

## A Day in the life of Lorna an apprentice Swiller

Hello, my name is Lorna, I am an apprentice basket maker and 'swiller'.

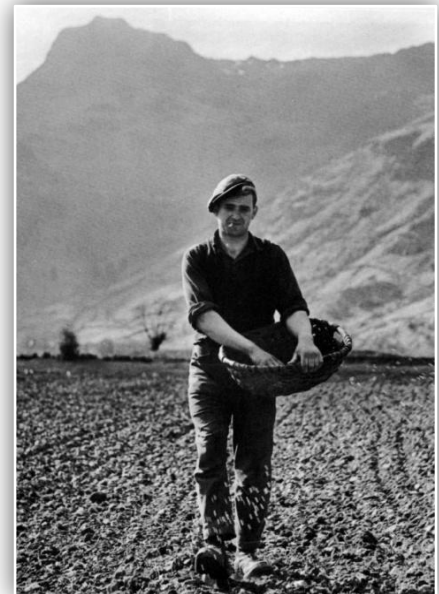
A swiller is a person that makes oak swill baskets.

Before plastic and metal became readily available, baskets and containers had to be made out of wood and other natural materials using old traditional crafts.

The swill was the speciality of the Furness fells. It was used for any task that required goods to be moved in industry and around the farm. Many were needed and a lot of local people made their living as swillers.

Swills were used for sowing seeds, picking potatoes, moving coal onto ships and carrying bobbins and cottons to the mill.

These days' swills are mainly sold as firewood and laundry baskets or for holding and displaying fruit and vegetables.



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Owen Jones is the last professional swiller in the United Kingdom and the world.

Owen lives at High Nibthwaite at the South of Coniston Water in Cumbria.

I am Owen's apprentice, and he is teaching me to make swill baskets so I can carry on this traditional craft so that it is not lost forever.

Swills are made by weaving lots of thin strips of oak around a rim or 'bool' made from hazel.

Oak trees used to make swills must be straight, 10cm to 15cm accross and 2.5m to 3m long. They must not have any knots or branches.

The oak comes from coppiced woodlands. This is a traditional type of woodland management whereby stems of oak trees are cut low to the ground every 20-30 years. It grows back again making this practice very sustainable.



## A Day in the life of Lorna an apprentice Swiller

There is a lot of work that needs to go into preparing the materials to make a swill basket.

The first day is spent in the woods felling the tress, cutting them to length and transporting them back to the workshop.



On the second day, the oak is then split, which we call 'cleft' into 4 or 6 parts we call 'billets' with a tool called a 'froe'.

The oak billets are boiled for 4 hours in a large cast-iron boiler with a fire underneath, and then left overnight in the boiler.



At 6am on the morning of the third day, the fire has to be stoked again to boil the water for another day of preparation. On this day the boiled oak billets are soft and can be 'riven' – this is tearing the boiling hot billets of oak in half again and again until they are almost the correct thickness for weaving.

The riven oak is then prepared so that it can be weaved into a swill. This is called 'dressing' the oak. Dressing involves two different processes.



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First, the ribs of the basket called 'spelks', and pronounced spells, are dressed with a 'drawknife' on a swillers 'mare'. The drawknife is a very sharp two-handed blade, and the mare is a wooden foot-operated clamp.



After the 'spelks' have been made, longer pieces called 'taws' are made to weave over and under the spelks. The taws are dressed by pulling them between your knee and a knife to take off any rough parts and shape them.



The 'bool' forms the top rim of the basket. This is made a hazel rod, which is steamed for 20 minutes and then bent into an oval shape.

When the spelks and taws have been dressed and the bool formed it is time to start to weave the swill.



## This is a day in my life as an apprentice swiller...

My day starts at 6.30am. I don't like mornings so its hard to get up in the dark in winter but in summer I'm usually woken by the sun and our noisy cockerel. I have a wash and clean my teeth, have breakfast and a cup of tea and get my tools ready for the day.

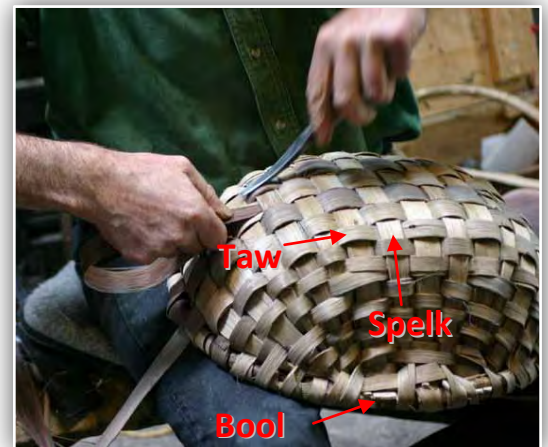
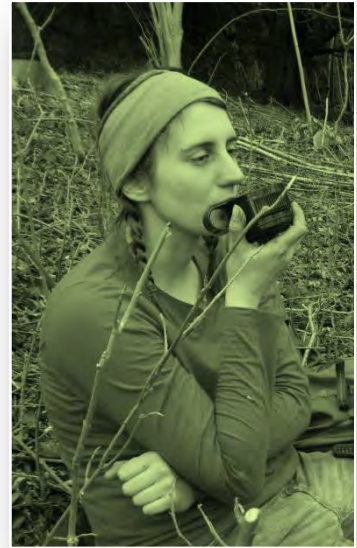
I will have put thin pieces of oak we call spelks and taws in the river to soak the night before. I weight them down with rocks so they do not get washed away.

As oak is a very tough wood, soaking it keeps it pliable and makes it possible to weave in and out to make a basket.

When I get it out of the river I wrap it in an old blanket so that it stays damp all day while I use it. Then I set off to Owen's house to weave with him.

I'm still learning so I need Owen's help and advice. Swills have a set pattern to follow which is quite complex. Spelks are fixed to the rim or bool to form ribs of the swill. Taws are then weaved in and out of the spelks to form the basket. Owen has learnt lots of useful tips over the years. He shows me these and it makes the weaving process a lot easier master.

Owen can make 3 baskets in a day, I can make 1 in a day if I work really hard.



## A Day in the life of Lorna an apprentice Swiller

A swiller has to rely on people buying his or her baskets to earn a living.

Felling the trees and preparing the materials is all unpaid in the hope that the final product will sell. This relies on people valuing this traditional craft and the beauty of the baskets.



Although alternatives might seem cheaper, a swill can be easily repaired and can last a lifetime.

Owen attends many craft shows and demonstrates swill making many weekends in a year to promote his craft and to advertise and sell his products.

Without craftspeople like Owen, this tradition would be forgotten and lost forever.



Woodlands need lots of management from one year to the next so that they keep healthy and produce good quality wood for crafts like swill making. This type of woodland management is also good for a whole range of animals, birds, butterflies, flowers and ferns.



I think I am very lucky being an apprentice swiller. Not only do I get to keep a local traditional craft from dying out, I am also helping to sustain some wonderful woodland and all the creatures that live there.

## **A Day in the life of Lorna an apprentice Swiller**

**Using the information from the 'Day in the life of Lorna an apprentice Swiller', think about the following questions:**

1. Where does Owen the last professional Swiller live – can you find it on Google maps?
2. What is an apprentice?
3. Why are there not as many swillers today as there were in times past?
4. What trees are felled to make swills – can you identify any of these in your school ground?
5. Why does Lorna need to keep the spelks and taws wet?
6. How long does it take Lorna to make a swill - ?
7. Why will Lorna need to sell the swills she makes?
8. What are the alternatives to buying an oak swill basket?
9. Does it matter if the local traditional craft of making swills dies out?
10. How does the making of swills help rural communities to be sustainable?