

Eight of us were on Mary Butcher's Fine Square Work Course at the Barony in West Kilbride, part of this year's Scottish Basketmakers Circle Autumn Gathering. There was a range of experience in the group, including some who had never attempted square work before. Most of us wanted to improve our square work, these techniques being amongst some of the hardest in basketmaking.

As a lucky recipient of a Basketmakers' Association Study Bursary I was particularly interested in how Mary would teach this course. I have been teaching basketmaking for about eight years, wanted to feel more confident and acquire some good tips for teaching beginners these techniques. Crucially Mary was teaching us the 'W.I.' method, apparently invented in the 50s by someone (anyone know who?) in a W.I. group, as an easier method of including the side stakes. Indeed, it is a much easier method than the traditional English way of piercing the side sticks, and consists of weaving the side stakes into the base as it grows. So I decided to make my two baskets in this technique with blunt corners. The first a rectangle and then the added challenge of a square square for the second! Also I decided to do two different borders, one four behind two and the other, a four behind one. These will be demonstration baskets for future students, showing the easiest border on square corners. I took lots of short videos of Mary teaching.

One of my faults that I was keen to ask about was the bulging that occurs on the right side of the long edges. Mary assured me that it is simply a matter of being right handed and that left-handers get a bulge the other side. She says it starts in the opening waling and must be watched carefully and corrected for. She also has a technique for pulling the border stakes at the right hand corner while pushing in the side weaving to help correct bulging.

Mary's technique for keeping square is to have a measure stick for the long and the short side, and on blunt corners this reaches from the outer edge of for example the right hand stake on one side to the right hand one on the other. We also discussed making jigs for large square cornered baskets with two sticks nailed in the centre to be nailed to the corners and two more sticks nailed to the original sticks cross wise to stop them narrowing.

Mary has no snobbishness about basketry techniques. She pointed out that some look down on both the W.I. method and the four behind one border but she is very happy to teach and recommend their use. She assured us that the W.I. method was suitable for any size of basket.

Mary taught the technique of a notch for those wanting a letter tray and she also demonstrated partitions on another student's bottle basket. Some students chose to focus on the traditional English method and also to use corner posts. One put a handle on hers. So Mary had a wide range of baskets to keep her beady eye on.

Mary's quiet way of teaching and checking out how we were all doing was confidence boosting and reassuring. She is very generous with her knowledge.