



# BASKETRY

## Then and Now

### BASKETMAKERS OF CASTLE DONINGTON

MAGGIE COOPER

**The parish of Castle Donington in Leicestershire was once famed for its basketmaking. This research gives an account of some of the willow growing and basketmaking families of the parish, and shows the important place the craft had in the local economy of the East Midlands.**

*Image above: Basketmaking was such a significant industry in Castle Donington that a basket can even be seen at the top of the village sign. Courtesy of Maggie Cooper.*

The Trent Valley in the East Midlands was once famed for its basketmaking, and the parish of Castle Donington, on the border of Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, was particularly well known. While at one time nearly every village across the country would have had a basketmaker who supplied a very small domestic basket, by the early-twentieth century the Trent Valley basketmakers were considered the best in the country and supplied a national, and even international, market. Many of the makers in Castle Donington carried out contract work for firms in Nottingham, where there was a more sustainable and reliable market for their baskets. The Trent Valley industry fell into decline after the First World War, and today the remarkable history of basketmaking in the East Midlands has almost been forgotten.

At the end of the First World War, it was still taken for granted that basketmaking was a stable occupation. However, a lack of men to maintain the willow beds, rising prices, falling wages, and increased imports of willow and finished baskets from abroad after the war led to the collapse of the willow industry in the Trent Valley, and forced many basketmakers out of the trade.

Census records and trade directories provide only a scant outline of the willow growing and basketmaking activities taking place in and around Castle Donington in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. This may partly be accounted for by the fact that some of the work was

seasonal, and some workers had other occupations. However, from these records it is clear that several businesses were able to make a living, albeit sometimes a precarious one, through making baskets and supplying materials for basketmaking. A list in Castle Donington Museum from the 1891 census shows a surge in basketmakers, probably linked to an increased demand for government work and for the railways. Nearly 200 basketmakers, labourers and apprentices are recorded in Castle Donington. Ten osier peelers were also recorded, although this was usually a seasonal activity employing many additional workers, often women and children. The 1901 census shows a fall in the number of basketmakers.<sup>1</sup> However, during the First World War it is likely that the number of basketmakers in Castle Donington rose again to meet the high demand for artillery shell baskets, although these were made in cane rather than willow.

#### **The Moll family, willow growers**

There have been willow beds in Castle Donington since at least the sixteenth century. Basketmakers and rod merchants rarely had enough money to own the land, so it was usually rented. One notable exception was Herbert Moll, who made a good living as a rod dealer and was able to build several cottages for his workers ('Molls Row' on Trent Lane) in the late-nineteenth century. Herbert Moll took over his father's basketmaking business at the age of 26, and must have seen the potential to exploit the local knowledge on willow growing and the demand for materials. It is likely that Moll continued to rent the land for the willow beds rather than owning it outright, but he had sufficient turnover to house his workers.



Image: The cottages of Molls Row. © Maggie Cooper.

This is significant for several reasons. It shows that there was profit to be made in willow dealing at the time, that there was enough confidence in the future of the willow market to invest in this way, and that there was enough work for employees to be dedicated solely to willow cultivation – with many others employed seasonally throughout the year.

‘Black maul’, sometimes known as ‘black mole’<sup>2</sup>, is a variety of willow much favoured by basketmakers and is known to originate from a grower in Leicestershire.<sup>3</sup> It is possible to speculate that it may have been named after Moll. Castle Donington was famous for the high quality of its willow and there is no reason for this not to be the case.

It appears that after 1856 Moll was only concerned with willow growing and dealing, and not with basketmaking.

#### **The Lambert family, willow growers and basketmakers**

The Lambert family were willow growers and basketmakers, and specialised in making hampers. The business was established in 1861, and they had their premises on Clapgun Street. It is not known where in Castle Donington they grew their willow, and they may have had willow beds in the adjacent parish of Hemington.

Lamberts also bought willow from other growers. In a memorandum to Mr Garratt of Melbourne on 15 January 1900, William Lambert stated that the willow that Garratt sold was of poor quality and would not be used. Lambert not only offered to find a buyer for the poor quality osiers, but also to supply quality cuttings.<sup>4</sup>

It seems likely that the willow variety ‘*Salix Lambertiana*’, a variety of *Salix purpurea*, was named after the Lamberts and specially developed by or for them. Lamberts would have been keen to invest in growing as much material as possible for their business.



Image: The site of Lamberts Hamper Makers on Clapgun Street. © Maggie Cooper.

#### **The Saxelby family, willow growers and basketmakers**

Several generations of the Saxelby family were involved in willow growing and basketmaking. John Saxelby is mentioned in the 1848 Post Office Directory. Albert Saxelby, born about 1850, was a master basketmaker and received the Freedom of the City of London. His son Martin Sutton Saxelby, born around 1899, was also a master basketmaker. Both Albert and Martin taught basketmaking at Loughborough College.



Image: Albert Saxelby, from ‘The Limit’, the magazine of Loughborough College. Courtesy of Loughborough University.

The Saxelbys had a workshop on the premises of their family home, Crown House, in Bondgate, where they made and sold a variety of basketware and cane furniture. A catalogue from the early-twentieth century shows many rush and white willow baskets, chairs and perambulators. The family had connections with many other basketmaking families in the Trent Valley, particularly the Mills family in Kegworth, and some had willow beds in Ratcliffe on Soar.

### **Crampton and Ward, basketmakers**

Crampton and Ward was established in 1906 and was based in the Tan Yard on the site of a former tannery. It was founded by Albert Edward Crampton, who is most noted for his involvement with Dryad Cane Works in Leicester, and George B. Ward, who may have been the same local basketmaker recorded in the 1891 census as living in Spital. At one point, the firm was known as Crampton, Ward and Stokes. Stokes may have been local or from Leicester, as there is a firm recorded in the 1906 Kelly's Directory for Leicester by the name of Stokes and Holt.<sup>5</sup>

Dryad Cane Works was founded in 1907 and specialised in cane furniture. By 1914 it employed nearly 200 workers. Albert Crampton and his brother Charles were key figures in the early days of Dryad. Having already set up Crampton and Ward, in 1908 Albert went on to establish CasDons, a furniture company imitating the Dryad designs. He later returned to Dryad as operation manager, although Crampton and Ward remained in business until the 1930s.<sup>6</sup>

Crampton and Ward was not considered to be a 'Donington firm', although they would have employed many local makers. They were most famous for making artillery shell baskets during the war. Crampton may have managed this war work in Castle Donington, where basketmaking became a reserved occupation.

### **The Bosworth family, basketmakers**

The Bosworth family had a workshop on the corner of Clapgun Street and Eastway, and made commercial baskets. At least three generations of the family were involved: Thomas Bosworth, Charles and James Bosworth, and John Bosworth. The firm closed in 1953.

### **Connections to other basketmaking areas**

There were many other Castle Donington basketmakers whose families were linked to basketmakers in the wider Trent Valley area. The Raynes family may have been linked to a Leicester basketmaker of that name, and the Roulstone family had connections in Ratcliffe on Soar and a large family business in East Leake.

### **Decline of the basketmaking trade**

A number of basketmakers in the Trent Valley were members of the British Amalgamated Union of Journeymen Basket, Cane and Wicker Furniture Makers. However, there does not seem to have been much of a Castle Donington presence in the list of members. One reason for this may be that members were not allowed to work at home – and many smaller companies in Castle Donington were essentially home-workers. East Leake had its own district group, and Castle Donington members may have been represented there or in the Leicester or Nottingham groups.

The committee of the Union, in an effort to secure a future for basketmaking, approached the Board of Trade to persuade them to consider making it a 'Key Trade'. They were not successful. The Union blamed the Growers and Salesmen's Association, which they said were looking only for cheap baskets and were not interested in whether they were imported. Furthermore not enough basketmakers were members of the Union – only 2000 out of 7000 nationally – and there were therefore not enough members to pressure the government to limit the import of foreign baskets.<sup>7</sup>

### **Decline of the willow growing industry**

The decline of willow cultivation in the Trent Valley was largely due to the shortage of man-power to maintain the willow beds during and after the First World War. The job was labour-intensive and willow beds need tending throughout the year, without which they very quickly become overgrown and fall into decline. It is well-known that it is almost as much trouble to reinstate an old willow bed as it is to start a new bed. After the war, the whole industry was changed forever and most people found employment in other areas.

### **References**

- <sup>1</sup> Castle Donington Museum. *Census List*.
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- <sup>3</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>4</sup> The Kerr Family Archive. *The Melbourne Muniments*. Melbourne.
- <sup>5</sup> *Kelly's Directory of Leicester*. (1906).
- <sup>6</sup> Kirkham, P. (1986). *Harry Peach: Dryad and the DIA*. 1st ed. London: The Design Council.
- <sup>7</sup> British Amalgamated Union of Journeymen Basket, Cane and Wicker Furniture Makers. (1919). *Annual Report*.

