



BASKETRY

Then and Now

THE ORSETT BASKET WORKS, ESSEX

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After the First World War Col. Francis Whitmore established the Orsett Basket Works on his estate in Orsett, Essex. This research examines the history of the Orsett Basket Works and the role it played in the rehabilitation of disabled ex-servicemen.

Col. (later Sir) Francis Whitmore was a significant landowner in the south west corner of Essex. In 1901, as part of his civic and military responsibilities, he organised the Orsett Troop as a regiment of the volunteer Essex Yeomanry. Many of the men were drawn from his tenanted farms or were agricultural labourers working on the Orsett Estate.¹

The Orsett Troop mobilised early in the First World War, heading for France on 7 August 1914. They faced battles at Flanders, Ypres, Loos and Monchy le Proux near Arras, and at least 38 men died in action.² Fortunately, the majority of the Troop returned home, although some with significant injuries. Whilst not relating specifically to men from Orsett, adverts placed in the local newspaper, the Grays and Tilbury Gazette, by the Ministry of Labour indicate the types of physical and psychological injuries sustained by men returning from the war.³

Case No. 1. Age 56, suffering from Shell Shock and Heart, requires work as a watchman.

Case No. 2. Age 25, single, Amputation left Foot, requires light employment.

Case No. 3. Age 20, single, Amputation Right Thigh, requires light work.

Case No. 4. Age 34, single, Amputation Right Leg, requires light work.

Case No. 5. Age 22, single, Amputation Right Thigh, requires light work.

Col. Whitmore was actively involved in the local

Main image: Men outside the Orsett Basket Works hut, 1919. Courtesy of the Essex Records Office, ERO D/Dwt Z3/3.

Community. Reports suggest that his wife ran a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) hospital at Orsett Hall, their home, during the war, and even today he is still generally regarded as having been a good landlord. As a local politician and activist he would have been aware of the work of organisations such as St Dunstan's School for Blind Veterans and The Society (forerunner to Combat Stress) in providing support and rehabilitation for injured servicemen during the War. Locally, he was involved with efforts to raise funds for the Lord Roberts Memorial Workshops, which included basketmaking in the crafts they taught to disabled servicemen, donating the proceeds of a lecture about his war experiences to them.⁴

Throughout 1919 and 1920 adverts from the Ministry of Labour identifying ex-servicemen looking for work, and letters from Grays Employment Committee exhorting local businesses to do their bit for disabled ex-servicemen, appeared regularly in the Grays and Tilbury Gazette. On 14 February 1920 an article entitled 'Work for Disabled Men' outlined the need for local employers to offer work, naming basketmaking as one possibility.

It is likely that interest in his workers' welfare, indirect pressure from the Ministry of Labour adverts and his peers on the Grays Employment Committee, along with an awareness of the benefits experienced by participants in existing occupational and rehabilitation workshops



Image: Orsett Basket Works Hut, 1919. Courtesy of the Essex Records Office, ERO D/Dwt Z3/3.

combined to encourage Col. Whitmore to establish the Orsett Basket Works.

Sometime in 1920 a small 'basketmaking industry' was set up employing thirteen men. In February 1921 bigger huts were procured and the Orsett Basket Works was established, employing about thirty men, including four instructors.⁵

The Works were set up primarily to employ injured ex-servicemen from Orsett parish, including Whitmore's estate. Lady Whitmore (the Colonel's second wife) recalls men with amputated legs, arms and fingers as well as those with exhaustion and lung complaints.⁶ The latter may have been psychosomatic symptoms of shellshock, 'a disorder characterised by a range of physical symptoms; exhaustion, shortness of breath, anxiety and headaches.'⁷

The Works aimed to provide employment, rather than focussing specifically on treatment, rehabilitation or therapy. This approach may have drawn on older models of occupational therapy, such as those found in early asylums like the York Retreat, where meaningful occupation in the form of necessary work was seen to be therapeutically beneficial to both physical and mental well-being. This approach is echoed in current day services that regard creativity and purpose as key factors of good health.

In the early 1920s Essex was still primarily an agricultural county and there was demand for baskets of various kinds for the Orsett Estate, as well as from many local farms and nearby fisheries. The Basket Works sales ledger held at the Museum of English Rural Life (The MERL) identifies eleven farms and one cockle fishery as customers in 1929.⁸ Although no evidence has been found of a specific basket works at Orsett prior to the war, willows were grown on



Image: Men cutting willow on the Orsett Estate, 1922. Courtesy of the Essex Records Office, ERO D/Dwt Z3/3.

the estate and by 1912 the Orsett Estate had about 16 acres of osier beds and was supplying willow to basketmakers in Barking and East London.⁹

From his own writing it is apparent that Whitmore regarded the Orsett Basket Works as more than a project for keeping ex-servicemen busy. He saw the Works as a business that had the potential to expand, 'as the enterprise succeeds, so employment will increase,'¹⁰ and he employed a commercial salesman who travelled widely promoting and selling basketry products. However, Whitmore also acknowledged the threat to locally made baskets from foreign competition, recording the 'dumping' of large quantities of imported willow in the early 1900s and saying that 'every foreign manufactured basket imported is contributing [...] towards the increasing burden of unemployment.'

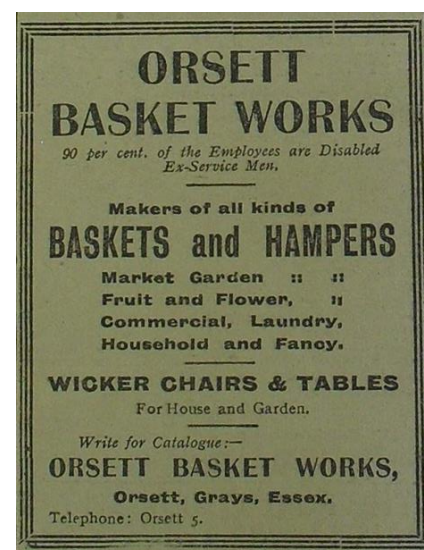


Image: An advert for the Orsett Basket Works. Grays and Tilbury Gazette, 5 November 1921.

The Orsett Basket Works provided employment for between twenty-four and thirty men and adverts state that 90% of these were injured ex-servicemen.¹¹ This initiative gained Col. Whitmore a King's National Roll Certificate and his benevolence was reported in a long article in the Grays and Tilbury Gazette which referenced biblical links to basketmaking.¹²

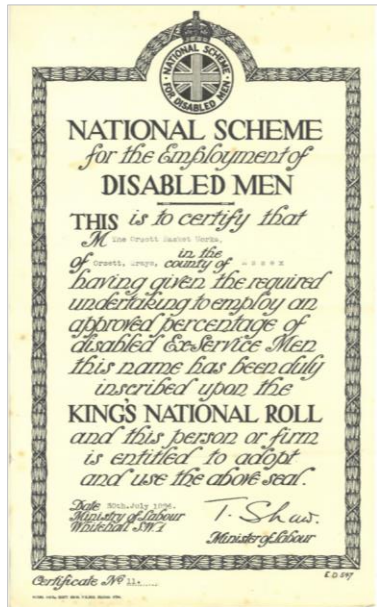


Image: The King's National Roll Certificate, MERL ESS 17/5/21. © The Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading.

To train his employees in basketmaking skills Col. Whitmore recruited a Mr West from Barking, probably a member of the family associated with West Bros Basket Makers, a business listed in Kelly's Directory of Essex as trading in 1917 up to 1933.¹³ Local, unconfirmed, conversations suggest that this company is likely to have been in existence earlier and later than these dates and was a business to which the Orsett Estate had been selling willow prior to the war. Mr West was employed from January 1921 as an 'instructor', and the pay sheets state that he was paid between £25 and £53 6s 0d per fortnight.¹⁴ The reason for the variation is not given.

While it is not entirely clear from the Orsett Estate's pay sheets or the ledgers of the Orsett Basket Works how many men were being employed specifically at the Basket Works at any one time, it seems that the basketmaking men were collectively paid between £20 and £35 a week in 1929, (ledgers for the Basket Works are not available before July 1929) and this amount was fairly consistent until 1932 when it fell to £15 to £20 a week.^{15&16}

The travelling salesman was paid £312 for the year in 1929. Part of his role was the arranging of trade displays at various events. Regular stalls included the Orsett Show (established by Col. Whitmore), the Essex Show, and the

Royal Show, with occasional ventures further afield at the Sussex Show and the Cumberland Show. In June 1935 sales at the Essex Show totalled £14 9s 0d and in July at the Royal Show £26 17s 6d was taken.

Women were employed seasonally, specifically to strip the willow, and the pay sheets indicate that for the months of May and June of 1923 their wages were £35 15s 10d and £46 19s 15d respectively. In his 1924 article Col. Whitmore says that twenty-five women were employed for this task.

In addition, a personal letter of reminiscence (Stan Clark, c.2012) to the curator of Thurrock Museum records that, as a young boy, his neighbour was one of the women who worked at the Orsett Basket Works and she 'was a very able worker of cain wratton [sic] work on chairs and I often sat and watched as she deftly worked on her frames'.

The Works were fairly successful, providing a range of baskets and basketware, with a catalogue of products available. As well as 'wicker chairs and tables for home and garden' made to order, there was also a repairs service. Other products included: cargo baskets, coal baskets, ships fenders, poultry crates, laundry baskets, bushel fruit baskets, lobster pots and brussels sprout baskets.^{17&18}

With a regular advert in the Grays and Tilbury Gazette from November 1921 and the activities of the travelling salesman there was a growing customer base. Local farms and fisheries continued to buy baskets and in 1929 customers also included: The Metropolitan Asylums Board, ABC Construction Co., Orient shipping Co., Stanford Laundry, Seabrookes Brewery, Epping Guardians, Grays Cooperative, the Seaman's Hospital, British and Argentina Meat Co., Princes St. Steam Laundry, Tilbury U.D. Council,



Image: Women stripping willow on the Orsett Estate, date unknown. Courtesy of the Essex Records Office, ERO D/Dwt Z3/3.

Tollemarches Brewery, Orsett Guardians, Burton Bakeries, Thames Board Mills, Harrods Ltd., Partridges Dairy, Tarpots Bakery, Lord Rayleigh's Farm Dairies, Kodak Ltd., The Lady Baker, Rev. Dewhurst, Capt. Attwells and The Countess of Basdari amongst many others. The specific nature of the products purchased by these customers has not been identified.

The Orsett Basket Works made a modest profit of £51 17s 8d in the year 1929. Profits continued until 1932, but by then had fallen to £3 8s 6d. It seems that neither the workforce nor the Works expanded in line with the potential proposed by Col. Whitmore. In 1933 a loss of £94 10s 7d was recorded and losses continued to be made in each of the following years. By 1936 sales had fallen significantly as had, so the wages bill implies, the number of employees. It has been suggested, but not verified, that in its latter years the role of the Orsett Basket Works became less that of a business and more of a welfare service for the remaining ex-servicemen, and that as these men died so the Works reduced,¹⁹ until they closed completely on 10 March 1939.²⁰

Little remains of the Orsett Basket Works today. The osier beds have largely disappeared under housing, although willows do still grow along some of the ditch lines. Thurrock Museum has one basket attributed to the Orsett Basket Works.

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