

BASKET-MAKING

Basketmaking has always been a much-needed trade in the countryside with the craft being passed on to apprentices who in time took over as the master.

But there was only so much demand in the small towns and after Henry and Francis Ellis both trained in Campden, probably under Joseph Sandford in the 1840s, Francis moved to Evesham and set up his business there.

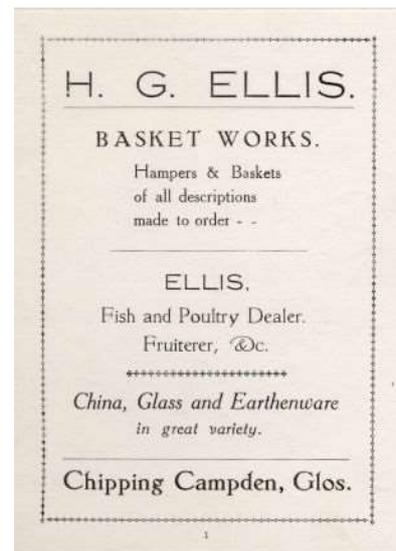
Similarly, Henry's son, Harry George Ellis, having trained with his father in the workshop behind Barley Mow in Leasebourne, then had to set up in a different business, as a fish and game dealer.



Ebrington orchard c. 1900, photographed by Jesse Taylor

After Henry Ellis died in 1900, his wife Hannah carried on with the business, and is listed in the 1901 census as a basketmaker, still at Barley Mow. She died in 1902 and Harry G. took over the basketmaking business, moving in 1905 to the shop now known as Cotswold Luxe where there was a suitable barn behind to set up the basketshop.

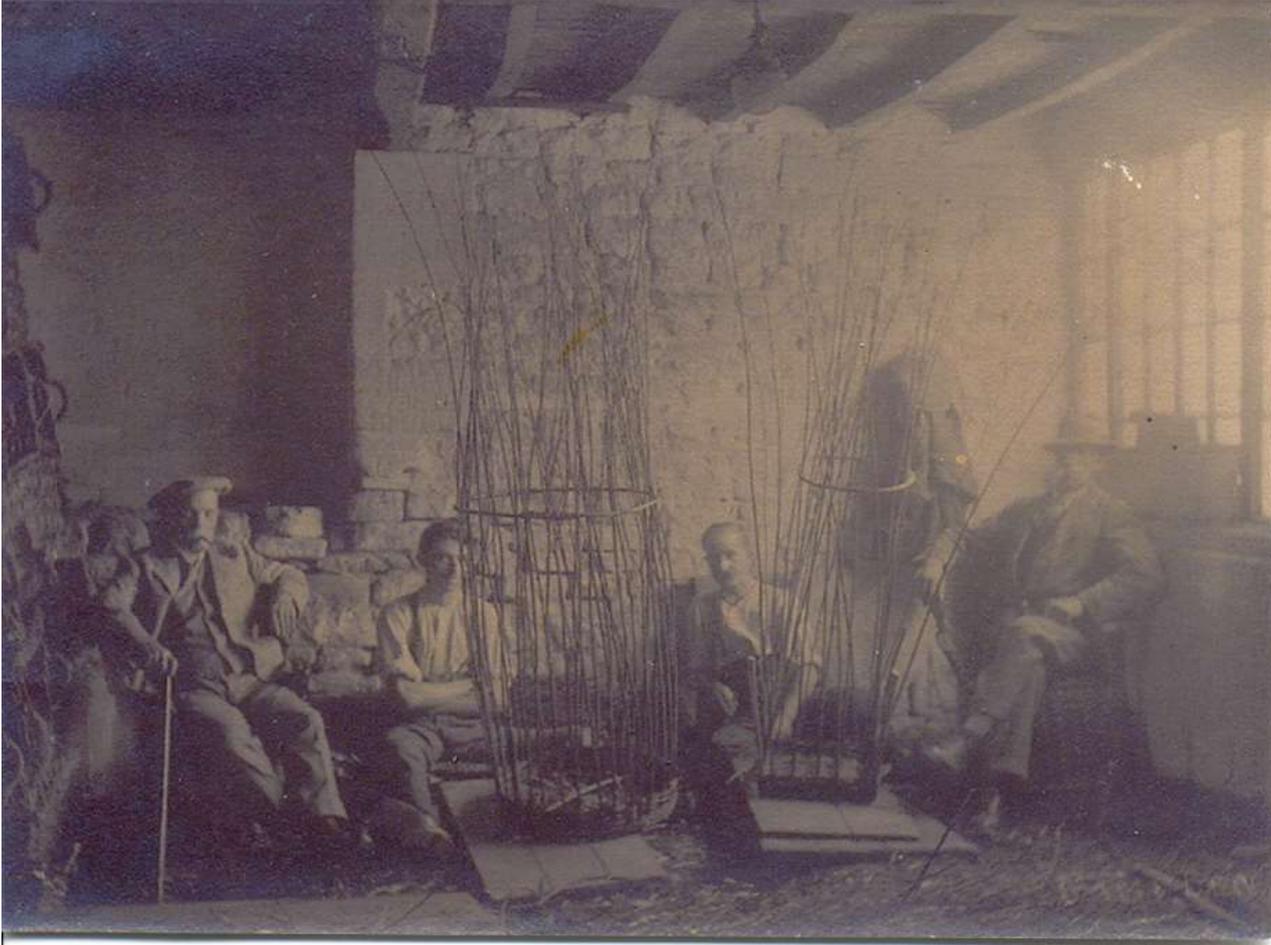
His second wife, Martha Kate, ran the fish and game shop on the front and sold a wide range of goods – vegetables, china, rugs, household items, hosiery while he ran the basketmaking business in the workshop at the back.



The Ellis children and friends, outside the shop c. 1906

Harry George's son, Lionel Ellis, wrote his memories of the Basket Shop:

The Basket Shop was a social centre for the men of the town, even including the vicar and the local MP. There was nearly always a visitor in there. Old Joe Chamberlain came in every morning until he got the worst of an argument and stayed away for about three months and then one morning came in as if nothing had happened. The Vicar made periodic visits and sat on a pot hamper (our main trade) for about half an hour.



Hathaway and Fred Taylor were brothers-in-law and were at that time very good friends. Dennis' son, Bert, came to work there when he left school.

The Morris Dancing was re-formed and like many events started in the basket shop. Dennis was the fiddler, Fred Taylor, Fred Hathaway (brother of Dennis), Bert (son), Roughy, Don and self were the dancers. In 1919 the Jazz Band came into being of which the Morris Dancers were a part. I should mention that all in the Basket Shop could play some musical instrument and the first dance band was formed there and played at dances in the Town Hall. When the Jazz (Band) outlived its usefulness (it raised much money for the War Memorial and other things besides drinks for the members – we always seemed to perform outside pubs), the Morris dancers also ceased.

The pot hampers were sold to merchants in Birmingham market but we delivered them to local growers in loads on horse drawn trolleys who then sent their produce to the market.



Making a delivery in Weston-sub-Edge

All this was before wooden crates and chip baskets were introduced. The pots, although the same size, held different weights of produce – eg potatoes 40al, plums 70lb, peas 40lb, beans 40lb, apples 60lb. We also made round skips for cherries and for picking sprouts before nets came in. Laundry baskets, chairs and hampers with lids for Northwick Park – Captain Churchill sent three hampers every week to friends or relatives in London containing in season fruit, vegs, pheasants, etc. Dad also put scaines (a buff osier split in three and then shaved the pith out which left something like chair cane) round the handles of silver teapots sent along from Harts at the Guild.

The pot hampers we had to mark with the firm's trademark and initials. Paint for this was bought by the hundredweight and we had to mix it with linseed oil. Coal was not delivered then in bags and we made round baskets each to hold one cwt. With two handles about 18ins apart on the top for the coal man to hold.

Mrs Barr, who lived at Cotswold House, was a breeder and shower of wolfhounds and we made the baskets for them to be transported to the various shows. These could only be made on a fine day as they were too large to go through the shop door when completed. Fred Taylor always made them. He was the complete basketmaker. Each man had a plant, sometimes one piece of wood and sometimes two, the latter put side by side to equal the size of the one. They were approx 6 ft. long and the men sat on a cushion with a lapboard which had a steel spike in the middle on which the bottom of the basket was impaled and so could be rotated as desired. The last job at night was cutting out for next day. A bundle of osiers was brought in and sorted out. Some for the bottom, then the stakes, handle rods (which were the straightest) etc. It's too difficult to explain all this on paper.

Father was one of the largest dealers of osiers in the country. Apparently one of his main suppliers was Gardiners at Wootton Wawen, and they had boilers there for boiling the osiers before stripping the bark off.



There was a boiler down the back of the Campden workshop. The osiers were boiled in a large tank for 1 ½ hours to make them pliable. We also made picking baskets. The fruit pickers use a leather belt round their shoulders to fasten the basket to free their hands to climb the ladders and pick the fruit. In fact there was nothing in the basket making we could not make – cradles, clothes baskets, baker's and butcher's and cane seating chairs, but not rush seats, we took all those to a blind man at Stratford-on-Avon.

After the War (before wooden crates) the hamper trade was so good that more men who had never made a basket before were brought in and roughly showed the rudiments of the job and then carried (on) until we had about fifteen at work.

Osiers are stacked up against the wall, ready to be soaked in the trough before use.

We got most of our osiers in the 1920's from an osier bed at Barford near Warwick. Eleven acres, all the year round work. Also some from Tachbrook more or less the same district and some from Ripple near Tewkesbury. To get white osiers they were peeled as soon as they were cut. We had to boil them to get buff. They were pulled through a brake which split the skin. Women were employed for this work.



HG Ellis (seated far right) with two workmen and Lionel Ellis (behind)

When we were boiling the osiers in the winter time we used to put the iron bar across the boiler hold and roast potatoes under the fire. Other boys also came down with their potatoes." (Lionel Ellis)

HG died in 1938, by which time the Basket Shop had closed down due to changes in the market for baskets, and increased mass production of chip baskets.