



# ENDANGERED BASKETS IN THE UK



Report of the  
Endangered Baskets  
Survey and Symposium  
September 2020

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## CONTENTS

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|     |  |    |
|-----|--|----|
| 1   | Introduction .....   | 3  |
| 2   | Project Aims and Objectives .....                            | 4  |
| 2.1 | The Basketmakers' Association.....                           | 4  |
| 2.2 | The Heritage Crafts Association.....                         | 4  |
| 2.3 | The HCA Red List of Endangered Crafts .....                  | 5  |
| 3   | Methodology.....   | 5  |
| 4   | Some Definitions.....  | 6  |
| 4.1 | Indigenous Baskets .....                                     | 6  |
| 4.2 | Fishing and Agricultural Baskets .....                       | 6  |
| 4.3 | Constructed Baskets .....                                    | 6  |
| 4.4 | Traditional Baskets.....                                     | 6  |
| 4.5 | Twenty-First Century Baskets .....                           | 6  |
| 4.6 | Other Basketry Forms .....                                   | 7  |
| 5   | Endangered Baskets and Basketry Skills .....                 | 8  |
| 6   | Challenges for heritage basketry and skills.....             | 11 |
| 6.1 | Education and training.....                                  | 11 |
| 6.2 | The market for Heritage baskets and business support .....   | 12 |
| 6.3 | Supply of raw materials .....                                | 14 |
| 6.4 | Recording and collecting Heritage baskets.....               | 15 |
| 7   | Preserving and Protecting Heritage Basketry and Skills ..... | 16 |
| 7.1 | Education and training.....                                  | 16 |
| 7.2 | The market for Heritage baskets and business support .....   | 17 |
| 7.3 | Supply of raw materials .....                                | 18 |
| 7.4 | Recording and collecting baskets.....                        | 19 |
| 8   | The Future of Heritage Baskets and Endangered Skills .....   | 22 |
| 9   | Next Steps .....   | 24 |
|     | Appendices.....  | 26 |



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# 1 INTRODUCTION

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The craft of basket making occupies a very special place in the cultural heritage of the UK. A vibrant community of skilled craftspeople make a wide spectrum of baskets, from the utilitarian and functional to the contemporary and sculptural. This research focuses on heritage basketry and includes a wide range of functional baskets that would have been traditionally used for domestic, industrial, agricultural and fishing purposes. Heritage baskets are very familiar to us and, whilst their uses are changing over time, they are still coveted as beautiful, functional, ethically sourced objects within the home. They are always handmade; no machine has yet been developed that can make a basket.

As one of the widest spread and oldest crafts in the world, today's basket makers draw on a rich heritage of basketry encompassing a wide variety of forms, techniques and materials. With this wide variety of forms comes a wealth of craft skill and knowledge and, as the original uses and markets for these baskets inevitably change, there is a significant risk that some of the basket types and techniques that have developed over time to serve particular functions will be lost.

## **WHY ENDANGERED BASKETS?**

The aim of this survey and symposium was to focus primarily on heritage baskets and the associated skills that may be at risk of becoming endangered. Basket making per se is not endangered; any quick internet search will show that basket making, a whole range of basketry forms, and access to learning basket making skills are all widely available. So why focus on the potential loss of heritage baskets and the associated skills?

**BASKETS AS EMBEDDED SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES** - Examining heritage baskets can reveal a variety of skills and techniques, including: the splitting of willow, hazel, oak and chestnut, making square corners, skeining, English oval bases, Jack West's bases and borders and more. Drawing on this information to remake old forms provides opportunities for learning and the reinforcement of skills. And, basket makers that have a diversity of skills and techniques available to them have increased opportunities for ongoing creativity.

**BASKETS AS MATERIAL FORMS** - Heritage baskets are made from a range of materials reflecting knowledge about growing, harvesting, storage and preparation, as well as telling something about the place they came from. Additionally, baskets reveal material knowledge relating to tension, density, fragility, spatial awareness, dexterity and strength, which are relevant to basket makers and non-basket makers alike.

**BASKETS AS OBJECTS OF SOCIAL CONNECTION** - Objects matter; human beings are meaning makers and objects are forms of and for generating meaning. Baskets are part of the local cultural history; they reveal information about traditions, rituals, aspirations and experiences. They are also containers of language and dialect, as well as of attentiveness and memory. Engaging with heritage basketry can reveal stories of community and connection.

**So, heritage basketry forms and skills can tell us much about the richness of the UK's intangible cultural heritage.**

## 2 PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

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This project is a partnership between the Basketmakers' Association, the Heritage Crafts Association (HCA), the Worshipful Company of Basketmakers and the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) to carry out the first UK wide survey of skills and knowledge relating to endangered baskets and heritage basketry techniques.

The aim of the project was to survey existing skills and knowledge and then to develop an action plan to preserve and promote these skills as embedded within our intangible cultural heritage.

### Objectives

- To raise awareness of endangered basketry skills and regional styles of baskets.
- To build on existing research into rare and endangered basketry skills that has been carried out by the MERL Stakeholders Project, Woven Communities and the Basketmakers' Association.
- To create a list of endangered baskets to supplement and inform the HCA's Red List of Endangered Crafts.
- To consult with the basket making community on a course of action to preserve and protect knowledge and skills in the context of endangered basketry.

### 2.1 THE BASKETMAKERS' ASSOCIATION

Founded in 1975 The Basketmakers' Association is the primary membership organisation in the UK for both professional and leisure basket makers. The passing on of knowledge is a core principle of the Basketmakers' Association.

"We strive to maintain standards of teaching and quality of workmanship. We research and record traditional making, conserving this knowledge and these skills for future generations. We also encourage new ideas and innovation in design and making, supporting all basketmakers and chair seaters" <https://basketmakersassociation.org.uk>

### 2.2 THE HERITAGE CRAFTS ASSOCIATION

Founded in 2009, The Heritage Crafts Association is the advocacy body for traditional heritage crafts. Working in partnership with government and key agencies, it provides a focus for craftspeople, groups, societies and guilds, as well as individuals who care about the loss of traditional crafts skills, and works towards a healthy and sustainable framework for the future.

#### Intangible Cultural Heritage

In 2003, UNESCO adopted a Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, including 'traditional craftsmanship'. It stated:

*"Any efforts to safeguard traditional craftsmanship must focus not on preserving craft objects – no matter how beautiful, precious, rare or important they might be – but on creating conditions that will encourage artisans to continue to produce crafts of all kinds, and to transmit their skills and knowledge to others."*

178 countries from Albania and Algeria to Zambia and Zimbabwe have signed up to the convention, effectively making Intangible Cultural Heritage part of their cultural policy. Unfortunately, the UK is not one of them.

The Heritage Crafts Association supports the 2003 UNESCO Convention and its goal of safeguarding traditional craftsmanship by supporting the continuing transmission of knowledge and skills associated with traditional artisanship to help ensure that crafts continue to be practised within their communities, providing livelihoods to their makers and reflecting creativity and adaptation.

The Heritage Crafts Association is one of only three UK-wide NGOs recognised by the UNESCO Convention for Intangible Heritage (accredited as an NGO under the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention 2003), and the only one with an explicit focus on craft skills.

### 2.3 THE HCA RED LIST OF ENDANGERED CRAFTS

The HCA Red List of Endangered Crafts was first published in 2017 and was the first report of its kind to rank traditional crafts by the likelihood that they would survive to the next generation, based on intangible cultural heritage safeguarding principles. The research was repeated and the second iteration of the Red List was published in March 2019.

- 212 crafts feature in the research
- Four crafts are listed as extinct
- 36 crafts are listed as **critically endangered**
- 71 crafts are listed as **endangered**
- 102 crafts are deemed **currently viable**. Despite this classification, these crafts are not risk-free or without issues and will continue to be monitored.

Crafts that are categorised as endangered or critically endangered have very few practitioners remaining, and there is significant risk that the skills will not be passed on to the next generation.

## 3 METHODOLOGY

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### **Stage 1: Survey of basketmakers, July-Sept 2019**

An online survey of Basketmakers' Association members was carried out to capture knowledge of regional and heritage baskets and their associated skills, and numbers of makers with these skills.

### **Stage 2: Endangered Baskets Symposium, 5th Oct 2019**

Hosted by the Heritage Crafts Association, in partnership with the Worshipful Company of Basketmakers, Basketmakers' Association and the Museum of English Rural Life, this event brought together basket makers from across the UK to share knowledge and stories of endangered baskets and their associated skills. The symposium used participatory techniques and discussion to capture more in-depth data to inform the Red List of Endangered Crafts and develop a course of action to preserve and protect knowledge and skills relating to endangered basketry.

### **Stage 3: Reporting**

The aim of this stage is to analyse evidence and knowledge from the survey and the symposium. This analysis will then be used to create an action plan to address the potential loss of high-level basketry skills and specific endangered baskets.

## 4 SOME DEFINITIONS

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To begin it is worth establishing some working definitions relating to basketry as reported here.

### 4.1 INDIGENOUS BASKETS

Indigenous baskets (following Joe Hogan's description) are those that were made in specific places, usually for specific purposes, and often by non-industrial makers, such as Gower cockle baskets, hazel whiskets, rush frails, Canterbury watercress baskets and elm tendles. As can be seen from this list, which is not definitive, these baskets were made from a range of materials, using what was locally available and their making often needed particular skills and techniques.

### 4.2 FISHING AND AGRICULTURAL BASKETS

Baskets that also usually had a geographical distribution are those associated with fishing or agriculture; they were needed in industrial scale numbers so were made in basketry workshops rather than by a maker-user. Examples include herring swills, herring crans, potato baskets and Covent Garden sieves. These basketry forms were primarily made from willow and also have particular skills associated with their making.

### 4.3 CONSTRUCTED BASKETS

Although also widely used for fishing and agriculture, these baskets have notably different methods of construction and require quite different skills to make. Baskets in this category can include those that use carpentry and green wood work techniques as well as those more usually associated with basketry. Examples include trugs, stave baskets and spelk or swill baskets.

### 4.4 TRADITIONAL BASKETS

These include the whole range of domestic and government workplace basketry forms that were once common throughout the UK, such as laundry baskets, letter trays, wastepaper bins and hampers. These baskets were usually willow and again had particular skills associated with their making. Many of these traditional basketry forms are still made today and may be described as Traditional English Willow Baskets.

*It is these four categories of basketry that the survey and symposium were primarily concerned with and to describe these in this report the terms heritage baskets and heritage basketry skills will be used.*

### 4.5 TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BASKETS

Basket making in recent years has become increasingly eclectic in form, technique, skills and materials. While basket makers continue to draw on the above forms to varying degrees, there has also been a significant increase in the making of baskets from around the world; examples include Polish shopping baskets, Catalan bases and Azorean picnic baskets. It is notable that these forms are often identified by geography. In addition there has been an increased use of non-traditional materials; paper, plastic, wire, etc. as well as the continuing use of cane / rattan.

During the symposium and also in some survey responses conversations considered basket making as a career in 21<sup>st</sup> century UK. Many of the concerns discussed are similar to those for small businesses and self-employed workers in the creative sector in general. Issues raised included:

basket making being seen as 'real' work, pricing and marketing, how to manage ongoing professional development, business planning skills, recruitment and retention of staff in rural basketry workshops and the attracting and training of young people. Despite these challenges several makers at the symposium reported that demand for baskets was high.

#### 4.6 OTHER BASKETRY FORMS

Chair Seating – the Basketmakers' Association membership is also made up from chair seaters and it is likely that many of the issues considered here will also be of relevance to their work.

Fencing, Sculpture and Coffin making – to increase sources of income makers have diversified into other willow crafts. These are viable uses of willow basketry skills and provide a valuable, sustainable income for many basket makers. However, in the context of considering endangered basketry skills concerns were raised about the amount of willow required for these forms and that as different skill sets are needed this could, in the longer term, contribute to the loss of higher level, specialist basketry skills.

Related Crafts – these are crafts such as coracle making and hat plaiting that are closely related to basketry and share some skills and/or materials.



## 5 ENDANGERED BASKETS AND BASKETRY SKILLS

The survey, desk-based research and symposium identified the following baskets and basketry skills that are considered endangered or critically endangered. *For the full results see Appendix 4.*

***This is not held to be a complete list and further information enabling this record to be developed is welcomed.***

- Critically endangered – at serious risk of no longer being practised.
- Endangered – there are currently sufficient people to pass the skills to the next generation, but there is a concern about their ongoing viability.
- Extinct – no longer being practised. For the purposes of this research, this only includes crafts that have become extinct in the last generation.

### Specialist basketry skills and techniques

This list identifies particular skills and knowledge that are necessary for making a range of baskets. These are of particular concern as the skills can be highly specialist and a loss of such skills could result in the loss of many specific basket types.

| Specialist basketry skills and techniques                                      | No. of makers | Status |
|--|---------------|--------|
| Lip work, coiled straw work (including lip work chairs, cradles, baskets etc.) | 1-5           | ●      |
| Scuttle work   | 1-3           | ●      |
| Skeined willow work (seating, baskets, tea pot handles etc.)                   | 1-5           | ●      |
| Woven split wood basketry – oak, hazel and split willow frame baskets          | 1-10          | ●      |
| English square work  | 20+           | ●      |

### Specialist growing and harvesting skills

This list identifies the growing, sourcing and harvesting skills that are fundamental to the basketry process. A loss of skills in producing materials could have a serious impact on the future of high quality basketry that has its roots in the physical and cultural landscape of the UK.

| Specialist growing and harvesting skills                       | No. of makers             | Status |
|--|---------------------------|--------|
| Growing/harvesting of rush ( <i>Schoenoplectus lacustris</i> ) | 3 suppliers               | ●      |
| Growing heritage straw   | 20+                       | ●      |
| Willow growing for basketry                                    | 10 growers (4 commercial) | ●      |

### Skills associated with specific basket types

This list identifies the skills and knowledge that underpin specific local and regional baskets. Whilst there may be similarities and cross-overs in the skills and techniques used to create these baskets, they have an intrinsic social and cultural value in their individual forms.

| Wales and Borders  |               |        |
|--|---------------|--------|
| Skills associated with specific basket types               | No. of makers | Status |
| Welsh shopper making (similar construction to the cyntell) | 2             | ●      |

|   |      |   |
|---|------|---|
| Penclawdd cockle basket making  | 1    | ● |
| Salmon putcher making   | 1-5  | ● |
| Tregaron peat basket making   | 1    | ● |
| LLangwm fisherwoman's basket making   | 2    | ● |
| Hazel spale basket making<br>(also known as Wyre Forest whisks/ Wyre scuttle) | 5-10 | ● |
| Cyntells/ Welsh frame basket making   | 5-10 | ● |
| Welsh tea things basket making  | 5-10 | ● |

| <b>England</b>   |  |               |
|--|--|---------------|
| <b>Skills associated with specific basket types</b>  | <b>No. of makers</b>                     | <b>Status</b> |
| Basketwork furniture making  | 1-5                                      | ●             |
| Great Yarmouth herring swill making  | 1-5                                      | ●             |
| Oak swill basket making  | 1-5                                      | ●             |
| Mersea oyster tendle making  | 1-5                                      | ●             |
| Devon stave basket making  | 1-5<br>(3/4 part time makers, 1 trainee) | ●             |
| Eel hive making  | 1  | ●             |
| Split willow basket (watercress basket) making   | 2  | ●             |
| Bramble basket making  | 1  | ●             |
| Northumbrian back and donkey creel making  | 1-5                                      | ●             |
| Cornish cawl, croust, broccoli crate, dropper making   | 1-5                                      | ●             |
| Withy pot/ lobster pot making  | 6-10                                     | ●             |
| Rush frail making  | 6-10                                     | ●             |
| 'Jack West' basket making (made with an underfoot base)  | 1  | ●             |
| Sussex trug making   | 10-20                                    | ●             |
| Herring cran making  | 5-10                                     | ●             |
| Kent fruit and vegetable measures (sieves, potato prickles, vegetable flats, pecks, half pecks etc.) | 0  | ●             |
| Southport boat basket making   | 0  | ●             |

| <b>Scotland</b>  |                      |               |
|--|----------------------|---------------|
| <b>Skills associated with specific basket types</b>                                    | <b>No. of makers</b> | <b>Status</b> |
| Creelagh (also mudag or murlagh) making  | 1-5                  | ●             |
| Kishie making  | 1-5                  | ●             |
| Skeklers costume making - hats, cloaks, leggings                                       | 5-10                 | ●             |
| Cuddy/cuddie making  | 0                    | ●             |
| Willow kishie making   | 0-1                  | ●             |
| Heather basket making  | 0                    | ●             |
| Fisherrow and Newhaven fishwives' back creel and head creel (a pair of baskets) making | 0                    | ●             |
| Ciosan making (marram grass)   | 0                    | ●             |
| Arbroath basket making (rip, merlin, scull)  | 0                    | ●             |

| <b>Northern Ireland</b> |
|-------------------------|
|-------------------------|

| N.B. This covers data from the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland |                   |        |
|---|-------------------|--------|
| Skills associated with specific basket types                            | No. of makers     | Status |
| Irish creel making  | Insufficient data |        |
| Irish skiathog (potato basket) making                                   | Insufficient data |        |
| Irish skib (potato sieve) making  | Insufficient data |        |

| Related crafts  |                                     |        |
|---|-------------------------------------|--------|
| Skills associated with specific basket types              | No. of makers                       | Status |
| Boyne curragh making                                      | 3 in England<br>No data for Ireland | ●      |
| Straw backed chair making (Orkney chair, Fair Isle chair) | Orkney 6-10<br>Fair Isle 1-2        | ●      |
| Straw hat plaiting  | 1-5                                 | ●      |
| Whole willow seating                                      | 1                                   | ●      |
| Corn dolly making   | No data available                   | ●      |
| Bee skep making   | 6-10                                | ●      |
| Chair seating   | >100                                | ●      |
| Chair caning  | 21-50                               | ●      |
| Rush matting  | 6-10                                | ●      |



*Left: Hazel basket by Charlie Jones  
Below: Recreating a Jack West basket by Cat Beaumont  
Bottom left: Rush frail by Rachel Frost  
Bottom right: Oak swill by Owen Jones*





*Top left:* Skeined willow basket by Mary Butcher  
*Top right:* Kishie by Lois Walpole  
*Above:* Myrddin cyntell by Claire Revera  
*Above right:* Cyntells by Claire Revera  
*Right:* Heather cassie, Orkney  
 National Museum of Scotland, Baxter-Rintoul Collection



## 6 CHALLENGES FOR HERITAGE BASKETRY AND SKILLS

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The survey and symposium aimed to gather information about heritage baskets and skills and it is these that are the primary focus of this report. It is likely however that many of the challenges and possible solutions identified will also have applications to basket making in general.

It was felt that there were particular challenges with regard to ensuring ongoing access to heritage baskets as a resource, heritage baskets as a product and to the availability of the teaching of endangered basketry skills. These challenges are discussed below.

### 6.1 EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Capturing knowledge now is very timely. Some basket makers trained with the 'last generation' of commercial basket makers, but now, a generation removed, there is a significant risk that skills will be lost.

*"... there were a lot of methods that were tried and tested methods over generations. Looking at them and using them gives us a technical 'alphabet' with which we can do all sorts of things. And we don't know what we will need in the future, as life changes."*  
Mary Butcher

The survey and symposium began to identify specific skills associated with heritage basketry forms that are becoming endangered; examples are willow splitting, skeining, English square work and the unique basketry making methods of Jack West baskets.

**Basket makers have to invest time in learning and developing higher level skills and will be earning less during this time.**

Several basket makers commented that basket making is repetitive and requires dedication and commitment in order to become a competent maker and it can require resilience and skill to get to a point of financial viability. Skills needed to make unusual or rare baskets can be difficult to master and the quality has to be high in order to command a realistic retail price. When there is a long process of making and learning it can make the baskets less financially viable. Many of these skills have become reliant on the passion and commitment of a particular person or group who want to learn and pass on skills.

**Many of the most experienced teachers are reaching retirement age.**

There are some very good basketry teachers but there is a concern that this pool of people is dwindling and there may not be as many skilled practitioners and teachers in the future.

*"Increasing the number of professional basket makers working to a high standard can only be achieved through training. We are already in a position where our current professional makers are a generation away from any kind of formal training. Another generation will widen the gap diluting even more our awareness of the fundamental knowledge of this profession. With this decline we will continue to make poor imitations of what was once a highly skilled practice."* Jenny Crisp

Some basket makers said that working from old books of basket recipes and from baskets in museums can advance knowledge. However, there was a clear feeling that it is best to learn alongside makers who have knowledge of traditional English techniques as this has the increased benefits of allowing observation of subtleties of skill as well as opportunities to ask questions.

**There is very little formal training available for basket makers.**

Training is a significant issue both for new entrants and in ongoing training for basket makers. There are no apprenticeships or ongoing training to upskill younger people who might have an interest in becoming a basket maker.

*“I am certainly struggling to fund my ongoing training as well as running a business and I've been willow weaving for 11 years. I think a younger person would find it an almost impossible task and that is concerning.” Sarah Hatton*

The courses on offer at City Lit and Westhope College are highly thought of and offer good skills development, including a specific module on heritage basketry in the City & Guilds level 3 course. However, it was raised that these currently have to be self-funded and this is difficult for some learners.

**Professional and commercial basket makers don't have the spare capacity to take on trainees.**

There are some training opportunities available in commercial willow basket making companies such as Coates English Willow and Musgrove Willow, but recruitment and retention of makers willing to only work to traditional forms, in rural locations, for low pay, was reported as problematic.

Despite a willingness to train new entrants and pass on skills, this is often very difficult in a business that operates on a narrow profit margin. It is even more difficult for self-employed basket makers who have very little spare capacity in their business. Currently there is very little funding available to make it viable to take on a long term apprentice or trainee.

*“We do have experienced basket makers who are willing to train, but it does have huge impacts in the fact it takes up so much time which costs the business a lot of money... For our company training basket makers is a very big investment and a risky one.” Nicola Coates, Coates English Willow*

It was also raised that good training should include sales and marketing skills that may not be available in the host business.

## **6.2 THE MARKET FOR HERITAGE BASKETS AND BUSINESS SUPPORT**

Basket makers report that the market for some baskets, such as Sussex trugs and traditional English willow baskets, is steady or growing. For example Coates Willow, who make a wide range of traditional willow baskets such as hampers and bicycle baskets, commented that “the demand for well-made English willow baskets is definitely growing”.

This is not always the case, however, for the more unusual or rare baskets. Helen Campbell, who specialises in researching and making indigenous Welsh baskets, comments that “[these] baskets do have a limited market. They generally require advanced basket making skills and as a result will be priced into a speciality market arena. Their historic significance is often only appreciated by fellow basket makers or a historic/museum or regional audience.”

**The amount of time involved in making heritage baskets is not always appreciated and it is physically hard work.**

Many of the heritage basket types tend to be more time consuming and physically demanding to make than the more common basket types. They may also use materials other than willow and so require a wider or different skill set to those used by most basket makers. This, combined with a low commercial demand, can make them a less viable way to make money.

*“The managing of woodland and making of baskets is extremely physical and labour intensive and therefore baskets are expensive. It balances out as they are durable but the price can be off-putting to customers.”* Lorna Singleton

**Some of the traditional basket types are not needed for their original purpose any more.**

Some endangered basketry skills, such as Sussex trug making, have retained a market, even if it is much reduced from that of the past. However, a rush frail maker commented that they find it difficult to sell a lot because it “is little known and perhaps not attractive to modern buyers.”

*“They have to have relevance today, be useful and practical otherwise people won't want to learn them or have them in the home.”* Maurice Bichard

Sometimes the relevance of a basket goes beyond its practical usefulness, and with appropriate marketing UK heritage basket makers can find themselves in a specialist ‘high end’ niche, a market place of those who are aware of UK-made baskets as a higher-quality, locally-sourced, sustainable product. A well-made basket can last for many years and there is some resurgence in consumers wanting baskets as both desirable and functional objects.

**There is very little in the way of business support specifically for basket makers.**

It was pointed out that a lack of business support can mean that some people may not feel confident in starting a business or adding a new product, such as a heritage basket, to their existing business.

*“Perhaps the main hurdle to people starting to sell them [heritage baskets] more is their confidence. Maybe some guidelines on setting up and running a basket making business could be useful?”* Ruth Pybus

There is some financial support available to basket makers but this tends to be in the form of small grants for research or skills development.

However, Cockpit Arts is working with the Worshipful Company and the BA to offer online business mentoring for basket makers. With financial support of the Worshipful Company this will provide support to a number of makers who wouldn't have otherwise been able to access support.

**Overseas competition**

The pressure from overseas markets has a significant impact on British basket makers. Although there are still some traditional baskets made on a commercial scale in the UK, the vast majority of makers and Basketmakers' Association members make specialist, one-off or bespoke pieces of work that are aimed at the higher end of the market. At the symposium this was discussed as both an opportunity and a threat to the future of basket making as, despite the competition, there is a demand for high-quality, locally sourced and sustainable baskets as both desirable and functional objects.



### 6.3 SUPPLY OF RAW MATERIALS

A possible threat to the long-term sustainability of basket making is the availability of raw materials. In the past makers could access materials, such as willow and rush, from commercial growers across the UK as well as harvesting materials from locally or self-managed willow beds, rivers, woodlands and hedgerows. This is still the situation today, albeit with the number of large scale commercial willow growers much reduced and a similar reduction in commercial suppliers of UK grown rush. However, several concerns relating to willow supplies were raised both in the survey and at the symposium and these concerns may also be relevant to the supply of other materials.

#### **Some baskets makers have found it difficult to source raw materials.**

Basket makers have reported that they have had problems buying regular and reliable supplies of basketry willow of a good enough quality for what they need and that commercial growers are selling out early in the season, meaning that makers are needing to buy large quantities of green willow when it is available, which leads to issues with storage. Large quantities of willow are also being bought by willow sculptors and coffin makers who need sizeable amounts but for whom top quality material is less of an issue. White willow is becoming increasingly difficult to source in the UK and commands a much higher price than buff willow.

#### **Willow is becoming less viable as a commercial crop.**

Concerns about the supply of willow were echoed by one of the main commercial growers in the UK, who suggested that its future as a commercial crop was in danger. A number of issues that are affecting the viability and sustainability of commercial willow growing were identified:

- Land prices continue to increase
- Water management for conservation raises water levels to benefit wildlife and makes it more difficult harvesting willow
- Restrictions of chemicals to control pests and weeds have increased significantly in recent years
- Imported willow is cheaper
- Challenges facing rural land-based businesses – like all rural land-based businesses, willow growers are subject to a range of pressures including potential changes in land use policy, farming subsidies, recruitment and retention of staff etc. It is difficult to predict what these impacts may be in the longer term but they do tend to lead to uncertainty amongst growers.

#### **Other raw materials such as rush, straw and seating cane are also in short supply.**

Willow is the most widely used material in UK basket making but shortages of supply also apply to rush, straw, hazel and other raw materials. It was commented that high-quality rush from Somerset, which is one of the main materials for the seat-weaving craft, is disappearing from rivers due to changes in management regimes and is therefore becoming difficult to source. And in the Northern Isles a lack of black oat straw is threatening a number of crafts such as kishie making and straw backed chair making.

#### **The relationship between growing and using basketry materials is widening.**

Whilst willow growing and basket making have a history of being separate occupations there were also many makers who grew or harvested their own raw materials. Comments recorded in the

survey and symposium suggested that there is now a widening gap between growing and making and that in terms of protecting skills this is problematic.

*“... [it is the] highly skilled willow growers and basket makers that are critically endangered...and unless we can create some kind of long-term learning we will lose the fundamental links between growing and making and the knowledge necessary to perform basket making at a professional level.”* Jenny Crisp

#### 6.4 RECORDING AND COLLECTING HERITAGE BASKETS

The importance of heritage baskets as physical resources for learning was widely acknowledged. However storing, preserving, cataloguing and disseminating information about collections all present challenges.

**Baskets are difficult things to look after; they degrade, they attract infestations and they are bulky.**

This fragility makes them inherently difficult to research. Baskets were often used until they were broken, discarded and perhaps remade, and so what we see is just a fragment of the basket world. Baskets not made in living memory can be lost very quickly and getting a total picture of what is gone is very difficult.

*“Our understanding can be skewed by the single examples that we have: if we have two we can start making comparisons; if we have three we can perhaps draw conclusions; if we only have one we don’t really know what we are looking at.”* Hilary Burns

**Many museums have baskets in their collections but often they are not well catalogued or are not accessible for basket makers to study and learn from.**

It would be extremely difficult to record and map all the baskets that are in collections. It would be a huge exercise and there would be a lot of barriers around standardisation, parameters etc. However, there has been some good work done by the Basketmakers’ Association to create an index of museum collections and a physical archive of resources. It should be ensured that this is regularly maintained and updated in the most accessible formats available.

## 7 PRESERVING AND PROTECTING HERITAGE BASKETRY AND SKILLS

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Despite challenges to working with heritage baskets and with facilitating the availability of access to endangered skills and techniques there were plenty of suggestions for innovative solutions and possible ways forward.

### 7.1 EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Informal skills sharing and training is one of the primary ways in which basket makers improve their own skills. Most will cite training with another experienced maker as the way in which they developed their own practice and business. Some may have received funding but most will have funded it themselves, or given their time and skills for free.

#### **On-going skills groups and long-term mentoring can benefit basket makers through their whole career.**

Whilst costs in time and money were concerns for both new and experienced basket makers wanting to develop their skills, there were examples of makers who at various stages in their careers had shaped their own training, undertaking their initial learning on courses or with experienced basket makers, followed by practise and then further training in skills relevant to their making needs. A combination of block learning, mentoring and individual practise was seen as a possible route to developing a diverse range of high level skills.

#### **Accredited, formally structured courses are useful but steps should be taken to ensure that these are accessible to a wide range of learners.**

Formal and accredited courses are valued, although concerns were raised about the costs of these. It was felt that more targeted funding of bursaries could be a way to address this. And in terms of learning and developing the high level skills and techniques embedded in heritage basketry, it was suggested that all formal courses could be encouraged to include researching and making heritage basketry in their programmes.

#### **Structured 'mentorships' could offer an alternative approach to a standardised apprenticeship**

This was a potential model suggested by the education and training workshop at the symposium. In this less formalised route, training could be more flexible and lower cost than an apprenticeship. This would require a significant amount of development work and resources to achieve, and could form the basis of an externally funded project in the future.

#### **Build on existing examples of good practice.**

There are a wide variety of short courses available, including those run by experienced makers. However, it was felt that the range of courses on offer can vary from excellent to poor and it is difficult for learners to assess what they are getting for their money. The work of the Basketmakers' Association, particularly their courses and the availability of bursaries to attend these was appreciated, along with the HCA's Endangered Crafts Fund.

Skills sharing through local groups and networks provides access to relevant training across the UK. An often-cited example of this is the excellent work of the Northumbria Basketry Group, who have

taken steps to support members in long-term skills development through regional self-help groups, the researching of local heritage baskets and the publishing of an associated booklet. A number of suggestions were made that this model could be further developed and that perhaps existing skills groups and networks could be used to standardise training.

Films showing instructions for making heritage baskets are useful when access to course or experienced makers is not available; examples cited include 'A Day with DJ Davies', 'An Asparagus Basket' by Colin Manthorpe and 'A Square Fitched Shopper' by Sally Goymer which are included in the range of DVDs produced by the Basketmakers' Association.

It was suggested that online networks could be developed for the sharing of information, questions, knowledge and skills relating to heritage basketry. Instructional films could also be made available online.

**Many makers find that teaching unusual or endangered basket making skills is more financially viable than making them for sale.**

As well as learning heritage basketry skills, there are makers who are sharing their knowledge through teaching. It is important for the sustainability of the trade that we have competent teachers but this needs to be built on a basis of competent making. It is also crucial for many makers that they can supplement their income through teaching.

*"For many basket types, the only way to make the craft sustainable is through running training courses. There is a lot of interest in learning about split hazel work precisely because so few people have been doing it."* Ruth Pybus

## 7.2 THE MARKET FOR HERITAGE BASKETS AND BUSINESS SUPPORT

Some participants suggested that, despite the challenges, the market for heritage baskets appears to be steady or growing. However, it was also felt that there were many potential opportunities that could further raise awareness of heritage baskets and the skills required to make them.

**Raise the profile of makers of heritage baskets.**

A number of potential actions that arose from this suggestion were made during the symposium:

- Employ a part-time marketing person to 'tell the story' of basket makers, to increase awareness and the value of basketry skills.
- Develop a travelling exhibition and attend fairs and exhibitions.
- Work with local heritage sites on 'basket maker in residence' projects (e.g. National Trust) to actively promote local basket makers and skills.
- Promote the concept of buying an English basket with local provenance - some of this could be done centrally and then handed over to be delivered locally.
- Educate basketmakers and groups on how to curate images online and become a 'face' in the basket making world.
- Promote the importance of developing a diverse business – responding to opportunities, getting involved in community projects, education projects etc.

**Heritage and traditional baskets need to be promoted both locally and nationally.**

It was pointed out that there is often a lack of awareness around regional types of baskets and their links to local culture. Heritage baskets need to be celebrated and promoted both locally and nationally in order to raise demand.

### **Share success stories.**

There are plenty of 'good news' stories relating to heritage basketry and increased publicity would be beneficial. Examples of such stories are QEST funding for a trug making apprenticeship, the Basketmakers' Association's traditional basketry project, Northumbria Basketry Group's Fishing Baskets of Northumbria booklet, exhibitions that display heritage baskets and their contemporary interpretations such as 'Baskets of the Land and Sea' curated by Stephanie Bunn and interest from galleries such as The New Craftsman and the Sarah Myerscough Gallery. The 'Willow Basketmaking in Poland and Britain' project, coordinated by Mary Butcher, was successful in engaging 6000 people over three years in both practical basketry skills and awareness raising talks.

### **Raise awareness of existing sources of support for skills improvement and business development.**

Examples include:

- Bursaries from the Basketmakers' Association.
- Grants and bursaries available from the Worshipful Company of Basketmakers.
- QEST Scholarships and Apprenticeships.
- Heritage Crafts Association – Heritage Crafts Awards and the Endangered Craft Fund.
- Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship.
- Local small business networks.

### **Create distance learning opportunities for business support and mentorship.**

It was suggested that it may be possible to learn from an organisation such as Cockpit Arts to deliver business skills and mentoring, possibly through 'Train the trainer' sessions that could be delivered and then disseminated to local groups.

## **7.3 SUPPLY OF RAW MATERIALS**

Concern about the supply of readily accessible, good quality raw materials was a significant concern among attendees at the symposium.

### **Address the challenges commercial willow growers are facing.**

- Support those with the knowledge and expertise in willow growing to pass on skills.
- Work with partner organisations to investigate organic ways to develop fungal resistance.
- Build on best practice from other countries to develop new ways of working e.g. Denmark.

### **Increase resilience in the supply of raw materials**

It was commented that there is a need for more small scale willow growing to supply the materials for basket making. There could also be opportunities to explore the resilience and diversity of alternative willow varieties.

- Train people in the skills needed to grow basketry willow.

- Explore the feasibility of cooperative systems where small growers could work together to harvest and process materials.
- Explore the expansion of local community willow beds
- Develop a network of small growers, including makers who grow for their own use, to share skills and information.
- Research best practice examples of willow growing and consider additional research into disease resistant varieties, pesticide use etc.

An example of good practice for developing community growing skills is the charity 'Climate and Community' which has established a willow growing community teaching skills including planting, care and maintenance, harvesting, storage and basket making.

*"The relationship between managing materials and skills to use materials need to be restored, over the whole of UK in every community."* Clare Revera

In Sept 2020 the BA Board approved a proposal for a National Register of Group Willow Plots, to be managed by the Northumbria Group. The aim of this project is to exchange knowledge and skills in growing, and the exchange of cuttings.

#### **Promote the use of a wider range of materials.**

Willow is the most widely-used material, but to increase sustainability of supply, knowledge of growing, harvesting and using a wider range of materials should be encouraged.

- Train people in the skills needed to grow and manage other basketry materials, e.g. black oats, long straw, rush, hazel coppice.
- Encourage more hedgerow basketry – councils may need to change their hedge management routines so that basket makers can gather materials.

## **7.4 RECORDING AND COLLECTING BASKETS**

At the symposium Hilary Burns spoke about the role of museums and collections in her basketry work and research. She comments that

*"In connecting to other places and their traditions I have come to realise how much we rely on our own museums and private collections in order to understand our own basketry, both British and European".*

#### **Museums and archives have an important role to play as a physical resource for makers.**

Museums have many examples of heritage baskets as well as collections of tools and materials that can support basket makers learning.

Additionally, both Hilary Burns and Stephanie Bunn spoke of the role that basket makers could have in helping to understand and interpret the baskets that museums have in their collections and in understanding the skills involved in making them, which can enhance understanding of the cultural importance of baskets in the UK.

#### **Reviving extinct baskets can be used as a way to bring basket makers and the local community together and develop skills and knowledge.**

This has happened with a number of projects:

- Northumbria Basketry Group – led by Liz Balfour, this group has worked on and rediscovered baskets local to Northumbria and has developed skills in making these baskets and has documented them in a booklet.
- Gower Landscape Partnership – working with this project Clare Revera has researched and recreated the Penclawdd cockle basket, which is synonymous with the cockle picking community of the Gower.

This approach was summarised by a survey respondent as: Research – Remake – Teach – Demonstrate.

**There is an opportunity for museums to draw on heritage basketry to incorporate contemporary baskets in to their collections.**

Examining collections of heritage baskets, the material used and the skills for making them can be the inspiration for re-interpretations or new forms of basketry. An example of this is MERL's Stakeholders Project; this project encouraged knowledge and skills sharing between established and up-and-coming basket makers. Each of the participants was commissioned to make a basket or piece of basketwork in response to the museum's heritage baskets to be accessioned into the Museum collection.

**There are accessible heritage basketry collections to be inspired by.**

There are some good practice examples of museum collections that are well-archived and are available as resources to support skills development.

Best practice examples to build on:

- The MERL's physical collection and their online catalogue and photographs – this has been cited as very useful and accessible to basket makers. It is not just a collection for its own sake; it is a resource for makers.
- National Museum of Wales' Gweithdy building, St Fagan's – a centre for craft skills combining the tangible with the intangible skills of making.
- Scottish Fisheries Museum, Anstruther – baskets associated with the local fishing and culture.
- The Basketry map of Oxfordshire – part of project by Oxfordshire Basketmakers in partnership with the Oxfordshire Museums Service in which a basketry map was created.

**Increase the number of collections that are documented and catalogued.**

Stephanie Bunn spoke about the Woven Communities project, an initiative and collaboration between a group of Scottish basketmakers, the Scottish Basketmakers Circle and Dr Stephanie Bunn. The aim was to collect together and document all the diverse research conducted about Scottish vernacular basketry and to record Scottish baskets and their significance to Scottish culture and community:

*"It took a group of Scottish basket makers led by Liz Balfour, Dawn Susan, Lois Walpole, Julie Gurr, and Ewen Balfour to show me that that the way to bring attention to basketry as a celebration of human skill was to celebrate them in every way possible."* Stephanie Bunn

There was an aspiration that the heritage baskets held in UK collections should be photographed and the dimensions taken and that this information should be put online for easy access by makers. This

is a significant task; however as the Woven Communities and the Oxfordshire Mapping projects have shown, it is possible and the strategies and guidelines used by these projects are potential sources of learning.

**A lot of research exists but it is not all collated in one place.**

- The work of individual researchers and makers – including Hilary Burns, Bunty Ball, Mary Butcher, Stephanie Bunn, Lois Walpole, Maurice Bichard, Greta Bertram and many others.
- The Basketry Then and Now project – a partnership between Basketry and Beyond and the University of Hertfordshire, researching basketry in WW1 and remaking pigeon carrier baskets and artillery shell covers. This project is well documented on line.
- The Basketmakers' Association Archive holds instructional DVDs of makers demonstrating heritage baskets, reports from the Traditional Basketry Project and publications relating to the heritage of basket making in the UK.

It was suggested that a website for heritage baskets from the UK and associated information would be very helpful.

**Skills and knowledge can be supported by digital media, video and online resources.**

Film has been a useful way of recording endangered basket making skills. Several respondents mentioned films that had been made to record skills of makers as they get close to retirement. These included Terry Bensley's herring swill and DJ Davies' cyntell.

There is a case for filming and recording some of the most endangered skills and basket types where there is only very limited knowledge remaining and little time to lose. Where this is the case, baskets that are on the critical or endangered list should be prioritised, and context as well as technique should be documented.

**An annual heritage basketry event should be held.**

An annual event or festival highlighting the range of heritage baskets in the UK, reporting on new research, providing skills sessions and celebrating UK basketry would raise the profile and understanding of baskets as part of the UK's cultural heritage.

**Building on the Red List methodology.**

In the next iteration of the Red List of Endangered Crafts the methodology could be developed to include more social and cultural aspects of baskets within specific geographic areas and communities.



## 8 THE FUTURE OF HERITAGE BASKETS AND ENDANGERED SKILLS

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Regarding endangered baskets in the UK anthropologist Dr Stephanie Bunn said that *“..... even when the life that needed them has changed beyond all recognition. They still have something to teach us.”*

### **Baskets as a sustainable product.**

The use of baskets as sustainable, locally sourced, organic and biodegradable containers was a recurring theme through the talks of the symposium speakers and in survey responses. The use of baskets for agriculture, fishing and other industrial processes has largely been replaced by plastic, the devastating impacts of which are now being seen in our oceans and landfill sites. The process of making a basket, however, is essentially unchanged from when it began many hundreds of years ago, requires few tools and equipment, and virtually no mechanisation. When they are finished with they can be composted.

*“The process of growing and making basket is a simple and perfect example of a sustainable profession. We should make use of this point of view.”* Jenny Crisp

In order for baskets to be robust and viable as containers they need to be well constructed and fit for purpose. This is perhaps where the higher level skills involved in making heritage baskets could be relevant to the future of baskets.

*“Maybe we should take this moment to be very optimistic about the future of the basket. There is a real possibility for the resurgence of these really sustainable containers; more sustainable than wood, glass or ceramics. So perhaps we can be optimists.”* Mary Butcher

### **Finding a new use in life for ancient knowledge.**

Lois Walpole began learning about the basketry history of Yell, Shetland and her explorations included learning straw kishie making from Ewen Balfour and interviewing people who owned kishies or remembered them. As is traditional Lois makes her kishie baskets from readily available materials in Shetland. In past generations these materials would have been straw and marram grass but now that these are no longer available she uses beach ropes and wave washed plastic to construct her baskets. Her feeling is that the time is right to use our traditional skills and knowledge in new ways.

*“With the growing international disenchantment with plastic and the increasing sense that life as we know it in the industrialised world must change, I feel that the time is perfect now to pass on this knowledge, which is essentially a survival skill, to a more receptive audience than has gone before.”* Lois Walpole

### **Baskets for wellbeing.**

Mary Butcher considers this to be fundamental to the future of basket making and relevant in a contemporary context. Teaching and continuing learning play an important role, both in the preservations of endangered basketry skills and also in their wider social benefits and the benefits to the individual.

*“As makers, we know that making has a huge impact on our state of mind and wellbeing. As Matthew Crawford says in his book ‘they make a man quiet and easy’. We become absorbed and focussed on what we are doing, and this is very good for us.*

*We need to know how things measure up to an objective standard. We need to be the best that we can possibly be and that also is good for us. It is good for our mental state. And we know that gaining an intimate knowledge of our materials is good, and this increases as you do it and you get more experienced. We also learn that this work can be intellectually challenging and rewarding as well; to succeed, to get better... It gives us all that feeling of being quiet and easy, which is something that we need to strive for. It is worth the effort."*

**Continue to celebrate excellence in basket making.**

Baskets are both functional and beautiful and should be celebrated as such. Basket making is a craft that is closely associated with the UK and is one in which we continue to be world leaders. A lesson that has been learned from the study of heritage and endangered baskets is that the underpinning technique and mastery of higher level skills must be maintained in order to ensure the long-term future of baskets as practical, useful and pleasing objects.

**Maintaining a collective historical memory of skills will ensure the future for both traditional and contemporary basketry.**

Most good basket makers recognise and acknowledge that they are using and building upon the skills and knowledge of previous generations. Most are also generous with this knowledge and are keen to pass on skills, which needs continuing encouragement and support. A characteristic of the UK basket making community is the presence of strong skill-sharing groups and networks. This provides support for skills development but also enhances wellbeing through an active creative community. These basket making communities and networks should be actively supported and enhanced.

Dr Stephanie Bunn quotes psychologist Michael Tomasello who said *'the factor that makes us uniquely human is our ability to build on past skills whilst taking them forward with us. We do this because we have the capacity as human beings to cooperate and share knowledge'*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Becoming Human: A Theory of Ontogeny, M Tomasello, 2018

## 9 NEXT STEPS

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These conclusions and recommendations are intended to support the strategic aims of the Basketmakers' Association and the Heritage Crafts Association in their shared aim to nurture and celebrate basketry skills for their own intrinsic value and cultural importance.

These next steps should not be considered a 'to do' list but are rather a framework on which all those involved in the sector can work together to promote the heritage basketry skills that underpin the craft.

### **Raise the national profile of basket making**

- Provide advocacy for basketry at a strategic level – e.g. through HCA representation on the APPG for crafts.
- Promote basket making as part of the UK's wider heritage market place and form links with high profile organisations e.g. National Trust.
- Promote basket making as significant to the UK's well-being, creativity and dexterity.
- Promote the role of basket making in the transition to a more sustainable, low carbon economy.
- Develop key partnerships with allied organisations, such as those representing the green wood working sector.

### **Continue to actively support and enhance skill-sharing groups and networks**

- Encourage and support local and regional projects in heritage basketry.
- Support skills development.
- Enhance wellbeing through active, creative communities.
- Identify experienced basket makers willing to teach specific endangered / specialist skills.

### **Carry out project work to promote heritage basketry skills**

- Consolidate BAs archive material based on best practice examples such as Woven Communities and the MERL archive.
- Provide guidance on researching baskets in local museums - standardising format and placing documentation in the BA archive.
- Record the last makers of endangered basketry forms, including their cultural context.
- Promote and develop research opportunities into willow growing and cooperative models of growing.

### **Build on the Red List of Endangered Crafts methodology to continue monitoring heritage basketry skills in the UK**

- Develop an online resource to continue collecting data and research on heritage basketry skills including the social and cultural aspects of baskets within specific geographic areas and communities.

### **Actively promote the basketry skills that have been identified as endangered or critically endangered**

- Promote specialist and higher-level skills and techniques such as English square work which underpin many heritage baskets with a particular focus on preserving higher-level skills.

- Promote the skills and knowledge associated with specific basket types, including their important contribution to the intangible cultural heritage of the UK.

#### **Investigate ways of delivering more skills and training in endangered and heritage basketry skills**

- Identify core skills / higher level skills for English willow work and for other forms of heritage basketry.
- Incorporate the researching and making of UK heritage basketry forms and skills in to the formal courses that are available.
- Incorporate willow growing / materials harvesting skills into formal training.
- Publicise funding opportunities for continuing skills development – Worshipful Company Walmsley Bursary, BA, HCA, QEST.
- Facilitate partnerships to develop training opportunities.
- Continue to increase the availability of business planning skills (such as those being offered online by Cockpit Arts): marketing, diversifying, pricing, social media skills, ongoing professional development.
- Investigate alternative models for delivering training e.g. structured mentorships.

#### **Celebrate heritage basketry**

- Create an annual event on endangered and heritage baskets to report on new research, provide skills sessions and celebrate basketry as part of the UK's cultural heritage.

## APPENDICES

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Please see attached document

- 1      CONSULTEES
- 2      SURVEY RESULTS
- 3      SUMMARY OF SYMPOSIUM TALKS AND Q&A
- 4      NOTES FROM WORKSHOP 2 (FROM AUDIO FILES AND ANNOTATED SHEETS)
- 5      BASKETS TYPES AND CLASSIFICATION