A close-up photograph of a light-colored, woven willow basket. The basket is made of thin, light-brown willow strips woven in a regular, grid-like pattern. The texture is smooth and uniform. The entire image is framed by a thin, light pink border.

A SUMMER OF SKINNED WILLOW



LEARNING TO SKEIN WILLOW

This booklet was produced at the end of a Summer of learning and practicing the skill of skeining willow.

My training was made possible thanks to the Heritage Crafts Association grant for endangered craft skills, and Monica Cass of par-avion co.

This funding has provided me the opportunity to obtain handmade specialist tools and hone a craft skill that I aim to improve upon, and champion in the future.

I am still very much a beginner, however the act of sharing knowledge is so important, and I hope that you find this booklet to be informative and interesting.

THE PROCESS

Willow skeining is a traditional craft, most likely to have originated in Germany in the 15th century. It involves the process of splitting white willow and shaving it to a desired width and thickness so to produce a unified material to weave with.

The specific tools needed in order to produce willow skeins are a cleave, upright and shave. The finished product is a strand of willow that is rounded on one side, and flat on the other.

The process of skeining willow is time consuming and requires a great deal of skill in order to minimise waste. Few products are made utilising skeined willow, as the preparation of material is slow and exacting, with an abundance of cheaper alternatives available.

It is for this reason that Willow skeining is currently on the Heritage Crafts Association's red list of endangered craft, with only a few known practitioners currently making in the U.K...



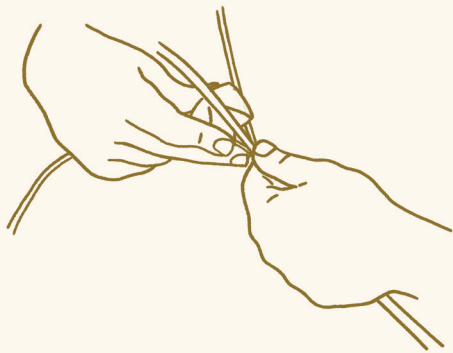
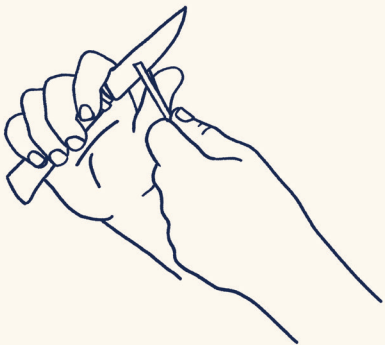


WHAT YOU NEED

- a bolt (bundle) of white 7ft long white Buff Willow
- a pair of secateurs
- a knife
- a bit of old swimming cap and a piece of fabric
- a cleave, upright and shave
- time and patience

STARTING OFF

In order to prepare for splitting your willow, first the tips need to be cut off. Using your secateurs, cut roughly a foot or so down the rod, preferably at the point of a nodule (a black dot where an offshoot grew).



SPLITTING THE WILLOW

Using your knife, cut a cross into the thin top end of your willow rod. This is to help aid the cleave in starting a clean split of three. This is the goal, as you are then getting more skeins from one rod of willow.

Once you have your incisions, manouvre your cleave into the centre and apply pressure down the rod, keeping your other hand gripped firmly and closely to the point of splitting (so to remain in control).

N.B. Once I mastered keeping control of the split, my breakages and waste became less and less!

The aim is to to split the willow right down the pith (the soft inner core of the willow rod), and you will know you are doing this well when there is a satisfying sound of 'ripping' rather than 'cracking'...



SHAVING THE WILLOW

Before jumping into using the shave and upright, it is helpful to remove as much of the pith as possible with your knife. Using your knee for pressure, place the willow on your knee and run the pith side of the willow along the blade, removing as much excess pith as you can.

Once the pith has been removed, the process of shaving the willow skeins down to a unified thickness and width begins. This is the most time consuming part of the process, and requires a bit of strength to tug the willow through the shave. Using a bit of old swimming cap is helpful to keep a grip of the skein whilst pulling.

With a bit of practice, the depth of each shave becomes greater, requiring less pulls and making the process faster. You are also left with satisfying curls of willow 'offcuts', which make great packaging or fire lighters.





USING THE WILLOW

The skeins that I have produced thus far, I am proud to say, have been used to weave the seats of custom made par-avion co. stools.

Through utilising traditional craft techniques in modern designs that are in production, the aim is to provide a contemporary example of these skills, resulting in them remaining relevant to current tastes and style.

Working with such time intensive raw materials provides an extra level of craftsmanship to par avion products, and I hope to utilise and expand on my skillset to develop new ways of using skeined willow in order to maintain a declining craft skill - and hopefully inspire others to consider it as a material of choice.

