

A Day in the Life of a Willow Basket maker

Hello, my name is Helen and I am a coppice worker and willow basket maker.

A coppice worker is a person who looks after woodlands and uses wood and harvested wood materials to make useful things.



I like weaving with my materials and make baskets. I use willow to make my baskets.

Willow is grown in beds grown close together so that it grows long and straight



In spring the planted sticks burst into life with lots of green leaves and grow quickly to produce new stems for harvesting in the winter



The willow is cut in winter when it is dormant and then dried and stored in dry, dark sheds. The willow grows in lots of different shades of green and brown.



Baskets have been woven from willow and other pliable natural materials for thousands of years. There is evidence of baskets from ancient Egyptians onwards

This is a king, Ur-Nina from Babylonia in 3000BC carrying a basket on his head.



FIG. 12. Limestone Plaque showing Ur-Ninā with Basket on his head. Louvre Museum.



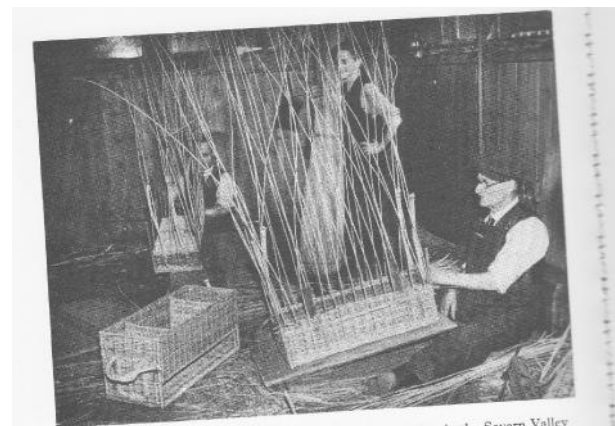
103 Cutting osiers from the stools with a reap hook

104 Stacking the rods in a pit to await peeling

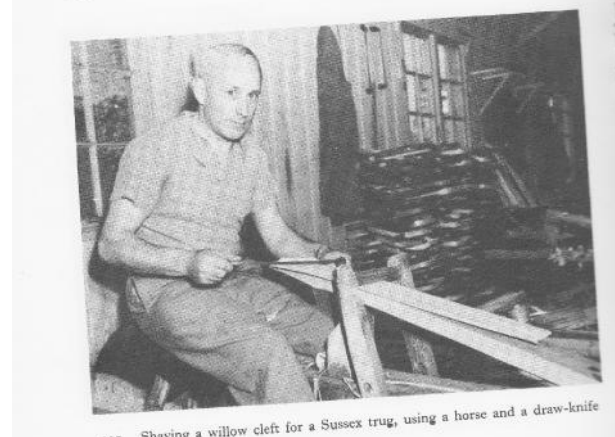
HARVESTING OSIERS AT TWYFORD, BERKSHIRE

These pictures are from the middle of last century and show people harvesting the willows

And then sitting at the plank making baskets for medical supplies.



109 Weaving rectangular baskets to hold medical supplies, in the Severn Valley



110 Shaving a willow cleft for a Sussex trug, using a horse and a draw-knife

My day begins at 7am when I get up and have breakfast and make my packed lunch.

Then I drive to my workshop in Wasdale.

The dried willow needs to be soaked in water to make it pliable again before using it. It has to soak for several days.

I soak mine in the stream, so when I take it is taken out I have to shake it over the water to make sure no fish or shrimps have been caught up by mistake.



Then the willow is wrapped in an old towel and left to mellow overnight.

So I will have some willow going in to soak , some coming out to mellow and some ready to use!

To make a round basket :

The basket begins with making a cross of 6 or 7 sticks and tying the slath like this



Then I open out the sticks to make all the sticks evenly spaced around the circle, weaving with a pair of weavers.

This makes the base of the basket.



When the base is the size I want I stop this weave.

I have to stake up the basket
This puts lots of long stakes into the base
and then bends them up to make the sides
and tie them at the top like this



To make the basket strong and the
stakes secure I do a 4 rod wale on the
side using 4 sticks at once to weave
together a firm foot.



Then the sides are woven using a
randing weave. This uses lots more
thin willow weavers to build the basket
to the height I want.



To finish the basket off I use those long sides stakes and bend them down to make a strong woven border to the basket



Here are some finished baskets.



Here I am making a basket from lots of different materials such as ivy, holly, dogwood and larch.



Here I am in my workshop making a big laundry basket with a lid.



At the end of the day I have to sweep the floor of my workshop to clear up little pieces of willow cut from the finished basket to make it neat and tidy.

I make lots of baskets of different shapes and sizes



This oval base makes a basket like this



A rectangular base will make a basket this shape.



And this basket is a celtic knot!

What shape did I start with for this basket?



This big basket took me 2 whole days to make.



As well as baskets I like making sculptures of all sorts of shapes, especially animals

When I plant willow which I have just cut it will grow into new plants. This will make a lovely leafy tunnel in the summer.



I have been working with Ennerdale school and we have woven a little willow roundhouse. This has then been covered in daub, a mix of clay and straw to weather proof it and then we put a little thatch on the roof.

It will make a bird feeding platform for next winter.



It is very important to keep the traditional skills of basket making going because one day we will have no oil left and then there can be no plastic. Baskets will then be needed again for carrying our shopping, storing lots of things in our houses, packing products in to send to customers, and many more useful things.



By managing the woods for the woods and other materials we are helping to keep a healthy environment for lots of wildlife too, such as birds and bees and flowers. It looks really nice too.

