

CRAFT INDUSTRY IN THE COUNTRYSIDE: ARKHOLME AND ITS BASKET-MAKERS

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The basket-maker's craft is as old as the cloth-weaver's, to which it is a parallel development. In the days before man-made packaging, basket-work was universally used for collecting things, carrying things, storing things, for furniture and utensils, for fencing animals in and draughts out. It still has irreplaceable uses, and moreover carries for us the charm of being always, and as far as we know for ever, a hand craft.

And yet until about 1800 it might well be called the invisible craft. In Lancashire, for instance, the Parish Record Society has now published 131 volumes, in all of which the trades are indexed. 'Basket-maker' occurs just eight times before 1800, five of the examples from one family in Prescott in the 1790s. The extant Lancaster marriage bonds from 1648 to 1755 have been published by the Record Society. There are about 15,000 of them in six volumes, many giving the bridegroom's occupation, and often the bondsman's as well. 'Basket-maker' is mentioned six times. In the course of reading some thousands of Lonsdale wills and inventories for other purposes, I have not come across a person called a basket-maker or one who might be assumed to be one.

Partly at least it must be concluded that the followers of this modest craft tended to be too poor to leave wills or marry by licence. Compared with the trades of the smith, the miller, or the cloth-weaver, basket-making had no mystery, and no capital investment. The tools were nothing

compared to those of the carpenter, for instance, and essentially improvised: a couple of good knives, a large bodkin, a short iron bar, a little home-made gadget for splitting the willow rods, and the basket-maker was in business.¹ At a pinch, indeed, pretty well anyone can make a basket of sorts. Robinson Crusoe taught himself with little difficulty compared with his struggles to throw a serviceable pot, and 'though not very handsome, yet they were such as were very handy and convenient for my laying things up in, or fetching things home in'. Artefacts so easily made and quickly replaced could not be the foundation of a fortune. T. Waller, in his *General Description of all Trades* (1747), calls it 'an inferior hidden Sort of Handicraft Business' in which the 'green work' (i.e. that using unpeeled withies) 'requires not much else besides Strength and Application'. He adds that the 'white work', which 'does not require so much Strength, but more Invention and Nicety', employs many women.²

We may assume, then, a craft of low status, perhaps often regarded more as a part-time occupation than a real craft. It was not until 1569 that the Basket-maker's Company was founded, and it remained a very small, poor company, with a strong tradition of employing foreigners, often refugees from the Low Countries.³ It seems likely that outside London the basket-maker's trade is often hidden by the word 'husbandman' or 'labourer' or even 'yeoman'. Even if some families earned their whole living from this trade, it is likely that the willow-growing took a higher profile than the willow-weaving. Work needing strong muscles and the fortitude to withstand adverse weather conditions would in countryside people's minds take precedence over sedentary work as being more valuable and more typically masculine. It may be that in the country the few people labelled 'basket-maker' were, like many tailors, unfit for field-work.

From the standpoint of the late twentieth century, the view backwards has been distorted. Basket-making was one of a number of rural industries which were not documented at all until after the first world war. Then it was found that there was no tradition further back than the memories of people still alive, and the very modest amounts of documentation reflected a late nineteenth-century situation in the big centres. A printed agreement on piece-work in Lan-

cashire and Cheshire, agreed to by the employers and journeymen at a delegate meeting held in Manchester in 1874, states, for instance, 'That all work done at the factory be paid by time at the rate of sixpence halfpenny per hour. The man to go in his master's time and return in his own. The time allowed for walking to be at the rate of twenty minutes per mile or any fractional part thereof.'⁴ And so on. The number of apprentices was to be strictly controlled, and the apprentices were to be bound before the age of 15 and serve until 21. It does not take much imagination to see that such practice was a long way from the village trade.

From the village of Arkholme in the Lune valley we can derive what is perhaps the best view of basket-making in north Lancashire. It is still an obscured view, but the scene from 1800 is relatively clear, and one can derive a little information concerning the eighteenth century. The first task is to describe the set-up of such village industry. The raw material of English basketry is *Salix viminalis*, the common osier, and its many sub-species, whose rods vary in thickness and flexibility, suitable for different kinds of work. They are best grown on good soil with a high water table, not water-logged but often flooded in winter. Nowadays the Somerset Levels are the main source of osier growing, but when the first proper survey was carried out in the 1920s, this was third in importance after the Trent valley and Mawdesley in Lancashire.⁵ But in Mawdesley at least the industry was very much a product of the nineteenth century, and the available information concerning osier production and basket-making all concerns the nineteenth century. It has not been possible to get any coherent picture of a time before 1800.

The 'rods' are nowadays planted at 15,000 to 24,000 an acre. A stick of willow pushed into the soil will always grow, but this is the only easy aspect of their cultivation. The beds probably need weeding four times in the first year, and although some cutting is possible after one year, the first good crop is from three-year-old stools. Thereafter, the trees may continue to produce for fifty years, and the annual close-cutting produces 'stools' which lift above weeds and animal damage. In an established bed, cutting is done in winter, cleaning up in spring, leaving August and Septem-

ber as slack times, often allowing osier growers to be seasonal workers in other harvest fields.

That brief description reflects good practice of the largest growers at a time when the growing and the making had become divided, and the industry to some extent formalized.⁶ The 1920s survey notes that there were still many poor beds and ignorant growers, and there is no way of deciding what was the norm in earlier times. In Lancashire at least before 1800 the chief source of willow for the village basket-maker may well have been the haphazard occurrence of wild trees along river banks. John Holt's survey of 1795 suggests an industry barely begun. 'The osier willow is at present in such demand for hampers &c. and there is such a scarcity of that article, that more than twenty pounds a year have been made out of a single acre of land planted with it; and though very few acres are at present planted with them, there are some thousands proper for their growth, but the management of them seems not to be understood at present'.⁷

The Lune valley is fertile and floods easily, good osier-growing land. The evidence is slight but unmistakable that there were basket-makers here in the first half of the eighteenth century. Two members of the Caton family of Layfield are so called in marriage bonds of 1737 and 1740.⁸ Although the Arkholme evidence is more circumstantial, we are probably justified in dating the craft there to the last years of the seventeenth century and a man called John Ireland, whose descendants still live in the village, although the name died with the last basket-maker in 1959.

The Irelands have a clear family tree from John Ireland's marriage in 1700.⁹ There is no hard proof, but strong cause for assumption, that he was a basket-maker. During his lifetime both his sons settled in the village and raised families there, which argues for a trade rather than pure husbandry: the small Lune valley farms could not support a father and two married sons, and in fact there is no evidence that John Ireland held a tenement at all.

Tradition calls him a basket-maker: in 1889 an aged member of a later basket-making family, the Smiths, said that the trade had been carried on in Arkholme 'for about 200 years'.¹⁰ The sons of John Ireland's sons, all three of

them, were basket-makers. Two were so called at their marriages in 1770 and 1771, and settled in the village. The third moved across the Lune to the mother-village of Melling and established the trade there.

There is no absolute proof, but good grounds for assumption, as to how the Irelands came to Arkholme. In 1674 James Ireland of Borwick was petitioning at the quarter sessions that since his late son John had left 'a wyfe greate with Child and hath left no substance att all towards maintainance of her', he, the 'very old, infirme and poor' father of the said John should not also be responsible for the bastard child of his son and Jane Wilson of Arkholme.¹¹ The sex of the illegitimate child is not mentioned, and so far no baptism has been discovered, so its identification with John Ireland the presumed basket-maker must remain a guess, but it is a good guess. The timing is right, the name-patterns of John Ireland's family are right, his apparent landlessness and settling to a poor man's craft also fit together; as does the fact that Jane Wilson remained in Arkholme and died there in 1719.

There is nothing to tell us how the first John got on, how profitable the trade was, or where the markets were. We do not know how he gained access to the land he would need for his willows, whether he coppiced the wild trees or began to plant for himself. Nor is there any firm evidence about the acreage that would be needed: in the twentieth century it was said that a basket-making family would need five acres of osiers,¹² but the 1848 tithe map, which coincides with the peak of basket-making activity in Arkholme (see table 1), shows only 12½ acres of osier beds.¹³ Later members of the Ireland family certainly combined their craft with other occupations – shoe-mending, shop-keeping, working the river ferry between Arkholme and Melling – and this may always have been a feature of the trade. William Ireland is called 'basket-maker' in 1802 at the christening of one child, and 'farmer' two years later at the christening of another. Edward Murray, a basket-maker, was the enumerator of the 1851 census.

One of the Ireland grandsons, John (1743–1826), acquired land in 1771 by marrying a widow, Alice Cort, who occupied a small farm which her son, who was sent away

TABLE 1 *Basket-makers in Arkholme 1811-1881*

Year	Population of Arkholme	Basketmakers	Basketmakers' dependents	Percentage of population dependent on basket-making
1811	324	5	6	3.4
1821	357	6	11	4.8
1831	349	10	30	11.5
1841	407	15	58	17.9
1851	329	14	32	13.9
1861	331	14	32	13.9
1871	360	7	14	5.6
1881	297	6	13	6.4
1891	254	6	10	6.3

Sources: see notes 9 and 14.

from home and brought up to the Church, did not need. In 1786 another grandson, William (1766-1841), was admitted to a cottage and garden: this may have been at Storrs, a hamlet outside the village, where in 1848 his family were living, and where by then they were growing a small patch of osiers along the Kirkby Lonsdale road. As we have said, the third grandson, Thomas (1750-1827), moved to Melling.

For a hundred years, therefore, we appear to have a small, settled family trade in Arkholme village, with first one and then two families participating, earning their bread-and-butter but not much more. None of the Irelands married by licence at a time when this was about the lowest form of conspicuous consumption, and none of them left a will. This seems to have been the situation at the time of the 1811 census, which offers no names, but does record the number of families engaged in crafts.¹⁴ Arkholme's tally was six: the parish register shows that there were at the time a smith, a tailor, a shoemaker and a mason in the village, which leaves only two for basket-making, and these must be the two grandsons of the original John recorded above.

In 1821 fifteen families were said to be in crafts, but this is puzzling, as the parish records seem to show only three in basket-making. The third would be that of Thomas Smith

(1780–1866), of a long-established yeoman family, owning 29 acres in 1848, much of it by the river. It was his son who was interviewed in 1889 and offered a date for the beginning of basket-making in Arkholme, connecting it with the Irelands. This Thomas spent some years in south Wales, two children being born in Carmarthen. The family came back after 1817 but because Thomas owned his own land he is always referred to as 'yeoman', never as 'basket-maker'. Although Arkholme's population increased between 1811 and 1821 in line with a general local increase, there is no way of telling why this happened. The parish register unfortunately does not provide evidence: until 1828 there is no Arkholme register separate from that of the other six townships of Melling parish.

In 1831 the number of craftsman families was seventeen, and now seven heads of basket-making families can be identified, five Irelands, Thomas Smith, and John Taylor. From then on, the censuses identify individuals, and in 1841, the peak of the industry in Arkholme, there were nine families, the two new ones being Breaks and Murray. Richard Breaks had come into the village as a hedge-schoolmaster, a position he held until he was at least seventy-five. The old school was a building, it was said in 1851 when the new one was built, 'no larger than an average kitchen'.¹⁵ He may have combined basket-making with the sort of undemanding schoolmastering that this suggests. Certainly his son was a basket-maker. Where they came from is not known, but the other family, the Murrays, came from Newport in Hampshire, with a stop-off at Preston along the way, where the eldest son was born.

1841 was the census year in which Arkholme's population reached a peak, and reached it quite out of step with the rest of Melling parish. It was this curious discrepancy which first aroused an interest in Arkholme village at all, and led to an attempt to find the cause, which table 1 shows quite clearly to have been the basket-making trade. In 1841 there were for certain eleven basket-makers in the village, probably four younger ones. Counting women and children, there were perhaps seventy-three people in all, or 18% of the township population, dependant on the trade for their support. From all we can learn about the family-based

organization of the industry, nearly all of them were probably not just supported, but actively engaged, as weeding, stripping willow rods, and other 'light' work, was traditionally done by the women and children.¹⁶ So too was some of the making. Arkholme, as far as we know, was always at the rough end of the trade, making agricultural skeps and baskets, a picture which has been somewhat distorted in popular tradition because the last basket-maker, the one people still remember, was a fine craftsman. Even children could be used in the manufacture of plain goods: an old man interviewed at Lymm in Cheshire remembered (probably from the 1920s) having to fulfil his tally of bottoms for strawberry baskets before he went to school in the morning, and again at night.¹⁷

By the mid-century there is a clear picture of the trade. Working from the ten-year snapshots of the census returns, and the parish registers, we can see that the basket-making boom lasted effectively for thirty years. During this time the craftsmen, with their large families of children, had a considerable effect on the population of Arkholme (table 1). Whatever mixture of circumstances started the rise, it must have been dependent to a large degree on railway development. The railway came from Preston to Lancaster in 1840 and from then on the web grew at great speed. There was no railway to Arkholme itself until 1868, but the potato farming of the Fylde and the cockle trade of Morecambe Bay, both greedy consumers of baskets, were themselves dependent on the railways for their development, and Arkholme developed in their wake. These two trades were still the main buyers of Arkholme baskets at the turn of the century.¹⁸

By the 1860s the decline had set in, and again it is impossible to pinpoint the reasons. It has been suggested that the osier beds fell victim to one of the diseases to which willows are subject. The Ireland family split up and scattered, a process probably hurried by their very success. One family had moved to Melling, where they continued basket-making for a while. Another moved to Lancaster before 1851. There was further dispersal: a family of Irelands, basket-makers, were said to live in Levens village about fifty years ago. Although within the confines of Arkholme we can

talk of boom and slump, the actual numbers are so small that just one son deciding to abandon the old trade for, say, the new world of railway work, as one of the Murrays did, makes a significant difference to the statistics. Richard Breaks, a journeyman basket-maker in 1841, had gone by 1851. He lost two of his four young children in 1845, which may have precipitated the move. The agricultural depression of the 1880s and 1890s caused a rapid decrease in village populations, but also a significant ageing. In 1851 the average age of the working basket-makers was thirty-three, in 1881 it was fifty-four.

Basket-making continued for decades longer, through the first world war, when there was a sharp rise in demand. All the other families disappeared or took to other occupations, but the Irelands went on. The last of them, Charlie, who died in 1959, was a fine craftsman, specializing in light fancy goods. The rods were no longer locally grown, probably not after World War I. For a time some of them came from Burton-in-Lonsdale, which was also a customer, as it took wicker covers for its particular brand of industrial pottery, carboys for chemicals. Charlie's house was, and still is, called Willow Cottage, for he grew a few osiers in the garden more for old time's sake than use, but the rods he used for his bicycle and shopping baskets and other more or less elegant goods, came from Somerset.

Now the osier beds have been cleared for good grazing land, though if you walk past Arkholme church and down to the railway viaduct you will find yourself in a tangled patch of wild willows along the river, self-sown descendants of the industry, presenting perhaps a rather similar picture to that which John Ireland knew in 1700.

NOTES

- 1 A. Heseltine, *Baskets and Basket-making* (Princes Risborough, 1982), p. 14.
- 2 Quoted H. H. Bobart, *Records of the Basket-makers Company* (London, 1911), p. 147.
- 3 Bobart *Basket-makers*, p. 2.
- 4 *A list of sizes and prices for skips and hampers for Lancashire and Cheshire* (Oldham, 1874).

- 5 H.E. Fitzrandolph and M.D. Hay, *Rural Industries of England and Wales*, II (Oxford, 1926).
- 6 Fitzrandolph and Hay, *Rural Industries*, pp. 32, 42.
- 7 John Holt, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Lancaster* (London, 1795; reprinted Newton Abbot, 1985), p. 85.
- 8 *Lancashire Marriage Bonds* VI, ed. W. F. Irvine (R.S.L.C., LXXXIII, 1933).
- 9 Lancs. R.O., Melling/Arkhholme parish registers; Ireland family information.
- 10 Unidentified newspaper cutting.
- 11 Lancs. R.O., QSP 414/13 (Quarter sessions petitions).
- 12 Fitzrandolph and Hay, *Rural Industries*, p. 42.
- 13 Lancs. R.O., Arkholme tithe map (1848).
- 14 *V.C.H. Lancs.*, II, p. 340 for this and subsequent census references.
- 15 Unidentified newspaper cutting.
- 16 Fitzrandolph and Hay, *Rural Industries*, p. 42.
- 17 Lymm and District Local History Society Typescript, *Basket-making in Lymm* [n.d.].
- 18 Information from Arkholme inhabitants.