

Baskets, Bushcraft & Birthday Treats

Rob Exton gets weaving with Jonathan Ridgeon by giving a friend a basketmaking course as a gift



Jonathan Ridgeon is a young man with a passion for all things natural who is on a mission to become an educator and conveyor of his skills and crafts to others. I first came across him six years ago when I was getting into woodland crafts and searching the Internet for inspiration and information. Stumbling across jonsbushcraft.com was indeed inspirational, and with his excellent tutorial on carving a Kuksa, he encouraged me to have a go. The website has numerous articles from making a fishing hook, to cordage making and even making a canoe or skis.

As a 16 years old, Jon was demonstrating skills (mostly self-taught) way beyond his years including his passion for nature and natural crafts. In the intervening years Jon continued to develop his skill, refine his website and complete a BA degree, with honours, in fine art, during which he concentrated on conceptual sculptural pieces using natural materials such as wood and rushes.

After this period of study Jon was keen to get back to nature and crafts so decided sharing his skills with others was the way to enjoy his crafts and earn a living. Thus his basketmaking courses were introduced in mid 2011.

In the Woods



Jonathan has recently negotiated the use of a 100 acre wood nearby, which from July 2012 he will be using for Woodland Basket Making, incorporating bramble, ivy and other natural materials if participants would like to use them. Shortly after that he will be offering other craft courses and bushcraft style courses.

News of these will be featured on his website in the near future (jonsbushcraft.com).

Birthday treat

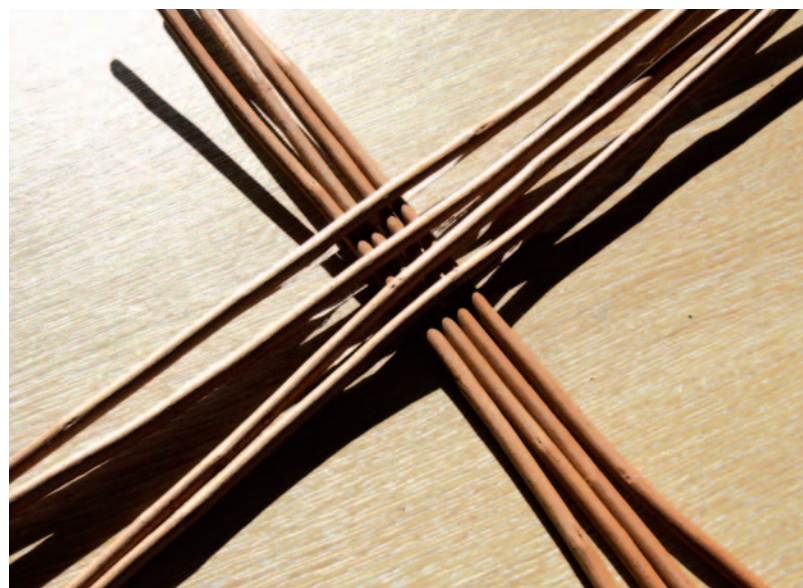
My good friend and colleague, Carol (left), is the Finance and Administration manager in my business with a talent for many things but, she is the first to admit, not very practical with her hands. With a special birthday looming I decided to treat her to a basketmaking course with Jonathan, which took place on the first Sunday in April.

Carol was excited at the opportunity but a little anxious that she would not pick it up and that she would be slower than the other participants. Failing to achieve what she wanted, to a standard she expects, was not an option so I was taking a risk in trusting this budding basketmaker to Jon's tutelage.

We met at the Reading Rooms (the old school house now used for village activities such as art classes) in the village of Astley, near Nuneaton, Warks. Courses are restricted to six students to ensure that Jon can give each participant sufficient attention and to help redo the bits that inevitably go wrong and need correcting.

Materials, tools and bases

This is an introductory course with all of us making the same style of basket, some will stop at 4-5in high for use as a fruit basket, whilst most will carry on higher to about 10in high and add a handle to create a shopper.



Making it is taught in the style of a demonstration of a technique followed by one's execution of the technique on your own basket followed by a demonstration of the next technique and so on. It is a clear and understandable approach which helps everyone to move forward with knowledge and understanding. Jon spends time discussing the few tools required and materials, with particular reference to materials that can be gathered in the wild and how to use them. Of great interest to me



were the baskets made from brambles which are so prevalent in our woodland and are a fabulous renewable resource for us all to gather.

We used commercially-grown brown willow (actually green in colour) which is so called because it has the bark left on and needs four days of soaking in water to make it pliable, along with buff willow which has had the bark removed and only requires soaking for 1.5 hours.

The base is started with eight rods 10in long and



Jon Ridgeon showing how the next stage is done (top). You start by crossing eight rods (left) and then use a twine weave (below left) to secure the rods and then a chase weave (below) to make them into 'spokes' (right) and prepare the base



Extra rods are then added (right) and bent upwards to start the sides of the basket



of quite substantial thickness. Four rods have a slit created in the middle and the other four are inserted through this slot to make a cross. This is called a four-rod slath.

Two weavers (rods) are taken and the thin ends inserted into the slit to trap them before you use a technique called twine weave. After a couple of rounds the spokes are secure in their positions and all the rods are bent a little to equally space them like the spokes of a wheel. Then we changed to a



plain chase weave until the required diameter of the base had been reached at about 8-10in.

Staking up

Sixteen new rods are now taken and inserted into the weave of the base alongside each spoke, opening up the weave with a bodkin, awl, large nail or screwdriver to allow the new stake to be pushed in as far as possible.

Using your thumbnail as a bending fulcrum you then bend the stakes upward and gather all 16 of them above the base and temporarily tie them at the top. To make a good start to the sides and secure the stakes in position we commence a weave called the three rod wale where three rods are inserted behind three consecutive stakes after which the left most weavers, one after another, are woven in front of two and behind one and so on until two rows have been completed.

French randing

This phase requires some space and a clear mind with 16 weavers all inserted at the same time the basket is some 7-8ft across and with six people weaving at the same time there is much hilarity as we beat each other with willow tips. The inevitable mistakes are made and sections have to be undone and re-woven in the correct place and order. Jon shows great patience and calm determination as he coaches individuals to learn the techniques.

With the techniques mastered it is not long before these weavers have run out to fine tips which may be high enough for what you require. Whether you are stopping at this stage or creating a higher basket a row of three rod wale is a good idea at this stage to tighten everything up.

Creating the rim

Carol and I were on a bit of a tight deadline and as Carol had wanted a fruit basket for her kitchen we had reached sufficient height to commence making our rims. This is made from the stakes which you now bend down to the right and weave into a pattern, of which there are many varieties. The pattern we used is called a 'three behind two rod border' which is quite complex but mostly consists



Having staked-up you start a weave call the three-rod wale (above), with three rods inserted behind three consecutive stakes. You can insert another three rod wale higher up (left) for strength

of weaving each upright in front of two and behind one until the end when the last two need to be threaded into place to complete the pattern. A final trim of all of the ends and the basket is finished, a very satisfying experience indeed.

The other trainee basketmakers continued with another layer of French randing, a final three rod wale layer followed by rim creation and the fitting of a handle which is made from a hazel hoop wrapped in willow rods and bound to the baskets rim with two more willow rods.

Conclusions

This is a great way to spend a Sunday, in the middle of the country (Meriden is not far away), so many of you are within striking distance for a day trip. Jonathan is a delightful young man who is patient, calm and very skilled. He is a clear teacher and enabler who deserves to do well in his chosen way of life. Mostly though, I must recommend this course for its sheer value for money. At £55 including tea and coffee it has to be one of the best value courses in the country.

So how did the birthday girl fare? "I was thrilled to complete my basket of which I am really proud," said Carol afterwards. "I was a little frustrated at times when I got muddled up but Jon was patient and persisted with me until I 'got it'. This is really something that anyone can have a go at and enjoy. I enjoyed it so much that I bought a pair of cutters and a bundle off willow off John so that I can make another basket at home.

"At my age I want for nothing with regards to gifts of a material nature. The gift of a craft is something I can take pride in, enjoy and maybe I can teach my grand-daughter when I have practised a little more."

Details If you are interested in other crafts Jon has some great little e-book tutorials at only £3.50 each. Each one covers a separate subject, including: Net Making; Beginners Guide to Wood Carving; Spoon Carving; How to Weave a Melon Basket; Hand Drill Fire Lighting; Making a Shave Horse The Traditional Way; and Weaving Rectangular baskets. To find out more visit his website (jonsbushcraft.com) where you will also find details of his courses.



To create the rim (right and below) you bend down the stakes and weave them into a pattern. Rod and Carol attempted a quite complex 'three behind two rod border', and then the job was done



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