

## **'Willow Basketry' - Bernard Graves 1998**

I would like to introduce to you willow basketry. Among the primitive early crafts, basket making is considered one of the oldest known predating textile weaving, more ancient than the ceramic arts.

Remnants of coiled baskets have been found in the middle East dated at about 10,000 BC. In Africa parts of pots with the imprint of Baskets on them have been dated at 8,000 BC.

Numerous records exist to show that from the earliest times willows have been used for making baskets and hurdles.

Wickerwork fragments were unearthed from the Glastonbury Lake Village 100 BC. And Pliny an early Historian specifically mentions the cultivation of Osiers.

In England the earliest record is dated 1381, and is mentioned in connection with an Basket maker, on early Poll Tax records, in the county of Suffolk. For many centuries right up to the end of the 19th Century there was a basket maker in every large Village.

During the Middle Ages 1570, Basketry reached sufficient importance that the basket makers, along with other craftsmen were organised into guilds, St Julian was taken as their patron. In 1937 the Guild received an even higher status by receiving the Royal Charter. Today the 'Worshipful Company of Basket Makers' is still an active organisation that together with the British 'Basket Makers Association' actively promote the teaching and practice of traditional Basketry and related skills in this country.

The practice of basketry is world-wide and achieved with a wide range of materials. The materials available depend in the first instance on the climate and soil conditions. As soon as people became aware of the need for a container they would have twisted and woven together natural materials and fibres into some sort of basket - perhaps the idea came originally from observing the birds and their nest building techniques.

The particular materials available in any region would have influenced the styles and the way Basketry techniques have developed in different countries.

In some countries coiled or platted baskets as in tropical climates made use fine Grasses, roots and even leaves.

In the far East Japan and China, Bamboo and Cane are the Traditional materials. They are used whole or split to make finer very technically complex baskets.

In other places, in the so called temperate areas, such as we live in Northern Europe and much of America, stronger thicker materials like willows or other more woody plant materials were used and developed. In Europe particularly it is the Willow that has given rise to the technique of putting a basket together by what is called the 'Stake - and - Strand' method.

Other traditional materials are various woods cleaved into Splints' for 'Frame and Slatted' baskets.

Travel between Continents meant that the different skills were passed on and mixed with other cultures and so developing the techniques further.

However inspite of Basketry being a very ancient Craft it is in only comparatively recent times 1800 AD that we have any records of the cultivation of suitable materials.

Throughout the 19th Century Willow growing flourished certain regions of Britain but then went into serious decline with the advent of man made materials such as cardboard and then plastics for carriers and the importation of cheaper foreign made baskets.

The traditional willow growing areas in Britain are Somerset, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Nottinghamshire, Staffordshire, Berkshire, Suffolk and Norfolk.

All areas that enjoy a reasonably mild climate with a higher than average rain fall and fertile soils. In Somerset areas of low land are suitable because of the well maintained ditches and drainage systems to keep the land from becoming water logged.

Although Willows will grow almost anywhere they do favour certain conditions to grow neat long straight 'Rods'. They require fertile lowland sites with deep well drained soils especially Clay and silt mixtures. They do not like acidic which usually results from stagnant water in poorly drained soils or Peaty conditions.

Today there has been a revival of the industry not so much of the Basket making factories that used to provide all the basket requirements for the house hold and many other industries from the Textile industry to the Coal miners. But in the general public who are tasking up willow basketry particularly baskets made from Hedge row materials as a hobby. The increasing demand for materials has meant that the growers of willows are putting down fields of Willow to meet the increasing demands for this material.

Until the fairly recent advent of man made materials, i.e. cardboard and plastic - willow baskets, almost provided for our every domestic need. From a child's cradle - the famous Moses Basket, to all manner of carrying and container type things. Shopping baskets ,baskets for holding food to even water. Basket work has provided 'Fencing' and 'fish trap's, huts and hats, chariots, chairs and clothing, animal muzzles and cages. Balloon Baskets for air travel and for land transport 'Carriages' made of willow work.

Warriors 'shields' and 'armour' have been made from wicker and during the Second world War aircraft had their heavy seats replaced with ones made of willow so as to increase the 'pay load of the planes.

Basketwork hampers, full of food and ammunition were strong enough to be air-lifted and dropped in Europe. Even the Guards today at Buckingham palace have a Willow structure under their large fury hats called 'Busby' to support them.

Houses were built of basket work, daubed in mud in colder climates like ours, a process known as 'wattle and Daub' and finally to man's final resting place there is a firm today

that has brought back the Willow Coffin in an attempt to save on the world's timber by using a renewable source of material.

## **CRAFTS**

Basketry is just one among many of the Human activities that we call a 'Craft' an activity that combines man's skilful use of his hands and certain Tools and his creative capacity to transform a variety of the materials coming out of nature to serve his domestic and social Cultural needs. Many Crafts have a long and ancient tradition, such as Spinning and Weaving, Wood working Crafts, Pottery, and Metal craft like Copper work or Black Smithing.

However before work specialised, man worked as 'hunter', 'fisherman' or 'farmer', the activities associated with these areas of work can be called the 'Pre - Crafts'.

Given time these activities developed into what we can call the 'Archetypal' Crafts like the Woodcutter, Stonemason, Farmer, Weaver, Potter and Metal smith.

With the development of civilisation human consciousness there was a further step in the development of what could be called the 'Other Crafts'. That is those crafts that specifically were set up to serve the needs of the 'fellow men' Tinker, Tailor Butcher, Baker and candle stick maker. The gesture of serving others also underlies the work and vocations of the Priest, the Nurse and the Teacher.

With the development of the 'Hand Tool' into The Machine as seen in the time we call the industrial Revolution more and more sophisticated crafts could be developed and we have the start of the manufacturing industries that use vast resources of materials and often complex process to convert them to commodities. Generally speaking we could call this the 'Technical Crafts'.

Originally the motivation for 'work was not only to serve what could be seen as the 'human' and 'domestic need' of existence. Man's activity was primarily as a result of his giving thanks to His God, wishing to express reverence and gratitude devotion - to bring offerings to the Gods.

In Christian Mythology with the Fall of Adam and Eve we have depicted the moment in time, The Fall of Man, when Men fell from Grace and we have through the Pain and suffering brought into the world, the origins of Work and Labour in the world.

There are some wonderful Medieval paintings that show Adam having now to 'Till the Soil,' by the Sweat of his brow he has to gain his daily Bread' and Eve is shown working a Distaff, a simple spinning tool, to make thread in order to make clothes to be made into clothes.

At the same time however 'Independent consciousness', the ability to know between Right and Wrong and man's most cherished attribute, that of Freedom could also start to enter into human existence. Man could in freedom rise from his Creature state to that of Creator to continue in the path and work of his Divine Creator and maker.

In some of man's earliest recorded art work in the so called cave paintings we have depicted the symbol of the hand. All work is accomplished by Human Hands, perhaps the one organ that most separates us from the animal kingdom.

Today we have only a dim memory or sometimes a glimpse that the 'hand' was an organ of 'Sense' for perceiving the world and of the 'Self' (No animal can do this). Again only through what happened at the Fall of Man did a sacrifice occur that enabled the Hand to be put to the service of the Earth giving rise to the birth of Craft work.

In German the word 'Handwerk' Meaning Craft indicates that the hand enables man to create, to do work. The hand is a physical instrument, used as a tool. But in contrary to animals, which can build and create marvellous forms and structures out of what we call instinct, the human hand is Free not patterned into some fixed habit, free to Give and Take and more over can be used to express Human Feelings.

In brief we can say that Craft means: To give expression to an idea (which exists in the non physical domain which we can also call the Spiritual domain) into the earthly materials. I.e. Spirit into Matter. This is a fundamental Christian principle and indicates the relationship of the practising of Craft to the Development of Morality. Which one could say has more to do with doing that it has to blindly obeying a set rules or religious dogma. With all 'doing', in all work comes the possibility for serving 'Needs' and taking responsibility for ones actions.

The Crafts had their kind of culmination, their height and fulfilment in the late Middle Ages. In the great cathedral buildings of Europe we see the coming together of many Craftsmen in a wonderful example of mans ingenuity his thoughtfulness wisdom and technical ability to master the natural resistance of materials.

In all Craft Disciplines to preserve their skills and knowledge and to ensue the right kind of Training. Craft and Trade Guilds were set up. Apart from maintaining the skills of the Craft, the practical knowledge were also concerned for the Spiritual development and Ancient Mystery knowledge associated with their Craft and work.

Today traditional Hand Craft work is only Professionally practised by a relatively few persons. It may be an activity in various schools or may provide a useful and meaningful means to introducing those with special needs to work in the Training Centres or indeed be the basis for work as with your weaving work here in Delrow.

To the ancient Indian woman, basket making was a work of love, baskets were made for people to mark specific occasions, marriage, a birth, a death. The baskets belonged only to one person and when they died the basket was destroyed, so that the 'soul' of the basket would accompany the dead persons spirit.

The wisdom of the crafts and that 'secret knowledge' which they can impart is well illustrated, albeit in an imaginative way, in some of the Fairy Tales.

### King Thrushbeard – Grim's Fairy Tales

'Haughty Princess'

She is given the tasks to perform 3 crafts- Basketry - Spinning - Selling Pots.

- Why is basket making mentioned?

- To answer this we have to ask - what is basket making for the human being?

What is a basket?

What is it for?

It is an enlargement of the hand, with handle I can bring into balance as I usually do within the palm of my hand.

By making baskets I enlarge and balance something, my hands

The hands belong to this middle realm of the human organism, along with chest, heart and lungs. This middle realm of the 3 fold man, we would agree is the seat of my emotions, my feelings. Can we imagine that the Haughty Princess is made to start with basketry for she first has to bring into balance her rather unrestrained emotional and self centred behaviour.

She has to find 'Inner Balance' before she is asked to 'spin' - thoughts useful ideas.

Basketry - Feelings

Pottery - Stand firmly with her feet on the ground.

Here we have a glimpse of the therapeutic effect different crafts can have. This is the 'Hidden Secret'.

As craftsman I am striving for qualities the 'balance', 'beauty' - uprightness, honesty, truth, I am exercising these qualities in my work piece, but the true practice of craft not only forms the outer shape, but as important is what is formed within, in ourselves.

Apart from any particular therapeutic role the craft may offer. The actual 'processes' of work and involvement in any craft engages us in a 4 fold manner from conceptual - realised product.

### 4 Fold Process

#### 1) PREPARATION

{Design	‘	Conceptual'
{Ideation – spiritual)		Thinking activity
{Preparation of Material		
{Plan ahead		

2) **ACTION** - Activity

The craftsperson brings his/her hands to bear upon the materials - workpiece, and works out of the mental picture that he/she has formed.  
‘Activity engages my will’

3) **JUDGEMENT**

As I proceed I exercise judgement as to the shape and form.  
‘Engage my feeling’

4) **CONCLUSION**

Finally I step back and look at what I have created. ‘Combination’

Has it worked? Is it balanced - I draw conclusion and is the nature with anything I make it will always fall short of the Ideal! Can give rise to motivation to try again to do better.

**I. Preparation and working Practise**

**1. Harvesting: In Nature**

Cutting, sorting to size  
Experience of living wood  
Drying Process - elements involved.

**2. Processing : Boiling - buff**

Pitting, stripping for white  
Brown, skin left on.

**3. Selection of materials for basket**

- a) Sorting - thickness ] Tactile
- b) Grading - length ] Skills - sense, touch
- c) Counting - number ] Sight

**4. Familiarise with willow rods.**

Elements that gave character to the work.  
Distinctive smell, dampness to workshop  
All important stimulation of all the senses.  
Water willow wet  
Mellow fellow mallow  
Dry rods brittle - wet - supple - elastic - strong

## **II. Working Process**

### **1. BASE**

#### **i) Forming slath**

conscious activity

exactness, cross

ii) Tie slath rods together

spiral around and outwards

cross becomes a star form

) 2 x 3 rods - 6 > 4 groups of 3=12

Aspect of Hidden number

### **2. STAKE UP - Slype**

Cutting away conscious activity

Demonstrate movement - sympathy and antipathy

Gesture

Sun rays - Centre Radii - outgoing - chaos

### **3. PRICKING UP >**

Peace achieved in gathering it all up

- suggestion of basket - body, skeleton, structure, chest cage

### **4. UPSETT**

- ensure that stakes go in the direction you want them to go.

Rhythmic weaving left to right 3 rods

### **5. WEAVING SIDE**

- pattern - dream off, sleep, shape - judging space formed inside basket appears 'I' in space outside basket experience.

'I' in vertical stakes life in flow of weaving of events destiny.

### **6. TOP CROWN**

- Border down

-Bottom foot track

### **7. TRIM OFF ALL ENDS**

- Basket appears

END

## **III. Working Gesture**

I believe the working gesture of Willow Basketry lies somewhere between the 3 dimensional work of the potter and the 2 dimensional aspect of weaving.

Basketry involves the rhythmical aspect of weaving but takes this into the vertical direction, into space.

1. Potter - The working gesture of the potter is leaning over his work piece and working from above, calling his pot upwards.
2. Weaver - the weaver works here in the flat space in front of him.
3. The basket maker - he sits here with his work piece in front of him - opposite himself

The basket acquires its own Centre, an enclosed space. It mirrors very much the middle realm of the basket maker, where the ribs and chest cavity form a basket like space - containing the rhythmical system, in the beat of heart and lung. In the basket the heart beat is transferred to the rhythm of the weaving (In, out, I, 2, 3, left hand).

The basket maker also in the changing body positions goes from a semi-prone position - dream consciousness - into a more upright perhaps even standing position - vertical - awake consciousness.

The very characteristics of the willow being hard, tough, tense yet elastic, flexible. warm, wet. alive - all these qualities work on those working with the material.

In my experience these very qualities and working gesture pose an appropriate challenge to most adolescents. Youngsters who after all would wish to acquire some of these innate qualities of the willow. The willows have a natural uprightness, having inward strength and resistance. Yet they are at the same time elastic, bendable, flexible. Is this not what we wish to develop as mature adults.

It needs not only physical strength to work with willows but also the WILL to want to do something with the material, to make it obey ones own will.

The schooling of the will is the practising of craft in the 'ideal' to imprint, to express an idea in the material and in so doing help to bring to birth an aspect of the self within the Soul of Man.