

Britain's brilliant Basketry

Norman Miller celebrates the Sussex makers of one of our most historic crafts

Clockwise from far left: Annemarie O'Sullivan is a contemporary basketmaker; Annemarie harvests willow rods every year to make her baskets; Annemarie's husband Tom in the studio they built together

Basketmaking is one of humanity's oldest crafts, dating back at least 12,000 years. Now a surge of interest in eco-friendly traditional craftwork is sparking a resurgence of interest across Britain in the beguiling variety of these beautiful practical objects.

Many are linked to specific places and uses, along with a resonant roster of names. Scottish fishing heritage alone offers sculls, murlins, rips, kishies, creels and crans, while traditional Lancashire baskets include swills, spelks and spales. The Sussex trug – inspired by the shape of Saxon coracle boats – was so admired by Queen Victoria, she gave it a Royal Warrant.

Sussex, in South East England remains a basketry hotspot, and it's here that Annemarie O'Sullivan (annemariesullivancourses.com) harvests willow rods (withies) each January from a watery half-acre bed at Horam on the River Ouse, turning them into globally acclaimed baskets.

I meet Annemarie in a cosy wooden studio she and husband Tom McWalter have built by their centuries-old house in the East Sussex village of Isfield, framed by downland meanders of the rivers Ouse and Ucknorth near the medieval county town of Lewes.

Walls display diverse creations woven primarily with willow, but complemented by pieces in chestnut, sweet hazel, and bamboo. Alongside baskets, Annemarie creates more abstract work, including startling twiggy light shades and one-off sculptural pieces – such as a recent large piece for a gallery in the hip Somerset town of Bruton.

But despite the status it enjoys as museum-quality craft, Annemarie insists she is happiest when her baskets are used: “to get crumbs in them, to get worn, to get picked up by greasy hands. It does feel really important that they have a life.”

Annemarie's awareness of basketry's utilitarian aspect extends to an open-mindedness around the



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“Basketmaking originated from people foraging materials from their locality”

diverse materials it draws on. “The brilliant thing is that people used what they had, and they used what was accessible,” says Annemarie. “So, if you go to mountainous regions, it’s all split wood, and if you go to coastal regions there’s much more rush. Skill sets and materials that really relate to landscape.”

For fellow Sussex basketmaker Ruby Taylor those roots lie in a 70-acre slice of woodland near Lewes. Here she founded the eco-craft educational collective Native Hands in 2010 to run courses (nativehands.co.uk) teaching people how to craft baskets from materials such as reeds and brambles.

“I love the variety that comes from using the humble, often overlooked plants,” Ruby says. “There’s a tradition of weaving with wild plants

– all basketmaking originated from people foraging materials from their locality.” She also highlights the wellbeing that can be found in fashioning baskets. “Taking time out of daily life to be creative in the woods gives a sense of space and connection,” she says.

Passing on knowledge of the traditions of basketmaking is vital to Annemarie, who offers both paid apprenticeships and courses. In 2024, she’s even offering a course in Colorado, in the US.

The Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Trust (QUEST), meanwhile, has funded initiatives such as trug-making apprenticeships, based at basketry beacons like the venerable Thomas Smith’s Trug Shop (sussextrugs.com) in Herstmonceux, East Sussex.

A much heavier, older form of

this iconic basket (hewn from solid timber) was widely used across Sussex to measure grain and liquids until the 1600s. It was Thomas Smith who reinvented the basket in Victorian times as a still sturdy, but much lighter form made from sweet chestnut frames with wide willow strips. He also made the trugs that beguiled Queen Victoria at the 1851 Great Exhibition in London – and reputedly walked 60 miles from Sussex to Buckingham Palace to deliver her order personally!

More recently, Worthing-based basketmaker Stephen Caulfield (sussexwillowbaskets.co.uk) provided VIP baskets in the shape of picnic hampers for the leaders of 28 countries attending the 2019 NATO 70th anniversary summit in London. Another of his specialities is the skep – a centuries-old traditional straw coiled basket designed to be turned upside down to create a home for bees, with a small aperture in the side for them to fly in and out.

Other Sussex makers are evolving the county’s basketry tradition for the 21st century. Julie Gurr (willowweaver.com) works in both traditional and sculptural willow basketry from her base in Iden near Rye “I spent years learning traditional basketmaking before I was able to experiment,” she explains. “There are so many different techniques developed for different materials that you can play with, adapting them to the materials you have access to. For me, basketry as a heritage craft led me to artistry.”

So perhaps Annemarie O’Sullivan is right when she says she sees a growing appreciation of basketry in all its forms across Britain, “I think we’re at a real turning point,” she says, simply. ■

Sussex Trug courses run regularly at different locations across Sussex. sussextrugs.com/trug-courses

Above: Ruby Taylor’s Native Hands courses teach people to make baskets from natural materials, like this one made from wild grass