

Not such a basket case

SUE CADE discovers the traditional craft of stave baskets is alive and well on Dartmoor



Devon stave baskets are a rare thing, it seems, requiring a visit to Burncombe Wood near Briddford to talk with John Williamson of Dartmoor Woodcrafts, one of a handful of people still making them.

John and his partner Clare have ten acres of ancient woodland here that they work with their two horses. Jens, a stunning Belgian Fribant heavydraft, and Louis, a handsome gypsy horse.

They have a long term aim to bring these woods back to their ancient state through coppicing, allowing more light in and encouraging a wide range of flora and fauna. It's where they crop ash to make the stave baskets. "Ash bend well and is tough; a young ash tree gives enough wood for a couple of baskets," John explains.

These unusual baskets are made from wooden splints of fir or pine attached to a wooden base, held together by nails and ash bands, with two end staves for the handles. John says: "Traditionally they were used to carry produce like potatoes or apples from the harvest. The size of basket told the farmer how much had been collected."

There were originally nine sizes; the size two carries up to nine kilos while the largest, the size nine basket, holds half a hundredweight of potatoes.

While some moulds exist, John has been busy making what he believes is the first size nine basket maker Jack Roswell of Tiverton died in 1997. Jack made the baskets for around 40 years,

having learnt the craft from his father. Without a reference, John had to guess at the height by taking measurements of existing moulds and scaling them up. He's now applying for funding so he can make all the sizes.

Historically baskets were made on days when the weather wasn't great – and John practices this today. He uses long-established tools he made himself including a shave horse of a style first seen in medieval times to clamp the wood so he can work hands-free.

The design of the draw knives used for shaping the wood "comes from a time before saws". While I watch, John chooses a piece of ash with a knot free section for his next basket. "I'm using a strong piece of wood so the grain remains intact, the process is to cleft rather than saw the wood."

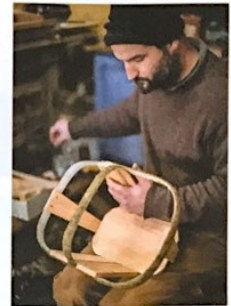
The craft of stave baskets is listed by the Heritage Crafts Association as critically endangered with just a few makers in the UK, and John believes he is the only person at least in the county making the size nine.

Intricate work goes to make each basket, from growing and coppicing of the ash to moulds and assembly, so it's no surprise that baskets are priced at a premium. Far from being a hobby, making Devon stave baskets is an important part of John and Clare's livelihood as they pursue a low impact existence.

John concludes: "Our aim is to make a living from our small woodland and craft-based work, whilst encouraging conservation." dartmoorwoodcraft.co.uk

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DEVON STAVE BASKETS



KEEPING TRADITION BURNING

John and Clare also make 'proper' charcoal which they sell to local farm shops. As 90% of the charcoal used in the UK is imported with some coming from endangered tropical forests, it's an environmentally sensible choice.

The charcoal is not just made locally in Devon but is also of a high quality, free from chemicals and burns hot for a long time. Dartmoor Woodcrafts offers charcoal making experiences, teaching people to make their own.



TOP AND ABOVE: These unusual baskets are made from wooden splints of fir or pine attached to a wooden base