

Traditional Basketry Project - Welsh Split Hazel Basket

Summary of Presentation made to the Basketmakers' Association Summer Meet in Ambleside July 2015

I used this presentation as an opportunity to show the DVD *Byd y Crefftwyr* (World of the Craftspeople) which I had obtained from S4C (the Welsh equivalent of Channel 4) in fulfilment of the TBP bursary provided by the Basketmakers' Association.

The DVD focuses on Evan Evans, a retired farmer living in Nant Melai Farm above Llansannan, Denbighshire. It was filmed in 1986. Evan practiced various rural arts and crafts and in the programme Evan wanders the farm with his grandson, Kevin, sharing some of his skills and knowledge.

Early in the programme, Evan cuts a hazel rod and takes it back to his workshop. He makes hazel strips from the rod by cutting into the first growth ring near the butt and then bending it at the point where the strip is lifting away, helping to tease the strip away from the rod with his fingers. Kevin watches as his granddad smooths the back of the strip by drawing it over his knee with the knife blade pressed against it. He has a basket he is just finishing. He adds the new strips to the basket and presents the finished work to his grandson. Evan invites Kevin to test the basket by turning it upside-down and standing on it!

I explained how important it was for me to see these shots of the hazel strips being made. When I and my partner David started trying to make strips we had a lot of failures (which we eventually partly attribute to using rods that were too green or too fast-grown). When we finally had some success at making strips we found it painfully slow and felt unsure about our technique. Seeing these shots let us see that actually our technique was fine and that the process is just very slow! I also explained how I have started to examine the growth rings of a rod before I use it. Sometimes very good-looking rods break almost immediately, probably because they do not have many growth rings. By examining the rod, I can reject any that have fewer than 4 or 5 rings.

The pair then put the basket to use. Evan uses mutton fat and grit on a wooden block to sharpen a scythe, which he uses to cut grass on the verge. Kevin fills the basket with grass and carries it into the stable to feed the horse.

Evan made an agricultural basket in this example. He dressed the back of the strips to improve pliability but did not remove the bark or even trim the frill of bark along the edge of the strips (a time-consuming process). I explain that the bark was usually removed if the basket was for domestic use, as this was considered cleaner and smarter. Evan has minimised the preparation of the strips in this feed basket.

Evan returns to his basketry later in the programme. He shows Kevin some finished baskets; shallow flower baskets with looped handles. He has made them to enter into an Eisteddfod (a Welsh festival of competition in the arts and crafts. Eisteddfodau can be anything from a village to a national event celebrating art, dance, music and poetry and are mostly in the Welsh language.) Evan shows his grandson how he ties in the first ribs for one of these flower baskets.

One of my objectives, as I have researched Welsh hazel basketry in my area, has been to find as many surviving baskets as possible, to discover what sorts of methods were used in their construction and to appreciate the diversity of styles. The basketry in my area was always a smallholder's occupation so there was no standardisation (and no professional record keeping). Unfortunately, Evan's family no longer have any of his baskets. This DVD allowed me to see 3 of his baskets, providing a record of the styles he used for different types and of the contrast with the styles of other makers I have come across.

In the DVD Evan sings a song contrasting the 'old days' when you made most of what you wanted to the modern consumer acquisition of the 'ready-made'.

I also used the bursary to visit two of the local records offices where I searched for information on the local basketry tradition. I failed to find any information relevant to hazel basketry, even in documents relating to local and national eisteddfodau (which had been my main hope of identifying other makers). Scrapbooks showed that eisteddfodau back in the 1960s had already lost basketry as a regular competition. This highlighted for me the low esteem that basketry has been given in everyday life, despite of (or because of) being familiar objects and possibly being a trapping associated with lifestyles that were considered poor or old fashioned. We are lucky that a few family members have prized their basket heirlooms and that some inspired programme maker in the early days of S4C chose Evan Evans as the subject of a whole programme.

Ruth Pybus August 2015