

# Weaver of the woods

From his Lake District workshop, Owen Jones crafts 'swills', continuing an ancient Cumbrian tradition of oak basketmaking

Words: Vivienne Crow Photos: Dave Willis

**O**n the wooded shores of Coniston Water, Owen Jones, one of only two swill basketmakers left in Cumbria, sits in his chilly workshop surrounded by wood – oak, hazel, birch, willow – all in various stages of processing.

Sawdust and shavings litter the floor. Steam drifts up from the large boiler at the back of the room, filling the space with the sweet smell of oak boiling. Using nothing more than two blunt riving knives and his skilled, blackened hands, he splits the oak into the thin strips he needs for weaving around an oval-shaped rim of hazel.

"Swills first show up in records in the 16th century," Owen says, explaining that they were unique to the High Furness Fells area of Lancashire, now south Cumbria. Initially the product of a cottage industry, Owen says the baskets would have been used by farmers for picking potatoes, sowing seed, feeding animals and so on. The name 'swill' may come from the basket's use in pig feeding, but Owen prefers the theory that the name

originates from the cockle-pickers on the mudflats of Morecambe Bay, who would have used loosely woven baskets to swill seawater around their shellfish, rinsing the sand from them.

## THE RISE AND FALL OF SWILLS

During the Industrial Revolution, demand for swills increased dramatically. They were used in mines, mills and anywhere that needed

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containers to carry items. Each town and large village would have had swill shops, fed by the centuries-old coppicing industry. Today, there are only two swill-makers left and the area's coppicing industry – which once supplied everything from medieval iron smelters through to 19th-century bobbin mills – has been reduced to its bare bones.

Owen, aged 60, grew up in the New Forest, climbing trees and making dens, so returning to a world of wood after a career in helicopter engineering felt almost like coming home. "I learned swill-making from John Barker in the mid- to late-1980s, after being introduced to him by my father-in-law."

John learned his trade in the 1930s and had retired from professional swill-making by the time Owen met him. The last of his generation, he wanted to ensure his skills didn't die with him.

"I had long been interested in using my hands, being creative," Owen adds. "And it's not such a big leap from helicopter engineering; it's about using your hands to feel and make judgements. It doesn't take long to learn the different

processes involved, but you do need some empathy with the wood. Even now, 31 years later, I'm still learning and improving."

Like John before him, Owen is passing on his skills. Over the years, several hundreds of people have completed his swill-making courses, but only one has gone on to make the baskets full-time. Lorna Singleton,

Once the wood is prepared, it takes Owen Jones around four to five hours to weave a traditional oak swill basket. Made in the southern Lake District for centuries, swills were used on farms and in the home, as well as in mines, mills and ironworks



36, took the course eight years ago and now makes oak swills from her base in Kendal.

“Owen has been incredible over the years; really supportive,” says Lorna. “If somebody shows a real interest in the craft, and has a synergy with the materials, he’s always very generous with his time and resources.”

She sometimes uses his workshop, and the two basketmakers also manage some woodland together.

#### MEETING DEMAND

Initially, Owen worked as a night porter in a local hotel while learning his trade, but he soon found that as

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fast as he was making the baskets, he was selling them. It quickly became a full-time occupation.

In the early days of his business, he bought his raw material from Bill Hogarth of nearby Spark Bridge, the

**LEFT** Owen selects and fells the oak from the woodlands he manages himself, making sure none of the harvested wood is wasted

**RIGHT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** A pair of cleft oak field gates and some completed swills await their buyers in Owen’s workshop; Owen inspects a completed swill; strips of oak, called taws, are smoothed ready for weaving; each taw is woven between the ribs, or spelks

area’s last coppice merchant. When Bill died in the late 1990s, rather than buying in from elsewhere, Owen decided to cut his own wood.

This marked the beginning of diversification into other products. To avoid wasting any wood that was harvested but wasn’t suitable for swills, Owen started producing gate hurdles, oak benches and charcoal. He also now supplies raw material for Stott Park near Windermere, Lakeland’s only working bobbin mill – now managed by English Heritage – and bark for Britain’s last oak bark tannery, J & FJ Baker in Devon. Even the smallest of hazel branches and twigs can be put to use as pea sticks and bean poles.

It’s a seasonal process. On dry winter days, Owen goes out harvesting in the frosty woods that cloak the steep slopes above his home. Wet days are spent in his workshop, processing wood and making swills. Spring marks the start of show season, during which he gives demonstrations and sells his



### FOLLOW CUMBRIA’S CRAFT TRAIL

From spinning and weaving to forging and throwing, craftspeople in Cumbria are keeping centuries-old skills alive, and you can visit many of them in their workshops.

Artist blacksmith **John Law** (pictured right) operates an open-door policy at Yew Tree Barn near Grange-over-Sands. Watch him crafting ornate gates, fireside tools and garden ornaments. [bespokersforge.co.uk](http://bespokersforge.co.uk)

**Farfield Mill**, a restored 19th-century woollen mill near Sedbergh, is home to the studios of several artists, including handweavers, felt

makers, leather workers and jewellery makers; open daily. [farfieldmill.org](http://farfieldmill.org)

**Debbie Copley** (far right) operates a stained-glass studio in Kendal where visitors can watch her working on her latest commissions; open every day except Thursdays and Sundays. [debbiessed.com](http://debbiessed.com)

Two local potters have teamed up at Brougham Hall near Penrith. **Mary Chappelhow** and **Gwen Bainbridge** operate separate studios in the 15th-century manor house but share a gallery. [broughamhall.co.uk](http://broughamhall.co.uk)



Cumbria is also the venue for several annual craft festivals. Meet printmakers, purchase work and attend workshops at **Printfest** in Ulverston every May; [printfest.uk](http://printfest.uk). Similar events for ceramics fans

– **Potfest in the Park** and **Potfest in the Pens** – are held every July and August near Penrith; [potfest.co.uk](http://potfest.co.uk). **Woolfest** is a celebration of natural fibres held in Cocker mouth in June; [woolfest.co.uk](http://woolfest.co.uk).

wares at craft shows, agricultural shows and wood fairs, mostly in the north of England. In June, he and a friend meet in Somerset to cut rushes, which he then weaves into hats. When the shows end in the autumn, it is time to start work on Christmas orders and prepare for festive markets.


### FROM WOODS TO HEARTH

Owen derives great pleasure from seeing his products through from harvesting to sale. “It’s about the whole journey – from being out in the

woods to meeting the customers. I get some orders off my website, but I sell most of my swills at the shows. In the early years, I was selling to local people who had been brought up using swills, but that generation’s gone now.

“Those cultural factors are less of a consideration when people buy swills now, but they’re still not ornaments; they’re used as log baskets, as cradles, shopping baskets, for gardening.”

His swills sell from £62 to £85, the most popular being the 22-inch basket, priced at £72. “I don’t buy in raw

materials, so I’m in total control and keep my overheads low,” Owen adds. “Some people think I’m bonkers for not hiking the price, but swills weren’t a precious item in this area; they were a functional, everyday thing. That’s what I was taught by John, and that’s still my ethos today.” 



**Vivienne Crow** is a freelance writer and photographer who specialises in the outdoors and has a love of hill-walking. She is based in Cumbria.

## NINE STEPS TO MAKE A SWILL



**1.** Having harvested the oak in the woodland he manages, Owen splits a trunk using an axe and wedges.



**2.** He cleaves the oak into length-wise billets ready for the boiler. Driving the froe (cleaving tool) down with a knocker, he splits the oak.



**3.** Owen uses a foot-operated vice, known as a mare, and a draw knife to dress the hazel before steaming.



**4.** Having steamed the hazel to soften it, he bends it into an oval ‘bool’ – the rim into which the oak will be woven.



**5.** Immediately after removing the oak from the boiler, Owen rives or splits it into thick ribs or ‘spelks’, and ‘taws’: longer strips for weaving.



**6.** By placing them on his knee pad, Owen dresses the taws: smoothing and shaping the long strands with a sharp knife.



**7.** Work on the basket begins with the central, or lapping, spelk. This is tied with knot taws to give the basket its shape and depth.



**8.** Having fitted the first five spelks, Owen weaves in the initial taws. The first is the narrowest and they get progressively wider.



**9.** After the last spelks are added, the final taws are woven in. The finished swill basket is handmade, functional and beautiful.