

The baskets

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Introduction

Knowledge of medieval baskets is small and must be a matter of conjecture, except where one or two writers of the time describe them or where they are shown in contemporary illuminated manuscripts or occur rarely in wood engravings. Very few actual baskets survive, for when worn out or worm-eaten they were usually burnt or thrown away, their preservation on the High Street site being an accident only made possible by the unusual soil conditions of the later 13th-century middens and occupation layers from which they were recovered.

Throughout the Middle Ages, baskets were evidently the lowly but universal servants of merchants, travellers, farmers, fishermen, gardeners and housewives. Alexander Neckam, writing c1180, records: 'A peasant spending his life in the country, wishing to provide for poverty and old age, should have many kinds of baskets (*calathi, cophini, sportes*). Nor should he be without a willow basket for pressing clabber, in which milk saved from the milking, pressed frequently, may be transformed into cheese'. Other requirements were a seedlep (a sower's basket) and a wine strainer basket (Holmes 1952, 200). Alexander also tells us that in the kitchens, cellars and storerooms of a castle there would be baskets of many shapes (ibid, 93).

Large circular baskets were used for bread in big houses and refectories; they were finely made so that crumbs did not fall through, and the best cost as much as a winnowing fan, always an expensive item because of its complicated construction. Charcoal baskets were also 'great' and circular but slightly cheaper though they must also have been close-randed to hold the dust (Rogers 1866, v, 691). In kitchens, meat baskets were used to receive joints from the butcher and to store the meat. They may have been as large or larger than those for bread and charcoal but cost less as they were not so fine (ibid, v, 699).

Baskets were relatively cheap. In 1271 at Maldon, Surrey, a seedlep cost 1½d and in 1292 four baskets were had for 4d and two corbels (panniers) for a shilling (ibid, ii, 566, 568). Baskets with no uses are also given, and by 1542 comes the description 'great baskets' (ibid, iii, 571, 576). The accounts of Elizabeth of York (1502) list 'four baskets with covers and four locks for the Queen, cost 4s'; 'a great trussing basket' (for carrying a large parcel of goods) was cheaper and there was another great basket for the Queen's stuff (Harland 1856, ii, 434). The Shuttleworth Accounts of 1582–1621 are more explicit, entries of baskets being chiefly those used for linen and other clothes:

'a baskete to laie linnen clothes in for my ladie' and 'towe basket wisketts', probably laundry baskets (ibid, i, 62, 102). Many in these accounts were used for carrying merchandise on packhorses, and there were also back baskets for humans to carry fuel, turves, earth and stones as is still the case in mountain areas of France, Italy, Spain and the Balkan countries.

Every village had its own basketmaker owning land near a stream or river where he grew his willows. His family worked with him and he often employed labour and took apprentices. Perth would have had several basketmakers. They would not have made the wattles or hurdles, so many of which have been preserved on the High Street site. This was a separate trade using underwood such as hazel, birch and willow, not basket willows, though the pollard willow rods may have been used. Simple baskets were also made by agricultural workers and farmers and their families to employ the short winter days. Coarse coiled work (like Cat No 267/A05–0218) could also be made at home.

Coiled basketry is rarely made in Britain today, with the exception of the well-known Orkney chairs which have wooden frames and coiled straw backs and arms. Basket beds and chairs were in use during the Middle Ages: unfortunately their portrayal in illuminated manuscripts is inevitably stylised and it is impossible to do more than guess how they were made, apparently as much by the carpenter as by the basketmaker.

The baskets (Illus 217)

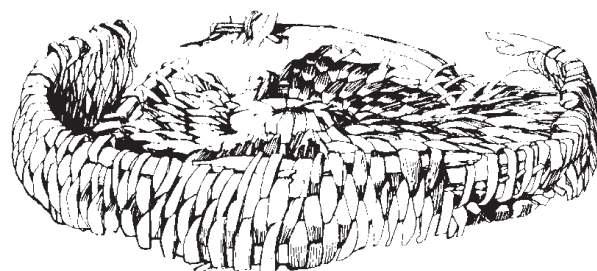
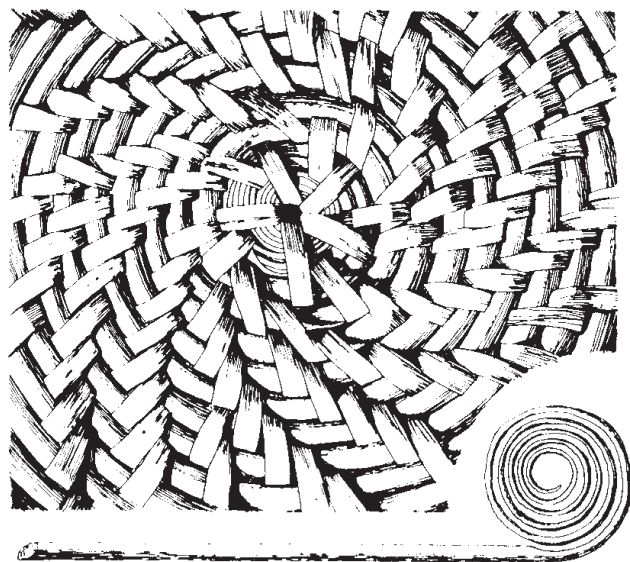
Three baskets, the wooden base of a basket and four examples of what could be the remains of 'basket handles' were recovered from the excavation. Of these eight examples of basketwork, three came from Rig VII, two each from Rigs V and VI and one had lost its labels during conservation. Although one of the 'basket handles' was recovered from a layer that dated from before 1150, four of the others were found in contexts that dated from the second half of the 13th century.

Of the three baskets discovered during the excavation, two (Cat Nos 267/A05–0218 and 373/A05–0044) were coiled. Little can be said of the more fragmentary of these two, Cat No 267/A05–0218, except to note that shapes of coiled straw like this are usually fairly simple, and that baskets of this type are still in use in the more remote mountainous districts of Europe. They wear well, cost little, but are laborious to make.

The other coiled basket, Cat No 373/A05–0044 (Illus 217), is of more interest for it has been made by the same

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<i>Cat/Accession</i>	<i>Object type</i>	<i>Area</i>	<i>Rig</i>	<i>Feature</i>	<i>Phase</i>
South Sector					
6/A8661	Basket handle?	2	VI	MC013, T3747 & T3757	Phase Ic
171/A05–0238	Basket handle?	9	VII	M13	IIg–IIIb
202/A8523	Basket handle?	3	V	M6b	IIg–IIId
211/A5952 & A6010)	Basket: hamper	4	V	B3 (North), Occupation (1a), MW2227	IVa,IVaa
267/A05–0218	Basket	7	VI	M1.4f	IVc
367/A05–0180	Basket base	7	VII	M9a	IVc,IVcc
373/A05–0044 & A05–0066	Basket	9	VII	M9a	IVc,IVcc
North/South Sectors					
672/A–	Basket handle?				



Illus 217 Basket Cat No 373.

method as the Beaufort basket which is now kept in the Priest's House Museum at Wimborne Minster, Dorset (Wright 1983, 179–80). The latter, a leather-covered, flat, round-lidded wicker basket, 267mm in diameter, was found in the Chain Library of the Minster, together with three wooden boxes, all containing deeds which date from 1276 to 1500. These do, however, not necessarily date the boxes. Although no analysis of this basket material has yet been made, a set of notes on it was published (Le Fleming 1940). Like the Perth example, it is probably coiled willow or hazel sewn with split or skeined willow. The tooled design on the leather cover is a repetition of a *fleur-de-lys* and a lion which are heraldic charges of the Beaufort family, who were closely connected with the Minster (and by chance with the Scottish royal family through Lady Joan Beaufort, wife of James I). The letter M is painted inside both basket and lid and suggests that it may have been the property of Lady Margaret Beaufort, afterwards mother of Henry VII, or of her mother, also

Margaret. This would date it to sometime between 1430 and 1509, 150–200 years later than the Perth basket.

The method of making the centre of the base of both baskets is identical (though the Wimborne one is not domed), and so is the coiling of the sides, despite the Wimborne basket having an elaborately sewn border, slightly recessed so that the lid fits over it tightly. Altogether it is in much better condition having been kept in a wooden chest and covered with leather. The size of the coil and the width of the sewing skeins are identical. Though the method of starting the coil is unusual, it is by no means rare.

The only tools needed to make this kind of basket are a sharp knife or a bodkin or point of metal or bone. All the material would be worked in a damp, therefore pliable, condition. In the case of Cat No 373/A05–0044 it was begun with a set of thin slivers, five or six in number, placed in position and oversewn with skeins. This was to simulate the sewing of the rest of the

basket. The actual core of a willow rod was introduced among the slivers and coiled round this central boss. As we have seen, this method of starting a bottom is not unknown and was probably resorted to in this case because a whole willow rod is not pliable enough to make sharp turns without kinking. The lengths of skein used for the Perth basket were quite short because so many ends are now visible. The bodkin would be used to make a hole in a preceding skein when enlarging the oval base. In a straight piece of sewing the skein is sewn into the gaps between the sewing of the previous round.

Cat No 211/A5952, a large basket or hamper, was quite different both in construction and in size. Very large baskets were used during the Middle Ages for storage (as in this case) and transport, for example panniers etc. The *Durham Account Rolls* (i, 95) in 1476–7 record four pairs of *calathorum magnorum* costing two shillings, and the Pauline Epistles (Bod Lib, MS Auct D.1.13, f1) include a very stylised illustration of St Paul being let down the walls of Damascus in such

a supply basket (Acts 9, 23–25; II Corinthians 11, 33). The same scene appears in various French manuscripts.

Cat No 367/A05–0180 is the fragment of a circular wooden basket base which still retains some of the holes through which the upright rods would have been fixed. Woven basketry is only rarely preserved on archaeological sites but Cat No 367/A05–0180 is one of an increasing number of solid basket bases which are being found, in various shapes and sizes (cf Morris 1984a, 100, Figs 77–78). Parallels come from Colwick in Nottinghamshire, and Dublin (ibid, Fig 78, M173, and M166–M169), York (Morris 2000, 2100, 2271, 2272 Fig 1103, 2273, 2412–13) and Gloucester (Morris 1979, Fig 16, 7–8).

Cat Nos 6/A8661, 171/A05–0238 and 202/A8523 are fragments of rods/twigs twisted together to form a possible length which may have acted as a handle for a basketry vessel. Four sets of similar objects have been found at the Coppergate and ABC Cinema sites in York (Morris 2000, 2271, 2272 Fig 1103, 2273, 2413).

