

IN THE WARS

Looking back at the essential role of baskets during World War One



Picture a World War One soldier transporting shells by packhorse to the front line in protective cases of woven cane. Basketry may seem at odds with war; almost impractical; but in Britain it was integral to the war effort.

The Basketry Then and Now project, runs from the University of Hertfordshire Everyday Lives in War Centre, has recently given basketmakers a chance to reflect on the legacy of the First World War. Early industrialisation drove the UK basketmaking industry – and its apprenticeship system – that went on to supply the armed forces in huge quantities. To meet the demand, an industry developed of willow growers who planted and harvested the fields, graded and boiled the willow, stripped, bundled, sold and transported crops.

While the demand for baskets on the home front and the front line increased, pressure was felt by men to join the forces. After conscription was introduced in 1916, employers had to make a good case if they wanted to retain their employees. Factories such as Dryad in Leicester (a name now synonymous with supplying materials for hobby crafts but which then specialised in manufacturing cane furniture) were completely turned over to weaving artillery shell cases and woven seats for aeroplanes. These chairs, terrifyingly flimsy-looking to our eyes today, had to be extremely light to prevent the early planes breaking up in flight. The total weight of a Sopwith Camel aircraft was 650kg, and 58,000 WWI aircraft were produced in total, some requiring passenger seats as well. ▶

Left and below; Willow Pigeon Basket, 65 x 25 x 80cm



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