

## VISIT TO COLEG LLYSFASI 19<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2026

Coleg Llysfasi sits at the head of the Vale of Clwyd, at the foot of the wooded Nant y Garth Pass. The College has a brand new administration and teaching block as well as extensive farm buildings. Eight North Wales members and spouses of the Worshipful Livery Company of Wales were met at the College by Ruth Pybus who advised us that the wet, windy, April weather was not conducive to walking in the forests but that she had a plan to inform and entertain us in the comfort of a lecture room and the forestry workshop. And so she did: Ruth is an expert on many things



related to the growing and uses of wood but she chose to enthral us with the history of 'spale baskets', a version of which is shown on the table beside her – and which she made. We were all familiar with baskets woven of willow but spale refers to split wood, in particular oak. She explained that whereas willow can be woven relatively easily, the process of preparing thin, pliable strips of oak, the forming of a hazel hoop as the top rim, the complex and individual knotting of the spales and the eventual use of the baskets differ markedly from willow. Indeed, spale baskets were the basket of choice for heavy work in farming and in industry. Uses ranged from sowing seeds, holding bobbins in the cotton mills and even carrying coal to

steam engines large and small. The Titanic had 1000 on board for transporting coal to the boilers. The general pattern was from Cumbria but North Wales villages such as Bwlchau and Llansannan produced hundreds of individual baskets based on the Cumbrian design. Ruth showed us photos of the last craftsmen (always men) and how she had tracked down their ancestors and found the now rare examples of their work. Her enthusiasm was infectious and an hour went by very quickly.

Ruth then took us to the forestry workshop where the students are taught the techniques they will need to maintain their farms – the making and repairing of gates, hurdles, feeding troughs etc using wood in the round or shaped. She demonstrated the various stages in producing eg a chair leg. As Andrew Richards pointed out, if there is no way of using hard wood there is no incentive to manage hardwood forests. It was a fascinating afternoon. The NWC will be making an award to both the forestry and animal husbandry departments at Llysfasi from April this year.

