



BASKETRY

Then and Now

THE FIRST WORLD WAR YEARS AND THEIR LEGACY

OCTOBER 2017

Image above: Sarah Le Breton making a pigeon basket at the Basketmaking and Willow Growing in the First World War event at Coates English Willow. © Dave and Sarah Evans.

Work on the project is now winding down as we tie up any loose ends and get ready for our final event in November which will mark the end of the project.

September was spent getting ready for our event at Coates English Willow, which was a big success. The exhibition banners looked fantastic dotted around the museum, and the talks and films were popular. The event was accompanied by a two-day course to make a replica of a pigeon basket seen at the Imperial War Museum, and the makers all came away happy – but rather tired – and with a finished basket. Huge thanks to Jonathan and Nicola Coate for hosting us, and to everyone who came along!

Adam Jones-Lloyd spent the week before the event furiously editing all

of the footage to get two more films ready to show – ‘The Sopwith Camel Aeroplane Seat’ and ‘Willow Connections: Exploring Castle Donington’. It was wonderful to see all the different bits come together to tell some surprising, and very personal, stories. These will be available on the website soon.

We’ve been continuing to edit the research summaries, and eight of them are now available on the website. More will follow so keep any eye out for them. We’ve really enjoyed reading them and hope you will too!

The main thing left to do now is to prepare for our event in Castle Donington, Leicestershire, 25–26 November. This promises to be a great weekend so please join us if you can.

Greta Bertram finished working on the project at the end of September, and Hilary Burns will now see it through until it ends in December.

Daniel Carpenter attended the Basketmaking and Willow Growing in the First World War event at the Willow and Wetlands Centre in Somerset on 23 September 2017, and shares his thoughts on the day.

The Willow and Wetlands Centre is home to the Coate family, who have been growing willow for nearly 200 years. As well as growing willow, the Centre has a team of commercial basketmakers on site, and a small but extensive museum collection charting the uses of willow throughout the centuries and the many forms of basketry practiced in the region.

This setting played host to the Basketry Then and Now project in the form of a talk, film screenings and a two-day pigeon basket making course. I arrived during the latter stage of the course, when the two-storey pigeon baskets were nearing their finishing point. The detail and level of authenticity was fantastic, both in the materials – willow and galvanised wire for the door frames



Image: Hilary Burns at work on her pigeon basket. © Dave and Sarah Evans.

(which would have been available at the time) – as well as the specific weaves used for each part of the baskets. Each level of the basket had a door at either end, and there would have been fabric inserts to divide the compartments diagonally, allowing four pigeons to travel in comfort in each basket. Jonathan Coate, who owns and runs the Centre and led the course, had already finished his two-storey basket and a single-storey basket, and was attempting to make an artillery shell basket while I was there.



Image: The exhibition banners in-situ in the museum. © Daniel Carpenter.

Back in the museum building, informative display banners featuring information about the Basketry Then and Now project were placed amongst the regular exhibits, often with direct relevance to items in the collection, such as a cane aeroplane seat from 1917–19, enhancing the experience of both the written descriptions and the items themselves. In an era before carbon-fibre and other composites, willow and cane provided the perfect

combination of strength and weight for such applications.

In the museum’s film room, Greta Bertram gave an interesting talk outlining the background to the project and what it had achieved, as well as expanding on particular aspects which may have come as a surprise to some, such as the extent the British Army went to train, care for and deploy its pigeons, and how vital they were to the war effort.

In between Greta’s talks visitors, could watch some of the short films that have been made for the project, including that of Mary Crabb and the journey of discovery she had been on, researching the use of shell baskets and making her own based on museum examples, along with her family research and remembrance work focusing on her grandmother’s boyfriend who was killed on active duty.

The day, with its combination of information, craft and personal stories, was a really engaging way of thinking about the social and cultural aspects of the First World War, and judging by overheard responses from other visitors, I think it hit home with a lot of people in a way that reading about it in a book or watching a television programme rarely does.

Hilary Burns took part in the pigeon basket making course and considers the value of making replicas of baskets from specific historical period.

There were very few takers for our course to make a replica of a double-tiered pigeon seen in the stores at the Imperial War Museum in Duxford. Perhaps it was not something many people could see themselves finding a use for, or wanting to repeat. However, the



Image: The basket at the Imperial War Museum and the sample made by Jonathan Coate. Left © IWM (FEQ 813). Right courtesy of Greta Bertram.

process allowed for reflection and put us in touch with how basketmakers in the First World War period worked.

We chose to reproduce this particular basket, rather than one of the larger ones which could hold up to thirty birds, because of its small size and the fineness of its construction. Working from photographs, drawings made by Nicola Coate on our visit to Duxford, and samples made in advance of the course by Jonathan Coate, together with Jonathan’s excellent tutoring, we homed in on the intricacies.



Image: Hilary Burns using Jonathan’s ‘bodkin drill’. © Dave and Sarah Evans.

Jonathan offered us the choice of staking up the base using the traditional method of piercing with tallow and a bodkin – always hard work and one reason a lot of makers avoid square-work – or using his own modern invention, a lathe-turned bodkin drill attachment with a spiral thread, to speed up the job and expend less energy. We all opted for

that, deciding that the original makers would have too, given the chance.

Some of the weaving, such as the pillaring – a discontinuous weave, over a few stakes at a time, making a vertically solid area and leaving the rest of the stakes unwoven – was new to us. Pillaring is used in pigeon baskets to create gaps in the weaving, ensuring that the birds don't overheat. It is not commonly used in other types of basket.

The gaps created were, in some places, filled with decorative cross-fitching using extra stakes. This led to a discussion about working methods, about whether there was more time in the past to make – even when baskets were a necessity – because this decoration was not structurally necessary. Rather, it must have been because the maker enjoyed the effect. As well as this, there were eight ties securing the lid to the basket when four would have done the job.

We learnt a new word – 'league-ums'. I'd come across 'leagues', full lengths of willow used to go through a basket – in this case to hold the tray that divided the two 'storeys' in the sides of the basket. 'League-ums' is most likely a Somerset variation.

A complex set of measurements had to be followed. Gaps for the four doors had to be made, also using a method that is common to pigeon baskets but that we had not used before. Then we had to make the doors themselves – two on each side, opening out away from the back of the wearer. These had to fit the spaces made for them in the right places. A detail that we had not come across before was the way that these were woven onto a framework of galvanised wire and connected to the basket by means of split pins threaded onto the wire frame. These



Image: On Stephanie's basket you can see the decorative fitching, the tray separating the storeys, and the metal hinges. © Dave and Sarah Evans.

pins were then threaded through holes pierced in the corner posts, and the ends bent back around them to create a hinge. A neat and very satisfying solution.

We came away from the two days very pleased with our efforts and the new techniques we had learned. Jonathan's experience was invaluable and we were grateful for his copious knowledge, acquired by working with the traditional makers since the age of 16. Interestingly the Coate's family business had recently, after a gap of many years, completed a large order for pigeon baskets.

We have been supporting community groups with a basketry connection in applying for funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund for First World War projects. In September 2017 the Kingsbury Time Travellers were awarded a grant for their project 'WW1 and the People of the Parish'. Helen Aldhous tells us more.

We are a small history group based in Kingsbury Episcopi, a parish on the Somerset Levels. Over the last two years, the focus of the group has been to build a digital archive which records the life and work of the parish, past and present. This has involved filming people, scanning photographs and documents, creating a Facebook page and

holding open events to share our findings.

One project that we have been working on has been to find out more about the 34 men whose names are on the World War One memorials. One of the names, Decimus Gummer, was the spark which ignited this project. What happened to him? What could we find out about him and his family? Where did he live?

From census records, family and military archives, and photographs, we discovered that Decimus, and a further 21 of the men on the war memorials, worked on the land. In this area, that often meant working with withies (willow) – either growing, stripping, or carting withies, and/or basketmaking. Until the 1970s, a large area of the parish, West Moor, was used for willow growing. Both adults and children were involved in stripping withies, the children before or after school. Once the withies were cut, they were moved by boats and lorries to the withy yards where the boilers were located. There are many withy boilers still present in the landscape, with the associated pits and sheds, although now out of use.

As our research progressed, we linked-up with the Basketry Then and Now project and Coates English Willow, to explore the significance of the willow industry in the parish and in a national context. Local families involved in the withy business have come forward with photographs and stories, which we have archived.

Our plans for our HLF grant include a diverse range of outcomes. We are linking the men on the memorials to heritage trails to mark out their homes. We are commissioning new centenary commemorative plaques. We are organising events such as a withy day with the local primary school, archiving workshops with the

community, and a centenary event. We are also creating exhibition and printed materials – and making a start on our website. In this way we will make our digital archive more widely accessible, celebrate the lives of people in the parish 100 years ago – and connect them to people living, working and visiting in the parish today.

Find out more on the Kingsbury Time Travellers [Facebook page](#).



Mary Crabb has been continuing her research into artillery shell baskets, and shares some of the latest developments with us here.

Nadine Anderson recently bought an artillery shell basket – misidentified as a carriage whip holder – at a steam rally in her local area, and it turned out to be very similar in design to the one I am making a replica of at the Museum of English Rural Life (the MERL). Nadine's basket appears to be the same length and diameter as the one at the MERL, with four wooden splints. It is divided into sections of different weaves and materials. Some parts are identical; while others are worked in an alternative material or with a substitute weave.

At the event in September, having finished his pigeon baskets, Jonathan Coate made an impromptu copy of Nadine's basket, working from the original and substituting suitable material he had to hand. At the time of the First World War, Coates grew willow but had not yet started making baskets – but they do have records showing they supplied willow specifically for making shell baskets.



Image: Nadine's basket (top) with the MERL's (bottom). © The Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading.

At the beginning of October, Maggie Cooper and I visited Leicester to view the Dryad Collection held by Leicester Arts and Museums. The two shell baskets there matched the 'old pattern' and 'new pattern' designs found in the Dryad catalogues – although both are shorter than the MERL's and Nadine's baskets. The more I look into it – and given the differences in the materials and techniques used – the more convinced I am that it is unlikely that either the MERL's or Nadine's baskets were made by Dryad.



Image: Jonathan's replica of Nadine's basket. Image courtesy of Greta Bertram.

With thousands of shell baskets being made to support the War effort, we will probably never know where they were all made. It is also not clear whether the fact that Coates supplied willow for shell baskets means that they were sometimes made of willow instead of cane, or if this simply refers to the woven willow bands found in some shell baskets, like the one at the MERL. However, on my journey to recreate a shell basket, I can only reflect on the skill and versatility of the makers, most likely working under pressure, with any suitable materials available to them at the time.

Other news

Leicestershire event, Saturday 25 and Sunday 26 November: A

weekend celebration of the willow growing and basketmaking history of Castle Donington and the East Midlands, including displays, talks, demonstrations, a drop-in workshop, film screenings and a guided willow walk around the village. 25–26 November 2017, 10.30am-15.30pm, at the Orchard Community Primary School, Grange Drive, Castle Donington, Leicestershire, DE74 2QU. Free, all welcome. Further information [here](#).

On the blog

Read our latest blog posts [here](#):

- Filming baskets by Adam Jones-Lloyd

Research summaries

Our second set of researcher write-ups are now available to read and download from the [website](#):

- Aeroplane seats and balloon baskets by Bunty Ball
- Basketmaking and rehabilitation by Tim Palmer
- Willow growing in Castle Donington by Maggie Cooper
- Styles of baskets in Castle Donington by Maggie Cooper
- Basketmakers of Castle Donington by Maggie Cooper

Borrowing the exhibition banners

The Basketry Then and Now banners are available to download from the [website](#). If you are interested in borrowing them for an event, please contact Anna Hammerin (a.hammerin@herts.ac.uk).

Contact us

Email:

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