

Project: Willow Roundhouses

Designed and Created by Trish Matthews for [Ufton Court](#) January 2013

Aim: Update Ufton court's wattle and daub activity to something less messy and which takes a little longer and gives the children more of a sense of working with natural materials.

Background: The existing activity involved weaving a small hurdle with doweling uprights and cane weavers. The problem with these materials is that because they are processed, they are all



identically shaped and they appear "man made". Also cane is non-native and would not have been used in this country as a building material. Daubing the walls with a mixture of wet earth and straw gave the children a feeling for how the buildings would have been constructed but produced something what was not very attractive (or convenient!) for transporting back to school and home.

First steps: The initial change was to introduce willow as an alternative weaving material. This is one of the native materials used for making hurdles and gave the children a feel for working with a natural material where each piece behaves slightly differently. The woven hurdles were also more attractive. Using willow requires slightly more preparation and organisation, since the willow has to be soaked for approximately 1 day per foot (whereas the cane only requires an hour or so). This meant that we had to sort out the logistics of buying a tank for soaking willow and also get organised to make sure the right amount of willow was soaked (the willow goes mouldy and is unpleasant to work with if left soaking for too long). It also provided an opportunity to introduce different types of weave and to connect this to other trades such as basket making. After making small hurdles the children could have a go at making full sized hurdles using locally coppiced hazel. We decided not to daub the hurdles since they were more attractive than the cane and it also reduced the mess during transport!



Willow roundhouses: The next stage was to design a new, more challenging, project which gave the children a better feel for the materials and something more impressive to take home afterwards.

Using the basic method for creating a simple Danish basket, I created a willow roundhouse where the upright stakes are drawn together after weaving sides to create roof beams which can then be covered at a later date (the example here has been covered with old, unwoven, seagrass but any available material can be used (grass, heather, even moss.....)).



The Danish baskets are usually made by passing the uprights through a sheet of cardboard or wood and tying top and bottom and then weaving the sides. This proved rather too challenging for the children to handle, so a simpler approach was taken by building low bases that could be stood flat on a table and the uprights pushed through to hold them in place while the sides are woven. Stronger weaves are used at the bottom and top of the walls (pairing) to keep the weave in place and the main part of the walls are woven with a continuous weave using single willow rods and changing direction at the doorway. When the walls are finished the roof bars can be kinked at the top of the walls and then tied to create the roof.



Results: It can be challenging to get a whole class through the activity in the available time due to the different abilities, but the finished houses look really impressive and we have had great feedback from the children and from the schools who have made them. Upton is hoping to build a full size roundhouse in 2014 and this activity will link in very well. It also gives the children a much better appreciation of how such buildings can be created and of historic building methods. Definitely a success!!

