

Musgrove Willow has been
growing willow on the
Somerset Levels for over
100 years. Photo: Musgrove Willow



Where the willow grows

For centuries, the Somerset Levels have provided the perfect conditions for willow to thrive. Today, this versatile crop and ancient craft is still practiced by artists and craftspeople and has even featured on the TV show *Rivals*

WORDS: Catherine Welton

‘Perfect timing, I’ve just paused for a cup of tea while making a dragonfly!’ laughs Jo Sadler, when I ask if it’s a good time for a chat about her willow sculptures.

Jo has been creating wildlife from willow – everything from flying owls to leaping hares, majestic stags to mischievous ponies – for over ten years, after a visit to Coates English Willow ignited her interest in the traditional Somerset craft. ‘Through a barn door, I glimpsed a workshop taking place, they were making deer and it was like a lightning bolt for me! I put my name down for the next available class.’

So began a passion that would see her swap gardening for a willow sculpture business, a business that has drawn in her husband, Ian, and daughters Tori and Hazel too. ‘Quite frankly it’s an addiction, it’s so uplifting, you lose yourself in it,’ she explains.

Part of the appeal lies in the willow itself, which starts off as a dry stick and has to be soaked and mellowed out before it can be worked with. ‘It’s a fascinating material, because different ones will do different things for you. You need to work with the willow; each whip has its own feel. You pick up the willow and you know whether it’s ready or not, and if it’s ready, dinner can wait, the Hoovering gets abandoned and the dogs know they’re not going out, because you’ve only got a short time or you lose the inspiration and the flexibility.’



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Coates English Willow was established in 1819.

Photo: Coates English Willow

Sculpting with the willow is an unusual combination of science and art. ‘There’s a bit of mathematics; you’re working out how to sew with it. Each piece of willow is like a line I’m drawing in my head, so it needs to be fairly predictable. You also need a good imagination, and the patience for stepping back and looking at it a lot.’

Willow has been a distinctive feature of Somerset’s landscape for thousands of years, with the wet, low-lying Levels providing the perfect conditions for it to thrive. In a world before plastic, willow was traditionally used for basketry, due to its unique strength and lightness.

The Musgrove family have been growing willow on the Somerset Levels for almost 100 years. ‘We grow more than 60 varieties of willow, across around 200 acres,’ says Ellen Musgrove, co-director of Musgrove Willow. ‘It’s one of the most sustainable natural materials available; it’s a renewable crop that regrows from the same stool every year, captures carbon as it grows and provides valuable habitats for wildlife.’

Willow ‘stools’ are planted during the winter, using cuttings; once established these can produce new rods

The reputation and quality of Somerset's willow is prized around the world

every year, for decades. Over the winter, the plant is dormant and can be harvested without damaging it. Once harvested, the rods are sorted by length, variety and quality, before being dried, boiled and stripped or kept fresh, depending on how they'll be used.

Willow's versatility is one of the qualities it's prized for. 'There are very few natural materials that are as flexible, durable and sustainable as willow,' says Ellen. 'It can be woven, sculpted, planted as living willow and used in everything from baskets and fencing to garden structures, public art and handcrafted coffins. Selecting the right willow for the job is an important part of what we do.'

This versatility means that willow has been able to move with the times, adapting to society's changing demands, as Nicola Coate explains. Coates English Willow was established in 1819, just after the moors were drained, and has been in Nicola's husband Jonathan's family ever since. 'They've been innovative and moved

with the times. When baskets became less in demand after plastics came around, the company started making charcoal and then quickly responded to the living willow trend and also started making coffins. Now we do the tourism side too. It's become very diverse which makes us resilient as a business.'

Such is the reputation and quality of Somerset's willow, that it is prized around the world. 'Somerset willow lasts for a long time, we've had washing baskets in that people can't bear to part with, but the handles have gone and they want to know if we can repair them, which to a certain extent we can,' says Nicola. 'Our charcoal goes all over the world, demand is growing for the coffins, and we even made some polo posts that were briefly on the TV series Rivals!'

Workshops where people new to the craft can try their hand at producing a sculpture of their own are proving increasingly popular, and are another way that businesses like Musgrove, Coates and Jo Sadler are diversifying.





Jo Sadler has been creating wildlife from willow for over 10 years. Photo: Victoria Bishop

Jo advises starting with a beginners' class to get a feel for it. 'When you're with me, I can see how your hands work and how your mind works, and how you're approaching the willow,' she says. 'You have to become one with your willow – it sounds daft but it's true! You have to stop trying to be in control and submit to it a bit.'

'People are often worried about how it's going to turn out. But a sculpture is personal, it reflects who you were on the day. So come as yourself and let it happen, that way you immerse yourself properly in it and learn the most.'

Of all the sculptures that Jo has created over the years, she has many favourites but one that really stands out. 'We had to make a two-tone cow for a place in Amsterdam, it was white with brown patches and had to look like a particular breed, so needed to be spot on. When it was finished, we took it to a nearby farm to get some nice photos of it, and the farmer and his son came to have a look. The farmer said, 'Jo, they're fantastic udders' and I was tickled pink, for a dairy herdsman to say that I thought "I'm very proud of that!"' ●



Jo Sadler. Photo: Jo Sadler Willow



Willow weaving workshops allow people to try their hand at this ancient craft. Photo: Jo Sadler Willow

UPCOMING WORKSHOPS

Jo Sadler Willow

Flying Owls at Mellow View/
Winsham, November 5
.....
Deer, Musgrove Willows, November 21
.....
Stag, Wells, November 2
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For more information:
josadlerwillow.com

Musgrove Willows

Willow Pig or Sheep, October 8
.....
Willow Swallows and Bird
Feeders, December 2
.....
Pine Cone Stars, December 3
.....

For more information:
musgrovewillows.co.uk

Coates English Willow

Beginners / Intermediate
Basket Making, October 17
.....
Willow Robin, October 19
.....
Willow Deer, November 26
.....

For more information:
coatesenglishwillow.co.uk