

BASKETRY

Then and Now

WILLOW GROWING IN CASTLE DONINGTON

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The Trent Valley in the East Midlands was once one of the most important areas for willow growing and basketmaking. This research gives an account of the willow growing industry in the parish of Castle Donington in Leicestershire.

Image above: Map showing the Castle Donington area, annotated by Maggie Cooper. Taken from Google Maps.

Introduction

In the early-twentieth century the Trent Valley in the East Midlands was considered one of the most, if not the most, important areas for willow growing and basketmaking in the country. One of the most famous centres in the area was the parish of Castle Donington, on the border of Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, which once had as many as 200 basketmakers, labourers and apprentices.¹

Historically, Castle Donington was a reasonably self-sufficient community with good natural resources, and basketmakers would have supplied a mainly local market. However, the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century created a demand for large numbers of baskets for packing, storing and transporting goods from an ever-widening market, both nationally and internationally. Castle Donington had the transport network to meet this demand, with the local inland port at Shardlow three miles away, and later with the railways and road network.

Suitability for willow growing

Castle Donington sits on a sandstone outcrop which falls to the wide valley of the River Trent to the north, with strong clay soil on the higher ground and rich alluvial soil on the flood plain.² This soil was especially suitable for growing willow for basketmaking, and there are records of willow beds in Castle Donington dating from the sixteenth century. The willow produced here was harder, tougher and more pliable than willow grown on lighter soil, resulting in a better quality of basketwork.³ Only the

highest quality baskets made from the highest quality willow would be able to compete with the growing amount of imported work in the early-twentieth century – and the willow grown in the Castle Donington area was of an exceptional quality.⁴ It takes many years of experience to grow reliable supplies of willow and this knowledge would have been handed down through the generations.

Willow was mostly grown on the flat valley plain, on land that was less suitable for other crops because of flooding. The River Trent regularly changed its course after flooding and so the beds evolved and changed shape over time. Many of the adjoining parishes also had willow beds on the flood plain, but those in the parish of Castle Donington covered the greatest total area. Rush also grew wild in the river, and was used for soft baskets, chair seating, and infill plaited weaves in the locally produced willow baskets.

Varieties of willow

Although the terms ‘willow’ and ‘osier’ are often used interchangeably, ‘osier’ tends to refer to *Salix viminalis* which, in the Castle Donington area, was usually used for larger basket work, furniture and fence poles. Smaller varieties were used for robust agricultural baskets, and fine rods for delicate work. Varieties such as ‘Black Maul’ and ‘Black Italian’ were stripped for white willow. ‘Black German’, a prized variety, was suitable for stripping for white after it had been cut, and was also suitable for buffing.⁵ In the early 1900s long willow varieties were grown for used in skeined work (split willow) to make fine baskets. Varieties such as ‘Long Skin’, ‘French Osier’ and ‘Dark Dicks’ were grown in Leicestershire for skeined work.⁶

Willow beds

Basketmakers needed a reliable supply of material, and there was always a need for new willow beds. Willow growing is very labour-intensive and forward planning was essential. In Castle Donington, willow for basketmaking was grown by dedicated growers who only grew willow, by farmers who grew willow amongst other things, and by basketmakers who often grew particular willow varieties to suit their own particular needs. Owing to the sometimes unpredictable nature of willow growing due to weather, pests and diseases, as much land as could be afforded was dedicated to the crop.

With one or two exceptions, the basketmakers and willow rod merchants of Castle Donington rarely had enough money to own the land, so it was usually rented. Land was usually leased for several years at a time, as it took 3–4 years from initial preparation of the land for the beds to reach full productivity. For this reason, rent was sometimes cheaper in the first year as there were no significant returns. The largest willow beds in Castle Donington were situated at the bottom of the hill on what is now the Willow Farm Industrial Estate, but it is not yet clear where the boundaries of individual beds in the parish were.



Image: One of the defunct willow beds on Broad Rushes, Castle Donington. © Maggie Cooper.

By the nineteenth century the demand for willow in the parish was so great that the beds of Castle Donington were unable to meet it, and so the basketmakers and rod merchants often had to rent beds or buy in willow from the neighbouring villages of Melbourne, Hemington, Lockington, Kegworth, Sawley and Shardlow. In Melbourne, there were willow beds on the site of today's reservoir, and entries in the 'Melbourne Muniments' show the arrangements made by basketmakers for leasing the land.⁷

In Kegworth, Castle Donington basketmakers leased willow beds in Long Lane. Cricket bat willow was also grown on the site, but it is not known if bats were made locally. On the old road between Shardlow and Thulston are the remains of a previously well-maintained willow bed which belonged to, or was used by, George Dixon, a Castle Donington basketmaker. The willow was grubbed up at least sixty years ago, but there is still evidence of the drainage and irrigation system.

Coppiced willow

The larger *Salix viminalis* osiers were managed on short rotation coppice and were harvested in cycles of two to six years. This material was grown separately so as not to shade out the smaller plants used for rods for baskets. Large plantations were situated near Ratcliffe on Soar and the area close to the M1 bridge near the Sawley Marina.

These larger varieties were grown for posts, poles and cricket bats, and were also used to make furniture and fencing. Farm workers on the Lockington Estate made split willow rail fencing, and many of the local farm labourers were skilled in this work. The rails were made from willow poles approximately 10m long which were split using an axe and wedges. The posts were made from willow which had been peeled at the base to prevent sprouting. There are the remains of an osier bed on fields linking Hemington Lane and Lockington Lane which may have provided the willow for the fencing. These fences were extremely durable and the last one in the area, near the war memorial in Castle Donington, only perished in the 1990s.

Larger osiers were also split and used to make cattle feeding skips. This was specialist work and only one or two basketmakers had the skills to make this type of basket.⁸

Decline of willow growing

The First World War interrupted the willow growing and basketmaking industries in Castle Donington, and they never made a full recovery. Many of the beds fell into decline owing to the shortage of men to maintain them and the concurrent rising costs of production. This was exacerbated by the extra cost of regenerating a bed that had been neglected for more than a year.

Before the war industrial and domestic demands secured full order books for the parish's basketmakers, with hampers, fruit baskets, market baskets and bassinets (cradles) produced on an almost industrial scale. However, during the war every basketmaker was required to make basketwork cases for artillery shells in cane, and this had a lasting impact on willow basketmaking.

These factors, combined with increasing imports of willow

and finished baskets from abroad (which had started before the war), led to the collapse of the willow industry in the Trent Valley and forced many basketmakers out of the trade.

The willow growing cycle

Willow was grown in Castle Donington in an age before mechanisation, and labourers worked with horse-drawn wagons and simple tools. Writing in 1912, William Paulgrave Ellmore stated that 'No branch of agriculture needs so much expenditure for labour per acre as that of willow growing if the ground is efficiently cultivated, and the produce properly sorted, graded, peeled and prepared.'⁹

Preparing the soil: The land had to be ploughed in order to make it suitable for planting. On land with invasive weeds, a strong plough drawn by six horses and led by a strong ploughman was needed.¹⁰ The soil was then broken up by harrow in February, after which the willow 'sets' were planted.

Planting the willow: 'Sets' or 'slips' are one- or two-year old willow rods, approximately twelve inches in length, which are planted directly into the ground, usually with the buds pointing upwards. In 1919, rod merchants sold sets for stocking new beds and replenishing failed plantings at a cost from 15 shillings to £1 per thousand.¹¹

Land drainage: Although willow thrives on wet, heavy soil it will not flourish on waterlogged land. Irrigation systems were therefore developed to keep constant supplies of water flowing into and out of the willow beds.

Flood damage: The willow beds on the river plain to the north of Castle Donington sometimes flooded, leading to difficulties in accessing the beds, and damage to growing willow and to any cut willow stored in the fields.¹² Willow was sometimes woven with gorse for flood defences, and gorse became in short supply.

Cutting the willow: The standing rods of willow are cut during the winter months, after the leaves have fallen and when the rods ripen and the sap is in the roots. In the Trent Valley in the First World War period, the willow was cut by hand with knives and rod hooks. This was a skilled job and precision was needed to cut close to the growing 'stool' without damaging the growing head, as well as to make a clean cut on the harvested rods.

Sorting, storage and carting: After cutting, the willow was graded into sizes and sometimes stored in piles, known as 'pies' or 'couches', on accessible parts of the fields to keep

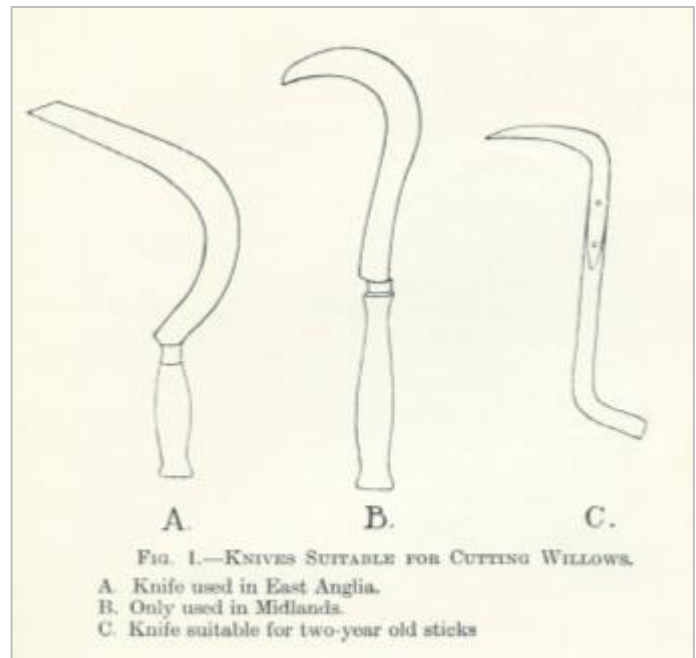


Image above: Knives suitable for cutting willow. Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. (1921). 'The Cultivation of osiers and willows'. London: HMSO, p.17.

the material fresh until it was peeled.¹³ In the Trent Valley, willow was transported by river to designated areas, or by horse-drawn carts to processing yards and buyers. The willow was then dried for brown willow, boiled for buff willow, or stripped for white willow.

Peeling for white: White willow was produced by stripping the bark from the freshly cut willow. This must take place between April and June, when the willow is 'flushing' or in bud. It was a hugely labour-intensive job. In a list gathered from 1891 census material at Castle Donington Museum there are nine people recorded as 'osier peelers'¹⁴ – but there would have also been many itinerant workers, women and children, who took three or more weeks off school to join the workforce. At this time, peeling was done by hand using a brake. The white willow was used for domestic basketwork and large commercial hampers.

Boiling for buff: Buff willow was produced by boiling willow overnight and then stripping the bark. This could be done at any time of year, but was usually done during the winter months. Buff willow fetched higher prices than willow with the bark on, but not as much as white willow. At the time of the First World War, many of the basketmakers' shops in Castle Donington had boiling tanks. Fred Taylor describes fetching cartloads of willow from Station Road and taking it Crampton and Ward, the largest basketmaking firm in the parish, in the Tan Yard to be boiled.¹⁵ Lamberts, another large firm which specialised in hampers, boiled their willow in an outbuilding on Clapgun

Street. And as late as the 1980s there was still a boiling tank in the outhouse next to the Pinfold in Bondgate.

Conclusion

The history of willow growing in the Castle Donington area is still patchy, and further information may be obtainable through archaeological surveys and further archive studies. However, it is clear that at the height of the basketmaking industry in Castle Donington, the growing of the willow was just as important as the making of the baskets.

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