

A Celebration of Willow



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*The Definitive Guide to Sculpture Techniques
Woven with Ecology, Sustainability
and Healing*

Kim Creswell

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*Dedicated to Rowan and Oakley,
my pride and my joy.*

*In solidarity with all brave environmentalists,
who know true riches cannot be measured in money.*

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A Celebration of Willow



Introduction

Growing up by the banks of both the River Wey and the Wey Navigation Canal, I must have played in the shade of willows throughout my childhood, without realising what an important part of my life the plant would become.

A wild sort of child I was, favouring running through woods, building dens, and making potions out of plants over sitting indoors playing with dollies. I felt more at home in the great outdoors than in a brick box. Sadly, during my formative teenage years I was witness to the destruction wrought upon the ancient Wisley Woods and surrounding ecosystems by the crazy obsession with road building, and I decided that I did not want to support a system that prioritised personal greed over the natural world.

The path calling to me lay in making, but being part of “the system” meant forgoing my heart’s cries. This led to the purchase of a dodgy old Transit van in 1990, determined to travel the country, painting what I saw.

Being skint, and by no means mechanically minded, led inevitably to the breakdown of said van and the unsought-for permanent halt in an Oxford car park. When one morning I woke up lying in a puddle of rainwater from the leaking van roof, some neighbouring travelling people offered to show me how to build a “bender tent” – a traditional Gypsy dwelling made from arched, coppiced hazel rods, with a canvas tarpaulin slung over the top. As it happened, there were no coppiced hazel rods growing in the vicinity, but there was a fallen willow tree on an abandoned Victorian rubbish dump. From its stump



had grown rods, straight, strong, and very bendy. Those rods we cut to make a tent frame, then covered this with some found old plastic sheets. The construction provided adequate shelter from the elements.

Now that was a cold winter, with temperatures regularly down to -8°C . One particularly memorable night, a storm took the cover and left me in bed looking up at wild, starry skies while my few possessions blew away around me. Though I had no wood burner for warmth, I did have three large dogs (and the occasional company of a grumpy billy goat) who kept me from hypothermia.

When spring shone, it was definitely time to change my view and change my luck. As I dismantled the simple structure that had been my home for the winter, I noticed that the willow rods had taken root, with tiny leaf buds emerging along their length. This observation immediately led to what I can only describe as a “light-bulb moment”. I suddenly envisaged sculptures made of willow trees; these were shapes that lived, breathed, and grew, way beyond the input of the sculptor, sculptures that took on their own lives, absorbing and reflect-

ing the environmental variabilities that every living thing is subject to. I pictured people walking through forests of trees that grew like horses, wondering if those trees had freakishly purposed themselves.

Certainly my life did change dramatically from that moment. I found myself with a Rowan seed in my belly, and the following winter I gave birth to my daughter in a caravan, down an old ox drove, under the branches of an oak tree.

When Rowan turned one, we exchanged the bus in which we were living for a wagon-horse and a spinner cart. I returned to bender life with my baby in the company of a horse, who took the weight of our chattels, firewood, and spring water.

I had the good fortune to share this nomadic lifestyle with many finely skilled rural artisans. We sold our wares on the side of the road as we travelled.

It was during this time that I began to revisit and manifest my ideas of willow sculpture, experimenting with shape and form, using the sticks, herbage, and withies which were abundant as we moved through the countryside.

As time went on, a display of willow sculptures and hedgerow baskets was ever-present outside the wagon, as we stopped on verges and commons. Those displays made us approachable, and there was



Picture by Steven Wooster

often a stream of interested people stopping for a chat and to browse the unique hand-made items, created from the very land we were standing on. The friendly support of these good folk facilitated the continued development of my ideas and techniques.

I began by making small items, such as pigs and geese, developing techniques for detailed anatomical shapes, and working sympathetically with hand-collected natural materials. In this book I share with you the techniques that I have developed and refined over the last thirty years. If you can make a pig and a goose, then you can pretty much make anything!

My sculptures became well known as we travelled the lanes with our horse, wagon, and woven wares. Locals would ask if I'd prune their gardens in return for the willow, and suddenly I found myself with stacks of coppiced willow and no way to move it. There was far too much to put on the cart – my poor old horse would've been on his knees!

The glut of materials prompted me to “weave big”, and I began to construct a “life-sized” (because they are real, y'know) unicorn on the wayside greensward, while the kettle was bubbling on the stick fire. To me, unicorns symbolise joyful freedom, creativity, and the successful pursuit of dreams. Three different people invited that sculpture into their garden, prompting the creation of further unicorns, and then a couple of years of making many unicorns with different specifics. This repetition facilitated development of frame techniques, muscular representation, and a wider exploration of living willow sculpture.

I held my first willow workshop in 1999, at the request of some passers-by. We spent a sunny spring day sitting by a stream, amongst the primroses, and it was there that I saw the deep therapeutic values of working with willow. All plants have their own characteristics, you may even say personalities. Willow is a plant that seems to be deeply nurturing and able to offer strong, yet flexible, support. Since that first sylvan sculpture session, I have instructed over a thousand people in willow sculpture, and I love to watch the subtle movements of emotion as the willow is woven. I find this more prominent when using fresh willow, but it is still present to some extent when the willow has been stored and soaked.

After being mainly home-educated, my daughter requested school attendance in 2003 – a decision that required us to become sedentary. I was keen to keep our low-impact lifestyle, so I bought a plot of land





Photo by Steven Wooster

*Photo by David and Carol Markson*

at auction and began to develop an off-grid, organically run smallholding and nature reserve. As a template for management I used the old-fashioned biodiverse common, which we, during our wagon days, so often used to call home. A withy bed was planted, with gathered cuttings, to supply materials for commissions and classes. The encompassing hedges were traditionally laid, following roughly fifty years of flailing, and reinstated as an invaluable resource for man and beast.

The burgeoning hedgerow and flourishing of species, on the previously mono-crop plot, offered provisions for the continuance of food foraging and medicine making. Serendipity took me by the hand in 2015 and led me down the path of rigorous medical herbalism training, which has allowed me to add a whole new layer to my intimate relationship with willow.

Since the 1990s a new industry has developed, that of willow sculpture. No doubt folk would have made figures from willow, to represent their life experience, but I suggest that in times gone by practical willow items, such as baskets, were more necessary to ordinary life. As a society, we have suffered a strange shift that has removed us from our daily dose of nature . . . our place of belonging. We no longer handle the well-worn withies of a shopper every

time we step out of the door. All has become plastic, and with that we feel a yearning, sometimes unheard but always there. I suggest that this is what has led to the rise in popularity of willow sculpting, a seeking for reconnection with our true natures. Willow offers to be our guide.

In this book I would like to share my own willow sculpture techniques with you, along with many other gifts that my dear plant ally has shared to reconnect people with planet. The generosity of *Salix* knows no bounds but is not to be taken for granted. No plant or animal is “under our dominion”. Every living being has its own thing going on; their priority is not our benefit.

I have compiled and included a Glossary at the end of the book, to which you can refer as you read and make, if terms are unfamiliar.

* * *

This book is a celebration of Willow and how she allows us to connect with ourselves as part of nature. We people are relative newcomers to this planet; we have evolved as part of this complex web of life, and this I urge you to consciously acknowledge every time you hold a willow wand. Nurturing is Mother Nature, and fortunate we are indeed.



Photo by Chris Groves

