



Chip basket made by the Atlas Basket Company in Edenbridge, circa 1941/42
Image: Eden Valley Museum Collection

Chip Basket

Soft fruit and vegetables used to be marketed in large wicker baskets which were returned to the grower each season. In the twentieth century, they were replaced by disposable wooden punnets called chip baskets which were lighter and far more convenient. They also came in different sizes, so produce could be weighed and priced more efficiently. The chip basket was

invented in 1901 by The Hulme Patent Advertising Match Company Limited of Irlam in Manchester, pioneers of the first non-poisonous matches in England. The chip basket was traded under the name of the British Basket and Besto Company Limited which acquired several chip basket factories and two in Edenbridge, the Atlas Basket Company in 1938 and the Eden Chip Basket Company in 1951. The Atlas factory was located in Fircroft Way and supplied baskets for mushroom growers at Elwood Farm in Rotherfield, East Sussex. The basket shown here, which was made by Atlas held 10lbs of 'buttons' or 8lbs of 'flats' but held other small vegetables too.

Mushroom growing before the 1930s was very labour intensive. Tasks were carried out by hand and growers had to search for mycelium in old piles of horse manure. It was not possible to know what kind of mushrooms the strain would produce or whether the quality was any good. The colour of the mushrooms ranged from light to dark brown but not white until the 1930s, when 'pure culture' spawn was made available. Harvesting the crop was a delicate process as each mushroom had to be twisted gently to release it from the soil before being trimmed and placed in chip baskets ready for market. Mushrooms were luxury vegetables and not grown on farms in Britain during wartime.

Chip baskets were made from the veneers of poplar or willow. Poplar was chosen because it was lightweight and free from oily products which could contaminate food. (The wood is still used today as a container for camembert cheese and Turkish delight.) The veneers were peeled from the poplar logs as they turned on vast lathes. The sheets of veneer were then moistened, cut into strips and stapled together. The baskets were dried soon after to prevent mildew forming. Stripped willow logs from the Eden Chip Basket factory in Sunnyside were turned to good use during the war. The wood was salvaged by a local resident and his children who made dozens of wooden train sets and distributed them to local fairs at Christmas time.