampers for the trapping, housing and transportation of birds. The design of these baskets was adapted for taking carrier pigeons to the front lines during the First World War.

**Skips and hampers for the textile industry:** Large hampers and skips were made for the local lace and sock industries by Lamberts and by Crampton and Ward. The latter also made linen baskets and wheeled basketwork carts.

**Feeding skips and scuttles:** Cattle feeding skips and scuttles were made with a very tight weave and were said to be able to hold water. They were round or oval in shape, with flared sides. Only a few exceptional craftsmen were able to make them. They were made from strips of wood known as 'spells' or 'spelks' which were woven together with willow rods.<sup>7</sup>



*Image: A scuttle maker. Courtesy of Maggie Cooper.*

**Railway and General Post Office baskets:** Large numbers of baskets were made for the General Post Office and for use on the railways.

**Domestic baskets:** Baskets for use in the home included laundry baskets, wash baskets and linen baskets.

**Skeined baskets:** Castle Donington and East Leake were once famous for their skeined willow basketwork.<sup>8</sup> Skeining is a process which involves cleaving whole willow rods into three or four pieces, and shaving the split pieces to obtain even-sized, ribbon-like strips or 'skeins'.



Image: Skeined fishing creel. Basket from the collection of Paul Hand. © Paul Hand.

The skeins were worked flat. In some cases they were stacked together, making an extremely strong and tightly-woven basket which may even have been watertight.

**Shopping baskets:** Castle Donington shopping baskets often had fancy borders made of willow and cane. Some had coloured bands of dyed willow or cane woven into the upper sections, something which seems to have been a traditional local style.



Image: 'Fancy baskets' made using fine willow, with plaited detail and skeined work. Baskets from the collection of Maggie Cooper. © Maggie Cooper.

#### Miscellaneous basketwork from Castle Donington

**The first car:** Castle Donington is well-known today for its race track. The first car in the village was a Studebaker and had a basketwork body. We cannot know for certain, but it is likely that the basketwork was done locally as 'fancy' work was very fashionable.

**Willow arbour:** There was a willow arbour in front of the Tan Yard works during the early 1900s.

**White willow handcart:** A lidded willow handcart was used by a Fred Hanford for delivering bread, and later for delivering parcels. It was probably made by Crampton and Wards or Lamberts. A wheelwright worked near the site of the Tan Yard works. Blacksmiths, leather workers and carpenters also provided fittings and fixtures for the many kinds of baskets. Crampton and Ward also made government Post Office Hampers.



Image: Post Office baskets. Courtesy of Castle Donington Museum.

**Furniture:** Until the early 1900s basketwork furniture produced in the area was primarily made of local willow and rush. As cane imports increased, cane furniture became popular and new designs were developed. Several companies in Castle Donington made furniture, including Saxelbys and CasDons.<sup>9</sup>



Image: A cane chair made in Castle Donington, in the collection of Castle Donington Museum. Photograph by Maggie Cooper, courtesy of Castle Donington Museum.

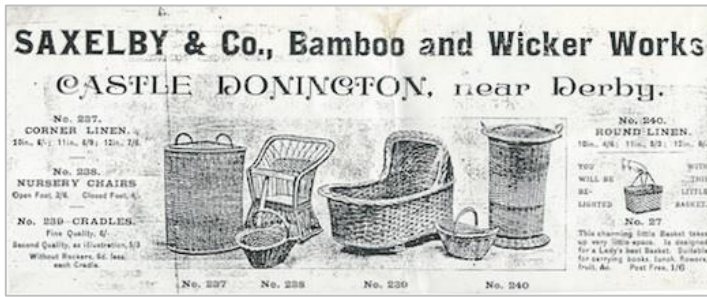


Image: Extract from the Saxelbys catalogue. Courtesy of Maggie Cooper.

**Artillery shell baskets:** During the First World War, basketwork cases were used to transport artillery shells to the front in limbers, attached to gun carriages or hung on the saddles of packhorses and mules. The design of the shell basket varied according to the type of shell and cartridge it was to accommodate, but formed a tightly fitting sleeve around the shell. Crampton and Ward is the name most associated with shell baskets, although there were many makers in the village – as there were in all the basketmaking centres in the Trent Valley. Hundreds of these baskets were made and collected every week outside the works in Station Road to make their way to the munitions factory in Chilwell.

Shell baskets were made of cane which was imported from France and Germany, and purchased via agents in Sheffield, Birmingham and Nottingham. They had leather bands which were sewn on to the finished baskets by home-workers.



Image: Home-workers leathering shell baskets in Castle Donington. Courtesy of Castle Donington Museum.

## References

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- <sup>2</sup> Ellmore, W.P. (1918). *The Cultivation of osiers and willows with an introduction by Thomas Okey*. London, Paris and Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd.
- <sup>3</sup> The British Amalgamated Union of Journeymen Basket, Cane and Wicker Furniture Makers. (1916). *List of Prices, Sizes & Particulars, of Hampers, Baskets, Railway, Market Gardening, Laundry, Carriage & General Shop Work*. Derby.
- <sup>4</sup> The British Amalgamated Union of Journeymen Basket, Cane and Wicker Furniture Makers. (1916). *Addition to List for Government Work*. Derby.
- <sup>5</sup> Basket, Skip and Hamper Makers' Federation. (1915). *List of Sizes and Prices for Government work throughout the London District*. London.
- <sup>6</sup> Carswell, J. (1991). *My Castle Donington: Memories of Castle Donington before 1950*. Coalville: Coalville Publishing Co. Ltd.
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