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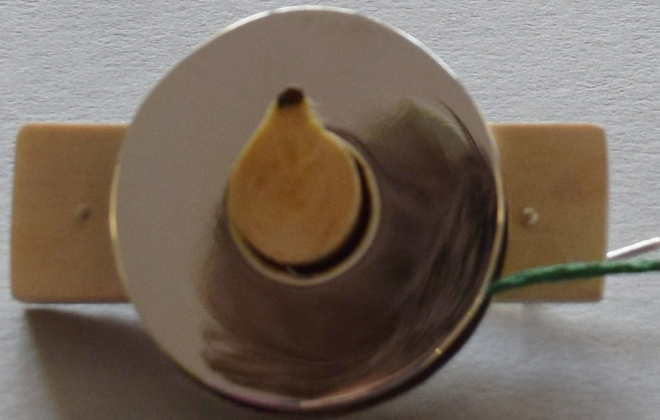


This project aims to engage people with the natural world and the outdoors through making with natural materials. Working with children through the Woodcraft Folk and also Ditchling Museum of Arts and Craft, I realised that children get to make things less than ever, and know less about the outdoors than ever. Seeing how much they enjoyed the workshops at Woodcraft, and how much improved their behaviour and relationships were generally in the environment of camp inspired me to start the project. I started with three main materials; nettles, birch bark, and amadou. I wanted the materials to be a mixture of familiar, like the plant nettle, made unfamiliar and new. I investigated their material properties thoroughly and came up with five ideas for objects and kits that could be made in workshops. These were nettle string, a sewing kit, a stamp kit, bowls and paintbrushes.

I was inspired by my background of experience camping and making in a communal setting, and was thinking about ideas of taking your mind away from the everyday rush, what effect making can have on humans as explored in books such as 'The Craftsman' by Richard Sennett and The Textility of Making by Tim Ingold. These authors are both anthropologists who seem to have come through their work to writing about making and community. I also read non-academic prose essays about the landscape by Robert MacFarlane and Nan Shepherd, which captured my imagination through their vivid descriptions of the landscape. Shepherd's descriptions of moving your viewpoint within a static landscape are a great example of how being outside is so immersive it changes your internal viewpoints as well - that "this changing of focus in the eye, moving the eye itself when looking at things that do not move, deepens one's sense of outer reality."¹

¹Nan Shepherd, The Living Mountain, 1977

Sewing Kit



Birch Bark Bowl



Nettle String



Stamp Kit

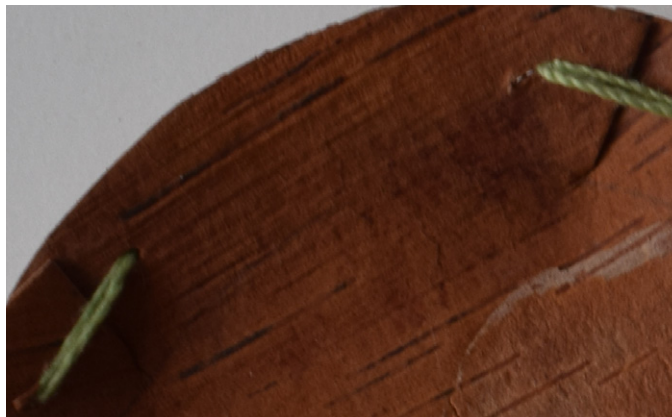
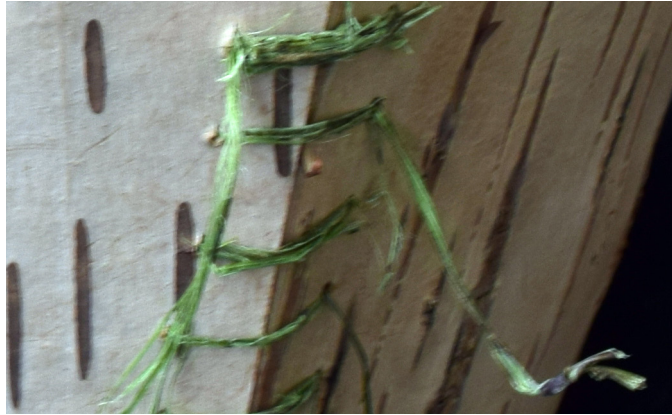


Paintbrushes

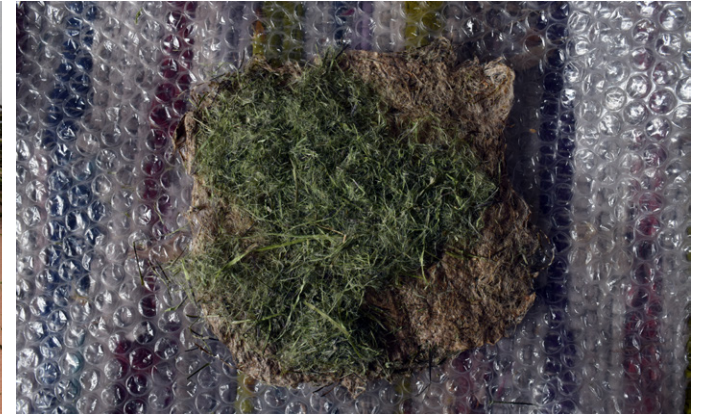


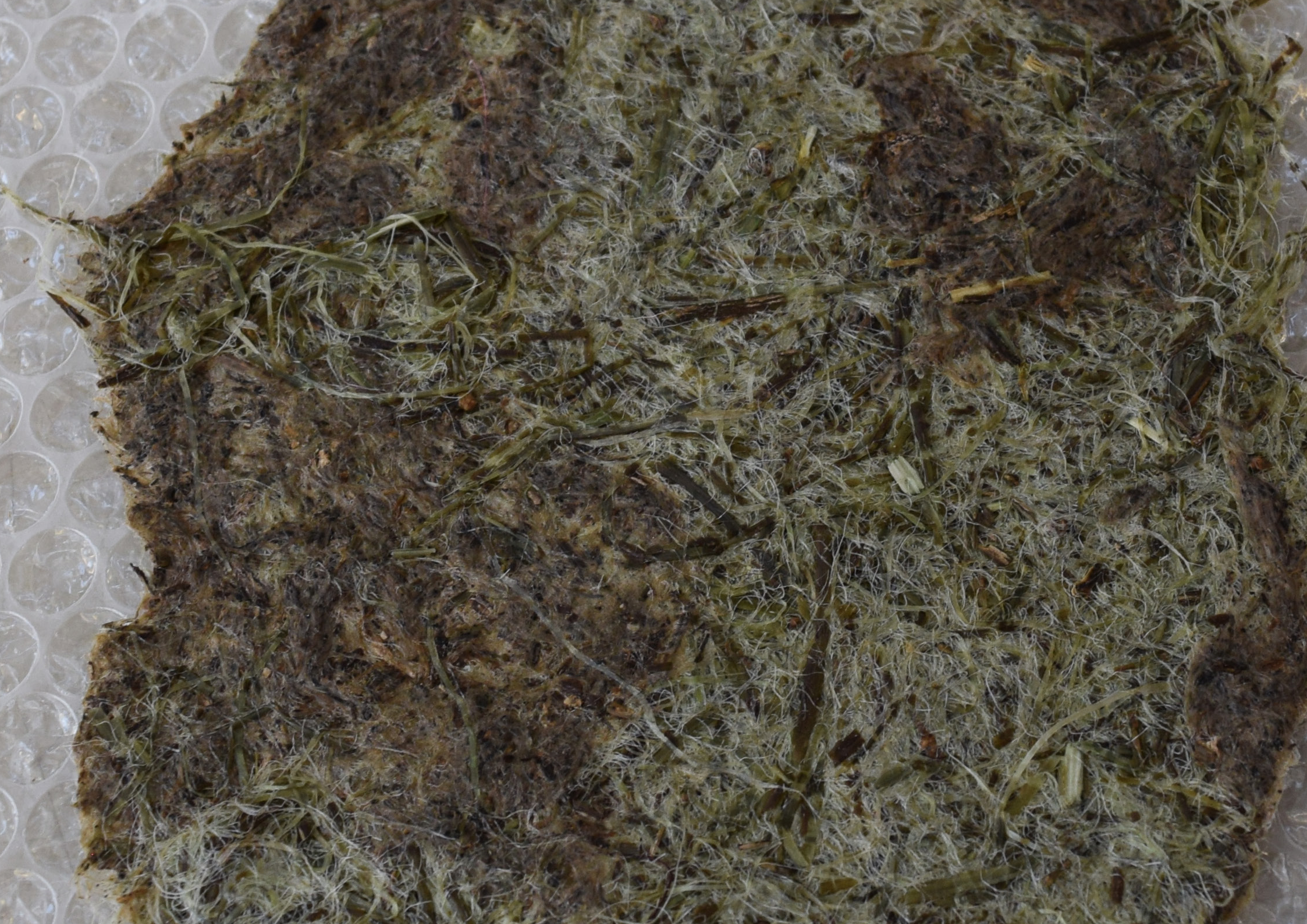
I made the sewing kit for the Bloomstein's Silver Project. I got 10g of scrap silver to learn processes with in the one day project, then got 35g to keep for the main project which enabled me to make two reel brooches, a silver thimble and three silver needles. The idea was to be able to attach the reel of thread to your person and solve the problem of knocking it over or misplacing it while you work. I had been sewing with my bowls using nettle thread and interested in embroidery. The idea of a workshop of sewing with natural dyed fibres would be a good one for Ditchling museum. After I made the silver pieces I made a pouch out of the nettle felt to go with them.

Stitches



Felting nettle fibres





Silver project - one day experimentation



Making the reel brooch



Making the silver thimble





Felt shop, Munich

SITZKISSEN
 in allen Stucken
 und Groen!
 12- 17-
 18- 24-
 27-
 47-

SITZKISSEN
 40 x 40 cm
 mit Schaumstoffkern
 47-
 oder 2-lagig gefult
 Stoffe und Farbe
 auf Wunsch!

Reinwolle fur
 Verklebung fur Wandstucke
 und Schalwandpapier
 100cm x 100cm mit
 20g 59-
 40cm x 100cm mit
 20g 74-
 100cm x 100cm mit
 40g 82-
 200cm x 100cm mit
 80g 98-
 Eigene Anfertigung!

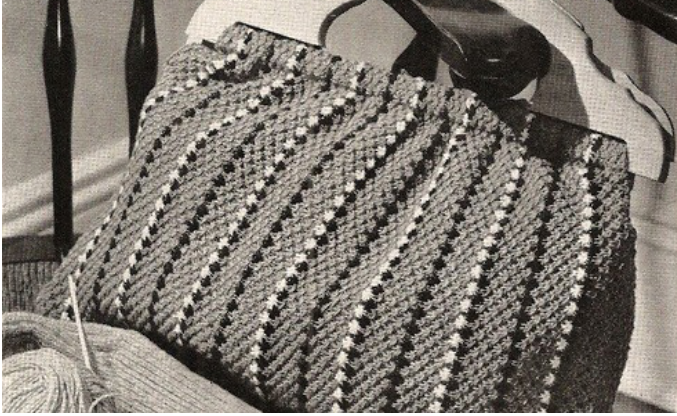
Reinwolle
 BEWAHRT
 WIRKSAMKEIT
 fur BEWAHRTUNG
 und UNTERBRECHUNG
 100cm x 100cm mit 25g -
 FLISCHEN fur
 INKUBATION
 100cm x 100cm mit 22-

TISCHSETS
 8,90 13- 14,90
 18,90
 TISCHLAUER
 1,90 2- 3- 4-
 12,90 17-
 22- 27-

TISCH-
 LAUER
 34- 45-
 65-

06-712
 100cm x 150cm
 einseitig gefult mit 58-
 gefult mit 77-

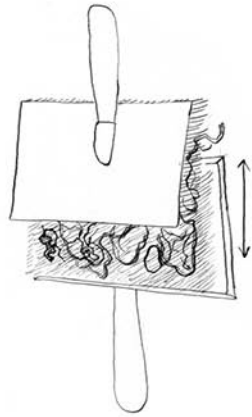




Making the pouch

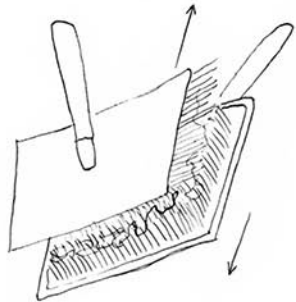


3. Carding



Now the stems are ready for carding, a process which separates out the fibres from the stem.

This requires carding brushes, which are rectangular with steel slanted bristles. A cheaper alternative is to use dog 'slicker' brushes which are widely available in pet shops and are equally effective for this purpose.



Take a clump of the skins and place them on one brush facing upwards. Bring the other brush to face it, push them together so the bristles intermesh, and pull them in opposite directions against each other.

Bend back any escaped strands and repeat the action until most of the stems are broken and you are left with something more like coarse fluff.

Take another clump and continue until all the nettle skins are broken up.



Now take a clump from your pile of coarser fluff and card it again to make it even finer and remove extra bits.



4. Felting

Find a sheet of bubblewrap larger than the piece of felt you want to make, and a piece of synthetic netting or similar fabric that will let water through holes. Prepare some warm water with washing up liquid in it and tear off a scrap of bubble wrap.

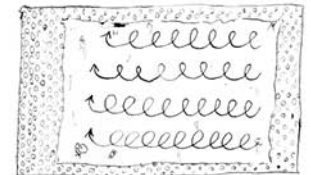
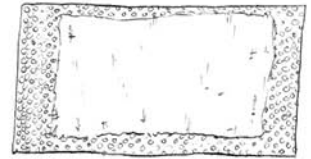
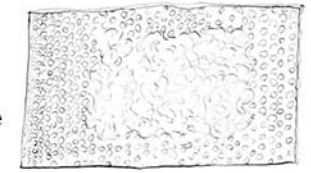
Take the carded nettle fluff and carefully arrange it on the bubblewrap so it is even with no gaps. Use a generous amount for the area as it will shrink. Lay the netting over the top.

Dip the scrap of bubblewrap in the water and dab water all over the netting so the fibres are wetted down. Rub the surface of the netting all over in small circles, working from side to side then top to bottom. Peel off the netting, flip over the fibres, and repeat the running. Keep the fibres wet but not soaking.

Take the netting off and roll up the bubblewrap with the fibres on it as tightly as possible, so that water is squeezed out. Keep pressure on it for a minute until water has stopped seeping out. Unroll it and examine what you have so far. Add more fibres if you see gaps. Rotate the piece to avoid uneven shrinkage, and repeat the process of running through the netting.

Repeat the squeezing and rubbing, rotating the piece between turns, until you are satisfied with the result.

Rinse the felt, roll and squeeze it again in all directions, and leave it somewhere warm and flat to dry out.



I was really happy with how the metalwork went considering I hadn't done any for a while and it was the first thing I have made out of silver, which I found quite different to work with compared to copper. I also have not made jewellery before, having had no particular reason to make any. However I like the idea of carrying a kit attached to you so would like to expand on this in the future. If I made more of the brooches I would find a better way of making brooch backs as although the way I did works I am not sure how long it will last.





These bowls combine nettle thread, bark, and in some cases wood. They are easily adaptable to different skill levels for different workshops by changing the method of fastening pieces of bark together, so could be made in adults or children's workshops. I started developing them with small paper model, then made stitched and riveted bowls. These bowls rocked so I had the idea to make wooden bases, which I turned on the lathe. Then I sewed the bark sides and bottom on using nettle fibres.



Bark samples and rivet bark bowls



Huge baskets of cane and birch bark at the Schmuck event, Munich



Bowl turning in wood



Wooden bowls in Munich



Birch Bark fishing weight pouch from the Hunting Museum, Munich



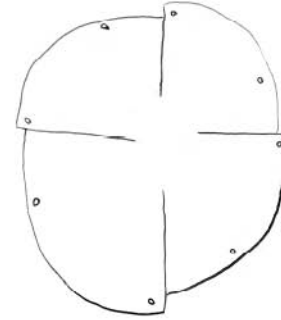


Birch Bark Bowls

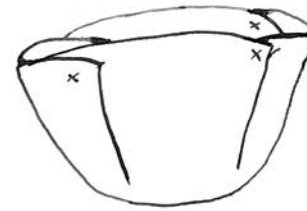


Cutting

Cut the bark into a circle using large scissors or a stanley knife. Then cut slits in towards the middle, stopping a few inches away from the centre.



Soak the bark in some hot water. This will soften it and make it flexible. Bend it into the shape you want and mark where you will need holes to fasten the flaps together.



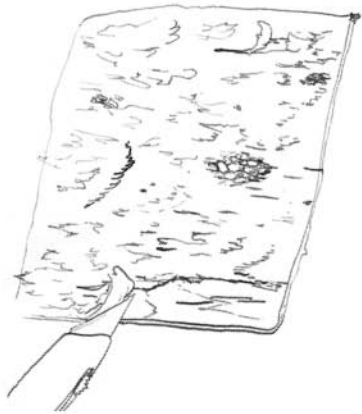
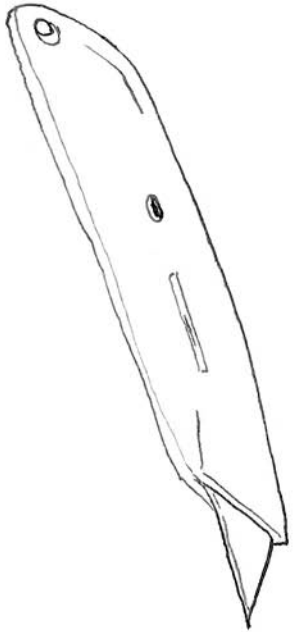
Pierce the holes with a needle or bodkin, being careful not to create a split in the bark. Leave a good inch away from the edge.

Stripping the bark

Pull any loose scraps of the outside of the bark back to reveal smoother layers underneath.

Try and peel the entire piece clean and to the same few layers. Use a knife to get under the layers if you cannot get a grip on an edge.

The thinner you make the piece of bark the more flexible it will be, but the more risk there is of making a hole so be careful.

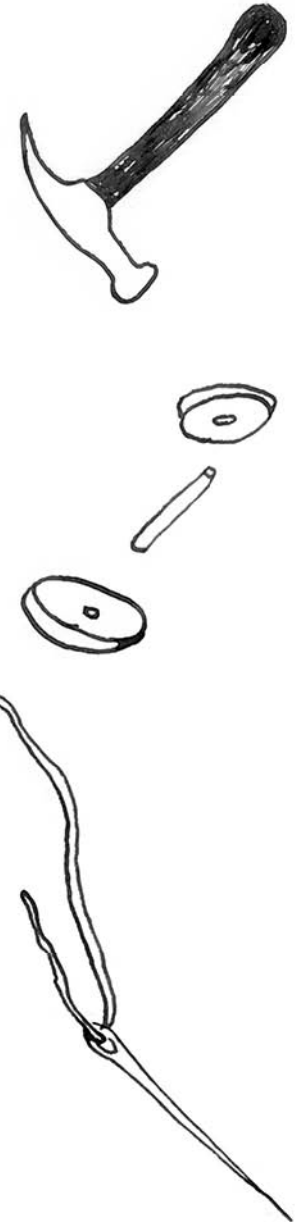


Fastening

To hold the pieces of the bowl in place you can use a variety of fastenings. Rivets are effective but you will need washers when you hammer them. You can also sew them together, use pot rivets or cut joints with tabs.

To rivet, bend the bark so the pierced holes overlap and push a piece of 1.5mm copper wire through it. Put steel rivets on each side, and there should only be half a millimetre on the top side of one washer. Hold the rest of the wire steady in a vice, and hammer around the tip of the wire with the round end of a jeweller's hammer. When the wire is flattened on one side, take it out of the vice and cut the other side of the wire. Repeat the hammering so the washers and bark are held together tightly.

To sew it use a large needle, you may find it easier to puncture all the holes first. Stitch using wool, string, cotton or metal wire.

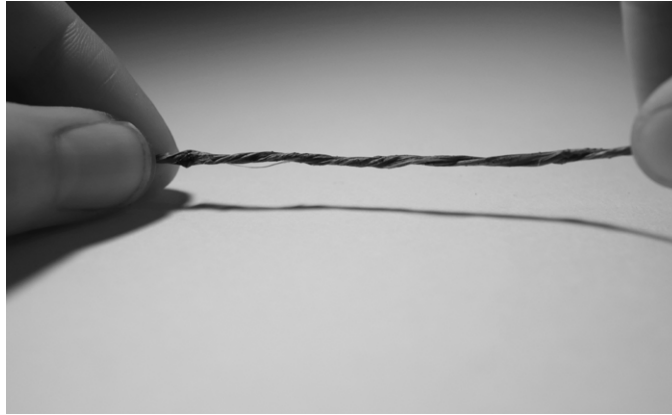
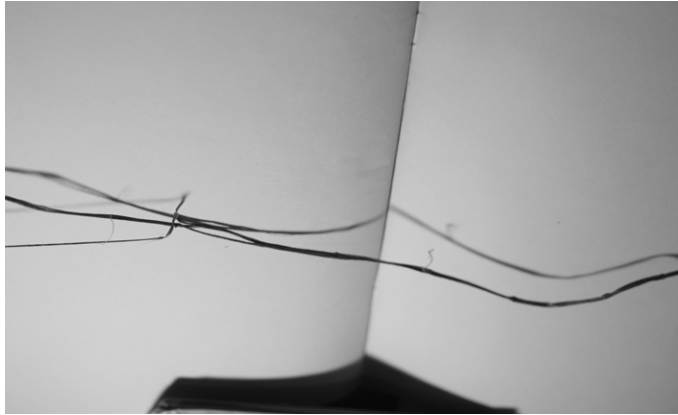


I am pleased with the level I learned bowl turning to, and I think the rims as a piece have potential for more objects and sculptural pieces maybe too. The bowls were the most difficult to make as it was hard to get the pieces to fit together exactly enough.

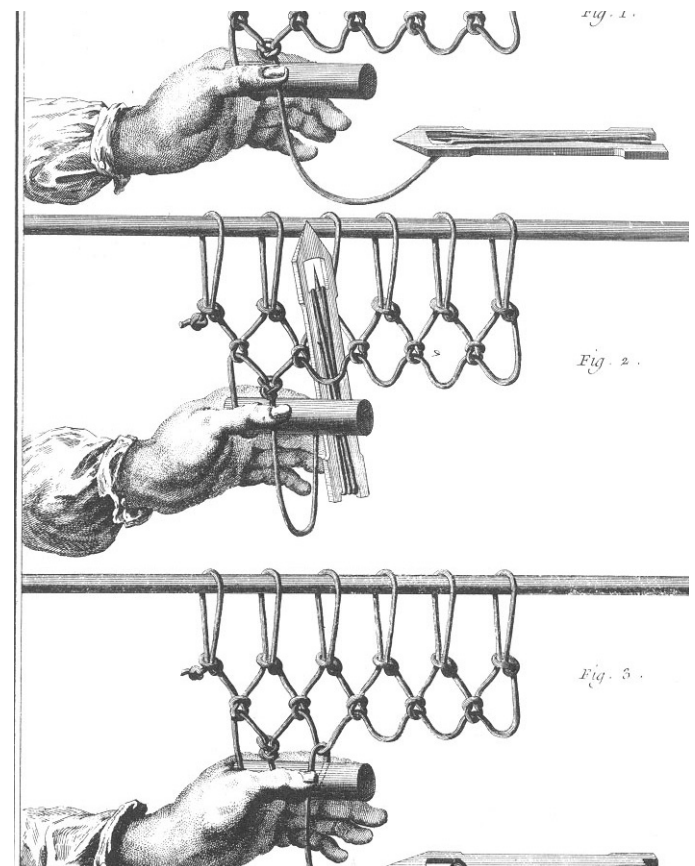
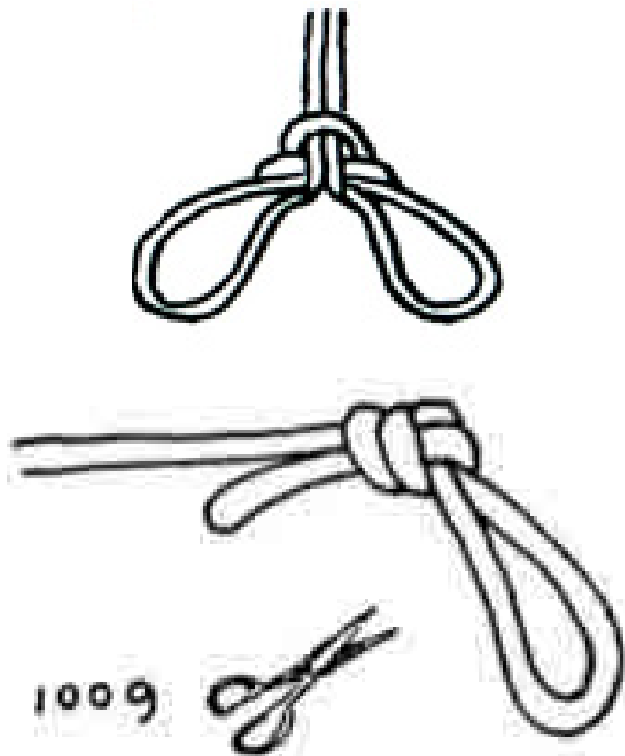


The first thing I learnt to make from nettles was a version of this string made straight from fresh nettles. The version I make now is made from dried nettle skins and is surprisingly strong. I have also made nets with it, I feel its potential uses are endless.

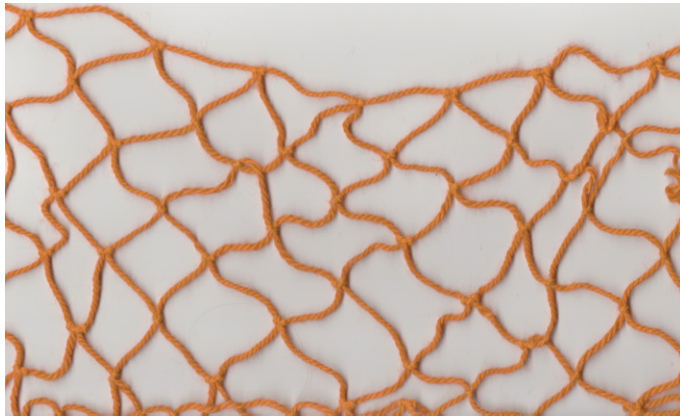
Making string by hand



Illustrations from Ashley's Book of Knots and Diderot's Encyclopedie, and a traditional fishing net from the Hunting Museum, Munich



Nets and net-making equipment in the Hunting Museum, Munich. Nettle weaving and net.



Peeling and Drying



Wear gardening gloves to pick the nettles. This will protect your hands from the stings when you are picking a large number.

Look for nettles that are at least 1 foot high, and stems that have turned a dark red colour. These will yield the strongest fibres easily.

Using the gloves, pick about 50 nettles by pulling up the whole plant. Make them into a bundle or put them in a binbag. Do not take all nettles from one patch as they are valuable for wildlife.

Cut off the bottom of the root and all the leaves using a sharp stanley knife. Try not to cut through the skin of the nettle too much.

Now that you have the stems, peel off the outer skins.

Take the knife and split the stem lengthways as neatly as possible, all the way down.

Bend the half stem back so the inner core is pushed out and carefully peel back the skin in one go. Crush the joints of the stems gently with a mallet if it sticks and breaks at them.

Peel the skins into smaller parts as these will dry faster.

Put the skins together and hang them somewhere to dry for about 24 hours.

Twisting

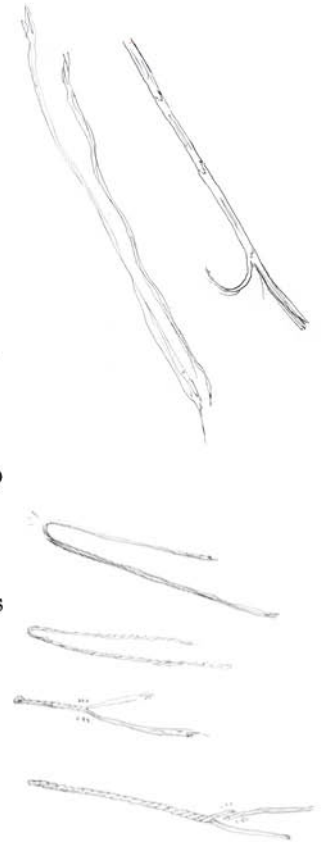
Take a dried length of nettle and twist it between your fingers.

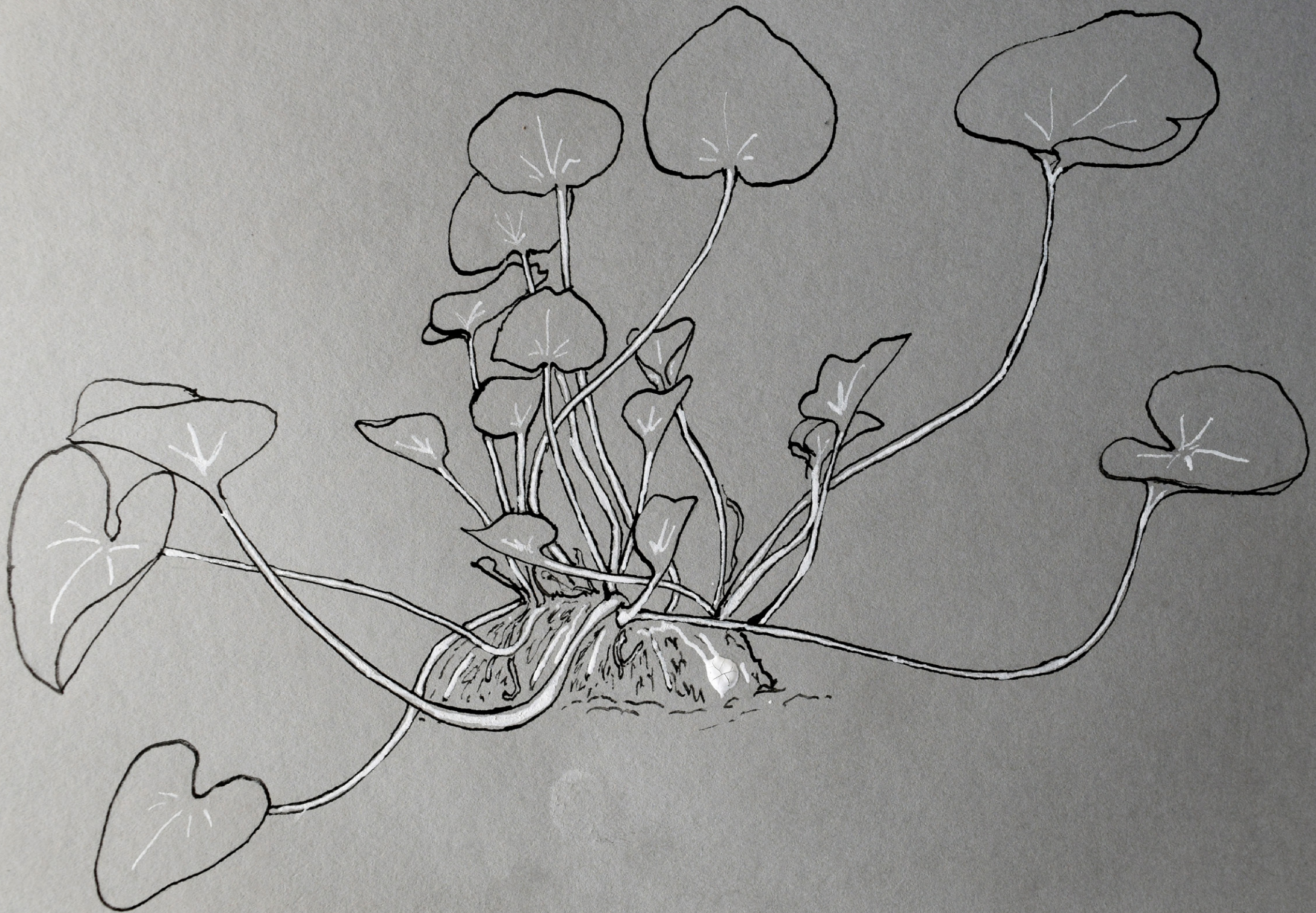
Allow the tension to form, then release it by bringing your fingers closer together. Encourage the kink that will form and twist the two halves together.

Continue to twist both sides in the same direction, and maintain the same level of tension in both sides as this will cause an even twist.

When one of the sides is running out of length take another piece and twist it in alongside. Keep it in place until the it has been completely incorporated to the strand.

Repeat this process until the piece of string is as long as necessary.

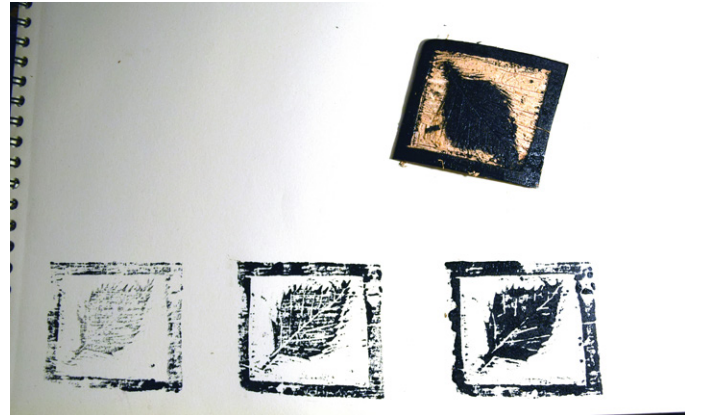
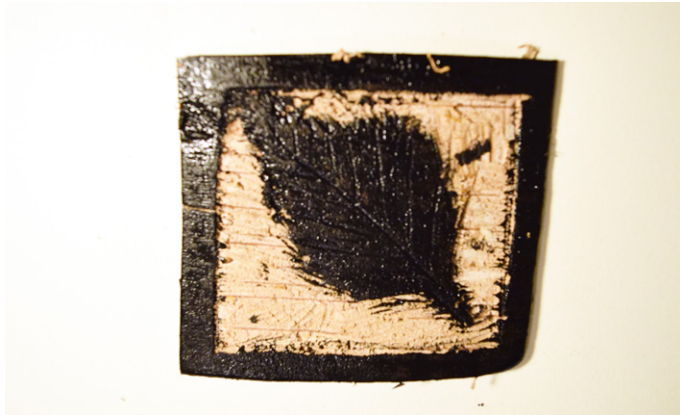




I feel pleased with having made as much string as I have, I feel like it could actually be useful now. The colour dulls from green as the chlorophyll in them deteriorates but it remains strong. I think this will be a good workshop especially if we use the string for something in the camp at Woodcraft, like laying a trail of some sort or marking boundaries of a game. We could make jewellery out of it or friendships bracelets. The only thing to be careful about is that where you join new pieces in the string can sometimes be weaker.



I made the stamp kit after realising that the birch bark could be carved into like linoleum for printing. I liked the idea of the objective being to make something that you can create images with, and also possibly personal seals, and the repeatability of prints of all sorts. This gives potential for people to have their own as well as contributing to larger collections or posters and using them multiple times.







I liked the fact that this project allowed personalisation so much, as participants in the workshop could put any design they like on the stamp. This personalisation engages people more than making something that looks the same as other people's too much as they feel more ownership over what they have made through the image which is their own idea. For my own designs I tried to make abstracted logos of the processes I had been using.





When I made the stamp kit I was thinking of having a whole art set. However I ended up sticking with just the paintbrushes as something that was good to make with the nettle fibres, to show them as they come out of the stem. At first I thought I would have a wooden handle but then I had the idea to make the handle from nettle skins and have them continue to the brush head where they would fray into the fine inner fibres. I made a workshop from a simpler way of making paintbrushes out of a stick of willow and other found materials like grass, which I ran with my woodcraft group, having approximately 6 children doing the activity at a time so doing it three times in the evening session.

These were the first paintbrushes, turned on a lathe, then drilled, then fitted with various bristles - twigs, wool, human hair and bits of dead nettle. However they looked quite machined and barely used any of the materials so I knew I needed to make them differently.



Brushes outside a shop in Munich



14,50

4,90

Teppichbürste
9,90

16,90

9,90

6,90

25,90

Plastik
M

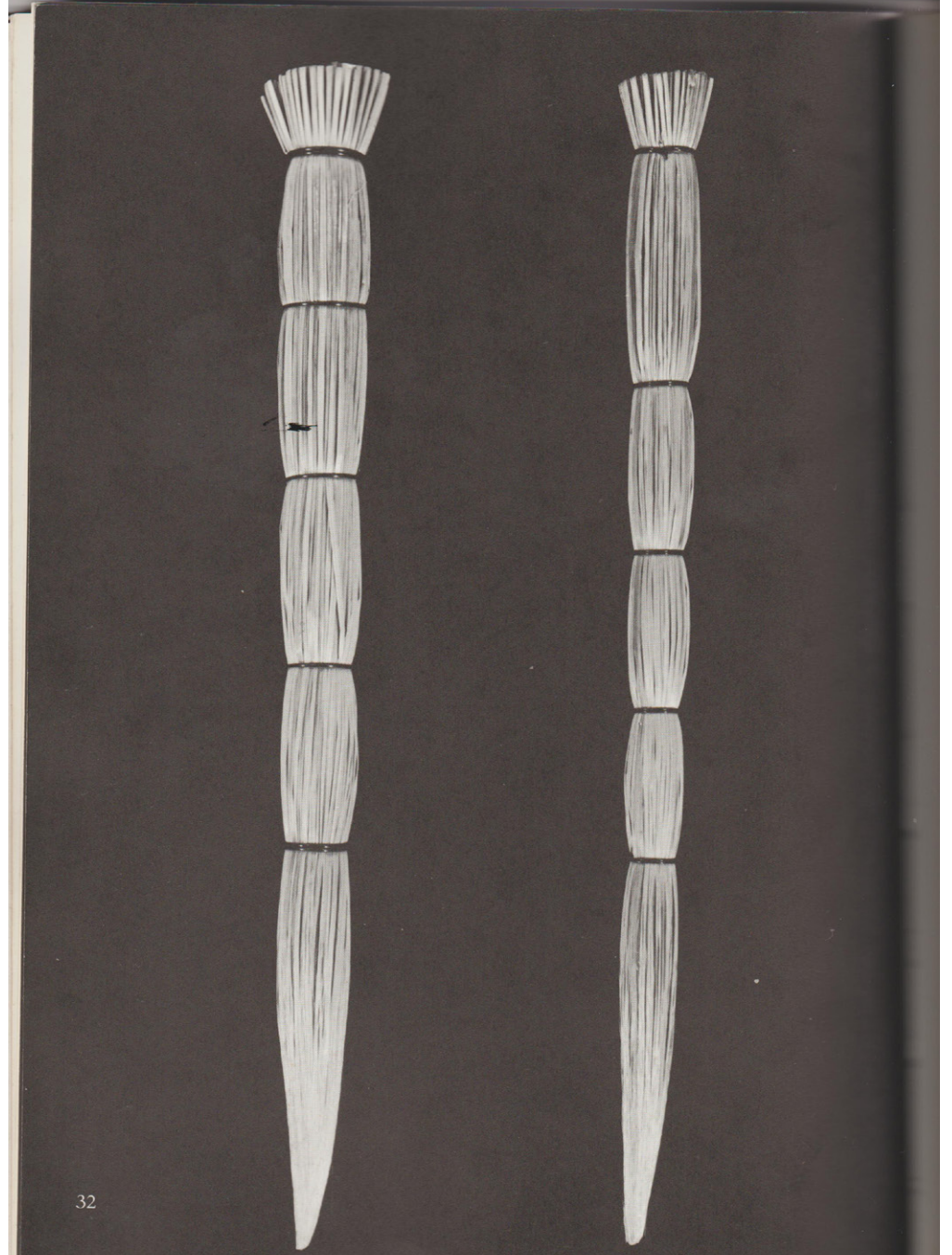
POLSTERBÜRSTE
MADE IN GERMANY

Tischbesen

Echt Massagelux

18,-

12,90



Japanese Brushes made from hemp and rice straw from the book Japanese Brushes by Masao Usui



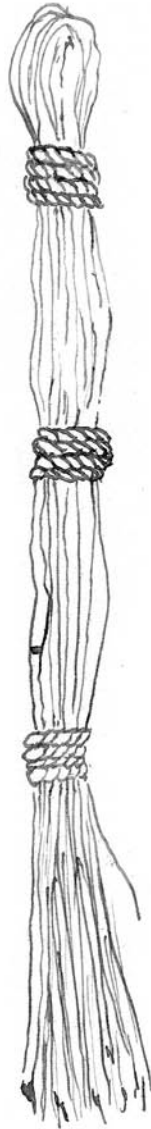
Making Ground - Anne-Marie O'Sullivan and Elaine Bolt



Paintbrush making workshop with Sunrise Pioneers, Central Brighton and Hove Woodcraft Folk



Paintbrushes



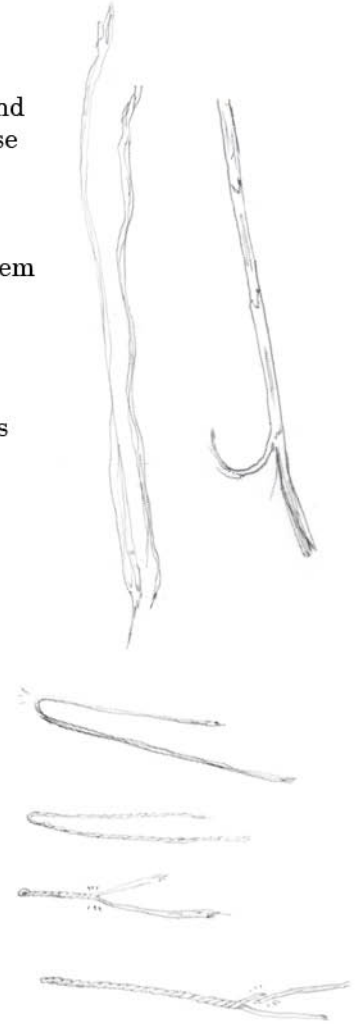
Peeling and Drying

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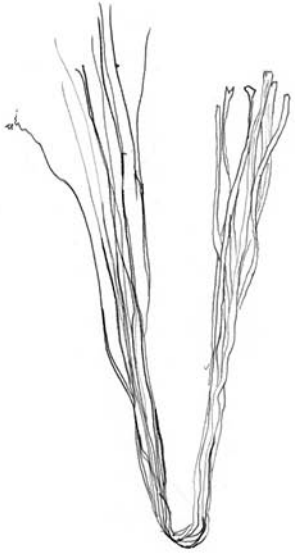
Using the gloves, pick about 50 nettles by pulling up the whole plant. Make them into a bundle or put them in a binbag. Do not take all nettles from one patch as they are valuable for wildlife.

Cut off the bottom of the root and all the leaves using a sharp stanley knife. Try not to cut through the skin of the nettle too much.



Folding and Tying

Bunch together some lengths of nettle skins.



Arrange them so the ends are all lined up and cut them to size.

Take a piece of string and start winding it around the bunch tightly, tucking the loose end under itself,

Keep wrapping evenly around until it is near its end, then take a large needle and poke it through the inside. Thread the end of the string through its eye. Pull the needle through so the loose end of the string is pulled tight and fastened.

Make several more bands of winding so the nettles are kept close and tight to make the stiff handle.

Leave a length of them at the top to make into the brush head.

Finishing

Trim the end and any sticking out pieces of string to make it neat.

Now take carding brushes or a fine comb and run it through the brush head. Use your fingernails to strip the outer off the skins and leave behind the pale fibres which are soft and fine.

Do this to all the bits in the brush head, and comb them again.

Shape the end by trimming it with a knife or scissors.



Testing an ink recipe using steel shavings, black tea, and vinegar



1. Collect steel shavings from the drill. Alternatively get some steel wool or a steel scouring pad and pull some off.
2. Rip open a couple of tea bags and add to the mixture.
3. Add vinegar and water.
4. Heat it on the cooker, stirring every now and again.
5. Test the ink on paper. Repeat this often until you are satisfied with it.
6. Remove from the heat, cool and strain off the solid ingredients.
6. Funnel into a bottle or other container.



I was eventually happy with the making of the paintbrushes after thinking for a long time about how to do it in a simple but effective way. It is not the usual way of making a paintbrush you see in most art shops with separate handle and bristles which I think helps make it more interesting.



Reflections on the project

I am pleased with how the projects turned out, and with how much I have learned overall about my chosen materials and processes, considering that I was largely without technical assistance apart from in wood and light metal for the bowl bases and silver work. The only thing about the materials is that I did not manage to finalise the amadou and this was due to a lack of information. I feel that if I had enough time I could make it better but experimenting would take a lot of time.

I also feel proud that I ran a workshop on my own and pleased that the children enjoyed being shown something new. I feel that I will be able to repeat this with different activities another time.

I fully immersed myself in drawing again for this project which I found rewarding, but I did end up spending a long time on it when I could have been making things. I will have to wait for the degree show to assess the impact my work has on people who are not my peers but I hope that they will be intrigued and inspired.



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