



Far Left: An artillery shell basket, used to protect shells during the World War One.
 Left: Mary Crabb, replica artillery shell baskets, produced as part of the Basketry Then and Now project, 76cm
 Right: field surgical pannier, 1904 pattern, the willow weaving is seen when it is opened up. The over-painting "63" suggests that the contents were changed. The chains on the back were attached to its partner over the back of the pack animal. It is unclear when the use of pack animals stopped in the British army, but the Americans were using them quite recently in Afghanistan.

Thousands of artillery shell cases were ordered, and it was difficult to obtain the imported cane materials needed to make them. Other basket types were also made under contract, such as baskets for the over 22,000 carrier pigeons that were essential for communication when other means were unreliable. These birds were used in the trenches, in aeroplanes and at sea, carrying messages back to the mobile lofts. Observational balloon baskets, medical supply panniers for surgical equipment, hospital laundry baskets, letter trays and wastepaper baskets for the War Office were all made in Britain's basketry workshops.

At home, calls went out for women and girls to help bring in the harvest. Baskets were needed for planting, harvesting and transporting goods on the railways as imports became impossible. Kibseys were used in Kent to transport fruit from orchards, broccoli crates were used in Cornwall to bring cauliflowers to London, and flats were used to take watercress from Dorset to the Midlands.

Wounded men flooded the hospitals. Invalid chairs and spinal carriages were made and it was these men in their basket-beds that gave rise to the phrase 'basket-cases', perhaps one that we ought not to use today. Basketry was associated with blind workshops, and new organisations such as St Dunstan's in England and Linburn in Scotland were established and taught basketry to the war-blinded. Others, such as the Orsett Basket Works and Star and Garter, trained disabled men. At this time making baskets was still seen as a viable occupation that could provide meaningful work and income.

Loss of limbs and minds from shell shock made returning and rehabilitating men an urgent matter. Slowly, the perception of mental illness changed. Occupations useful to their injuries, with beneficial psychological effects, were developed in hospitals. 'Curative workshops', concerned with restoring bodily function (or in some cases replacing it with prosthetics) started what is now known as occupational therapy. This began in America, as bedside reconstruction aides, mainly women, were employed. Their jobs included teaching cane basketry, well suited to graduated exercise. The Dryad factory took their cane off-cuts to the Royal Northern Hospital in Leicester to be used in this way. Dryad itself had identified a new market with the growing interest in craft as a hobby. Unfortunately, basketry's identity as a flagship craft for occupational therapy became associated with the notion that it was of little use, seen as more of an embarrassment than a skill to be proud of by the 1960s.

Seale-Hayne in Devon, used as a military hospital for shell-shocked patients deemed to be incurable, was one place that used craft in rehabilitating the mind and body. Dr Arthur Hurst was an early pioneer, insisting that the men, after successful treatment, as well as working on the farm took part in pottery and basketmaking classes. Resources being hard to come by, they collected local clay and hedgerow materials.

The Basketry Then and Now project has unpacked the issue of remembrance through the work of Mary Crabb. The pieces she has made

Museum of English Rural Life © Mary Crabb

combine textile and basketry techniques with mathematics and are based on dates and numbers significant to her grandmother's boyfriend, killed in France in 1916. Together with the Woven Communities project in Scotland, *Basketry Then and Now* also examines how the craft proves useful in focussing the mind, developing attention, bi-lateral dexterity and problem-solving abilities, and improving self-confidence for patients with brain injury or stroke. Not to be underestimated is the usefulness of making and giving, and the connection made between the patient and their family. Basketry has more value than we give it credit for.

After the war, the willow industry collapsed. A lack of men to maintain the fields during and after the war, combined with pressure from imports, falling wages and the 1930s depression, meant that it never recovered. The War Office identified willow as a strategic resource, and established a national collection of basketry willows in 1923.

Today, that collection is held at Rothamsted Research in Hertfordshire, where its use in bio-energy, bio-plastics and pharmaceutical compounds is being explored. The *Basketry Then and Now* project has been truly rewarding, giving perspective and a better understanding of the way in which a once national occupation fell away after the 1918 conflict. It helps us chart the many other changes in the lives of those who lived through it, and in the decades since. *** Hilary Burns. *Basketry Then & Now*, www.everydaylivesinwar.herts.ac.uk

Creates English Willow museum



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