

April Blog

Our meeting of 18th was nicely busy, with a choice of two morning workshops, which were very much enjoyed by participants. Penny led a group up on the stage learning to create Art Yarn; not the sort we all turn out to begin with and when things just aren't going well, but carefully designed for a purpose or achieved by deliberate experimentation. .



Art Yarns



At the other end of the hall, Nicky and Frances took a group to try Microwave dyeing, using acid dyes, which looked like great fun and certainly produced some stunning results.



The rest of the hall was full of people quietly getting on with their own projects or helping and supporting others, as usual.

The Harold Woodrow Trophy, open to all who have not yet won any Guild prize and judged by the Committee, was won by Madeline Goodey, with some utterly adorable felted animals, and Claire Cleverly came a very close second with some beautiful skeins of dyed yarn.



Madeline receiving her trophy from Nicky



Claire receiving her trophy from Nicky

In the afternoon, we had a talk from Anna Lewington, Rush Weaver. She explained how she had become interested in how people use the plants in their local area as part of her brief as an ethno-botanist in South and Central America; basketry in particular intrigued her. When she later moved to North Dorset she discovered that we had had our own tradition of using some plants more or less just as they are, without chemical or mechanical processing, until the very recent past; the last Dorset basketmaker died in 1964.



The craft came very close to dying out altogether, and is still very much in danger of doing so. She was delighted to find good stands of club rush (*Schoenoplectus lacustris*) on the River Stour at Hammoon, close to her home. This usually grows in, and is harvested from, the water, whereas reeds, which do look similar but are woody and jointed, generally grow on the banks.

She also explained that rushes have tall jointless stems, unlike reeds, which are more suitable for thatching. Rush undergoes a chemical change when it is cut green, dried for up to 10 days, then re-wetted, making it very strong and also watertight; it is still used between the staves of traditional whisky barrels to keep the whisky from leaking out! Historically rushes had many uses, for example making rope, or being dipped in tallow to make rushlights, which could burn for up to an hour. She also explained that rushes have tall jointless stems, unlike reeds, which are more suitable for thatching.

In 2006 the availability of grants and some workshop space at Gold Hill Organic Farm at Child Okeford meant that Rush Works could be started, as a community project, to revive the craft of rush cutting and rush work in North Dorset. (See Anna's website at <https://www.anna-lewington.co.uk/index.html> for further information.) She also went into schools and colleges to give children a chance to enjoy their own local tradition. Sadly over time the grants dried up and the workshop space became unavailable, so now she runs courses by arrangement at her home or in other suitable locations. She also highly recommends the Basketmaker's Association for help and inspiration, and showed us several very useful books. We had the chance to see and handle some of Anna's delightful makes; Anna's hats and the strong but light and airy baskets were strong favourites amongst the members. If goods made from rush are kept from damp, it can last a very long time; there is even evidence of rush work in ancient Egyptian tombs! Altogether a very interesting afternoon.

Below is a selection of the rush weaving that Anna brought along for her talk



Rush Weaving Workshop on Sunday

After a quick run-through for those who hadn't been at Saturday's meeting, we got stuck in to making a little mat, using 10 rushes cut short as "stakes" to form a simple woven base, "pairing" two rushes around these stakes, then finishing by weaving the stakes around behind one other and pulling them down through the paired section. Alison inadvertently discovered that if you keep the tension tight enough, the sides start to curve upwards; her "mat" turned into a rather lovely bowl! This took us up to lunchtime as we became more familiar with the look and feel of the rushes and tools, and how best to join new rushes into the weaving.



Busy Bees!



Alison's Bowl



Mat in the making



Ellen making her long braid



Coiling the long braid

After lunch we quickly made little bracelets by folding one rush in half, twisting the two ends separately in one direction then "plying" them together in the other direction, just as people have made twine from various plants since the dawn of time. Then we made long braids of three strands, using up to ten rushes, trying to keep the thickness as even as possible. These we then started to coil and stitch into place, using thinner rushes as a thread. This took a lot longer than you'd think, especially when the "threads" split or broke!



Angie's final pieces

So at the end of the afternoon, most of us took more rushes home, trying like mad to keep them damp *en route*, to finish our little baskets or whatever we had decided to turn our braids into. We all agree that we had a splendid, enjoyable and productive day and learnt a lot.