OAK, HAZEL, RUSH, STRAW, WILLOW AND BRAMBLE

Baskets of the British Isles

Unlike ceramics, baskets, or fragments of baskets, appear almost as ghosts in archaeological digs. By their very nature at the mercy of damp, worm, and wear, natural fibres return to the earth, in a continual process of decomposition. Preserved best in either the extreme dry heat of deserts or underwater, lying soft as butter in the silt of lake villages, basketry's role as the original 'slow' craft is also found as traces of pattern on coiled pottery, made using baskets as a mould. In spite of the scarcity of evidence it is obvious that vast numbers of containers of all shapes and sizes, made from whatever materials grew regionally, were crucial for the development of civilisations.

Baskets – so familiar and so universal, yet close inspection reveals significant variety; forms that have developed over time to fulfil specific functions, and are the repository of cultural identity. Some baskets have always been made in small numbers for individual use, by farmworkers and travellers; whilst others were made in their thousands in workshops, and were essential containers for fishing, agriculture and early industries such as charcoal burning. Many baskets retained these functions until relatively recently.

This collection, commissioned by The New Craftsmen, was put together to show off forms from the familiar to the intriguing, and techniques that include plaiting, looping, twining, cordage, stake-and-strained as well as hoop-and-rib constructions. Textures arise directly from field, woodland, river and hedgerow. The harvesting and processing of materials, in their annual cycle, is often as time-consuming as the actual weaving of the work.

As is traditional, on the Somerset Levels willow ▸

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page 34: From left to right: 1 Ruth Pybus Welsh laundry basket, split and shaved hazel. 2 Owen Jones, Cumbrian swill, oak swill, hazel frame. 3 Helen Campbell, Welsh cyntell, white and brown willow. 4 Liz Balfour, creelagh of mudagh willow. 5 Jo Hogan, kerry hamper, willow. 6 Ewen Balfour, kishie, oat straw, wild rush.
page 35: 1 John Cowan, Herring cran, willow and rattan. 2 Joe Hogan, Co. Tyrone back creel, willow. 3 Joanne B Kaar, Natural fibres looped bag, Montbretia, blue iris, Scotland. 4 Hilary Burns, frame basket based on an oyster tendle, willow. 5 Helen Campbell, Welsh tea-things basket, willow. 6 Annemarie O'Sullivan, kindling basket with integrated hazel handle, willow hazel. 7 Hilary Burns, Gertrude Jekyll style trug, willow. 8 Annemarie O'Sullivan, Sussex scarp, sweet chestnut, willow, hay.
page 37: 1 Joe Hogan, donkey creel, Galway, Co. Mayo, willow. 2 Jenny Crisp, Large square laundry basket, white stripped willow. 3 John Gowan, herring cran, willow and rattan 4 Hilary Burns, frame basket 'melon' form, split and shaved bramble. 5 Sally Goymer, shoulder bag based on a fishing creel, Somerset willows. 06 Lorna Singleton, eggy basket, oak swill, hazel frame. 7 Joe Hogan, scoob, willow. 8 Hilary Burns, croust basket, willow. 9 Hilary Burns, London flower-seller's basket, willow.

continues to be grown and processed; pitted and stripped for white rods, boiled and stripped for buff, graded and tied into bolts. This, though, is now a rather reduced industry from the times when willow was grown over thousands of acres in Britain, at a time when there was a working basket-maker in every village. Makers still rely on a regular source of materials; they may buy woodland or rent part of a field to plant a willow bed. Joe Hogan in Ireland, Jenny Crisp, Annemarie O'Sullivan and Hilary Burns in England maintain willow beds to control the quality and ensure a range of natural colours for their work.

Owen Jones and Lorna Singleton continue to weave traditional oak 'swills', strong agricultural baskets, alongside contemporary new forms. For centuries Cumbrian oak swills were made in the southern Lake District and used for harvesting potatoes, coaling for steam ships, in mines, mills and ironworks, on farms and in the home. Owen looks for 30-year-old oak with a straight grain and clear trunk of at least ten feet. For the last 17 years he has coppiced oak on land owned by the Lake District National Park. Bark is stripped from the felled logs, they are cut into three foot lengths, cleft in quarters and left to simmer overnight in a tank over hot coals. Steaming, they are removed and split into narrow splints – billets – using a froe (traditional hand tool with an outward facing blade and wooden handle). As the billets become more manageable in size they are further split or 'riven' thinner. The skill is in keeping the split running evenly down the centre. The splints are 'dressed' using a drawknife to pare them down to a smooth, even surface on a special form of shaving horse; the swiller's mare, developed for this task. Every year or two in the autumn the accumulated bark waste from this woodland is transported by truck to Bakers, the last remaining oak bark tannery at Colyton in Devon, where it takes 18 months to produce the durable strong naturally coloured leather.

Felicity Irons harvests English rush, Scirpus lacustris, on the Great Ouze, Ivel and Nene rivers from June to August. Working from flat-bottomed punts she and her workers cut the rushes under water with a scythe. The bundles are carefully dried in sun and wind, stored dry in a barn then damped down for plaiting. Ruth Pybus, in North Wales, harvests hazel rods, in the spring when the sap is rising, from local woodland. With a knife, the splits are pared from the rod and the bark peeled off. From these she weaves time-consuming frame baskets for laundry and domestic tasks, reinvigorating an almost lost Welsh tradition.

What of places where trees and shrubs are scarce? Ewen Balfour and Joanne B Kaar, in Scotland, harvest soft materials, grasses, leaves and rushes. A Shetland kishie, the back basket used by crofters to gather 'tatties' and seaweed, is also used for sowing oats, the staple food and animal feed, that in addition provides the raw material, oat straw, for the basket itself. 44 metres of 'simmons' – field rush 'Juncus effusus' – is plied by hand into rope and twined around the 'heogs' – or bunches of home-grown oat straw – to keep an even tension to weave this extraordinary basket.

Amongst other baskets now at risk of disappearing as their functions become obsolete is the eel hive or grig from Cambridgeshire, that was made extensively by fen men in the 20th century. It was a vital part of the fenland economy, as well as providing a means of supplementing the diet. Each maker had their own version of this complex two-chambered basket that allows eels to swim in after the bait. Two sets of sharp spikes woven closely together prevent the fish from swimming back out. Their exit the other end is plugged by a wooden stopper. Submerged traps would have been weighted down and tied to discreet markers on the bank. A great British basket, the quarter cran, was made in great numbers, yet dying out by the 1970s. It was fabricated in large workshops with men working piece-rate. These were set up to supply the fishing fleets whose boats chased the huge silvery herring shoals from Cornwall along Britain's east coast as far as Scotland. The maker had to be skilled and accurate as well as fast. This basket was an official measure that had to be passed by a government inspector – 14 measurements were taken before the basket could be branded fit for use. The tendle, traditionally made from elm, was used for gathering oysters; the flattened shape of the basket allowed them to be tipped into a sack. The twisted 'grommet' that holds the ribs against the frame is very unusual. Once the required receptacle for oyster gatherers, the design was unique to Mersea in Essex.

The intangible heritage of skill and knowledge involved in weaving, harvesting and preparating materials, could be lost if not passed on from craftsperson to craftsperson. Makers, who continue to make traditional shapes, and those who take inspiration from them to create contemporary work are seen here in this sculptural feast of natural texture, form and pattern. It offers encouragement to look again at our basketry heritage.

¥¥¥ **Hilary Burns www.thenewcraftsmen.com**

images courtesy The New Craftsmen