

The History & Art of making Corn Dollies

This September 2017 Janet Goddard was kind enough to present a talk about 'The History & Art of making Corn Dollies' together with a fascinating demonstration.



Along with a friend, Janet became interested in the making of Corn Dollies from a demonstration at her local W. I. meeting. After hours of research and practice, spanning nearly 50 years, she has created many beautiful and intricate designs as a hobby as well as commissioned work. Now a very self-taught and accomplished Artisan.

Corn Dollies (whose name derives from 'Corn Idol' or 'Image') have been around for thousands of years with many designs dating back to pagan times (around 4000 years BC) together with the evidence of the existence of carvings on old tombs looking very much like plaited straw work in Egypt at least 6000 years BC.

The folklore and history behind Corn Dollies is very varied but the basic idea behind them is that the Spirit of the Corn (which could be oats, wheat, rye or barley) resided in the last sheaf gathered at harvest time and special ceremonies attended its cutting. Often a figure or traditional design would be made from this sheaf that would be preserved in the house/home until the following year in the belief that the Spirit would ensure that the seed corn would germinate in the following Spring.

Men and women, according to some folklore, would also make small Corn Dollies. They would give them to their sweethearts as love tokens, these were known as Favours or Harvest Knots and would have been worn as a buttonhole. According to tradition a Favour given by a man or boy to a female would still have its ears of corn on. However, a Favour given by a woman or girl to a male, would have been made only of straw and wouldn't have ears of corn on. This is mimicking nature, grain being the seed of new life (the seed of a new crop) or in the females' case, the bearers of children and the soil being known as mother earth, the bearer of new life.

The art of making corn dollies is labour intensive. Firstly, the corn is cut by hand which results in far less damage to the material and should be done before the corn is fully ripe and has started to head over; there should still be a small amount of green visible at the first joint of the stalk and the kernels are still soft. By cutting while the corn is slightly green, as the grains are not yet fully ripened they are less likely to drop later and will dry out to a beautiful golden colour.

Once the sheaves have been cut they require drying ready to be graded according to thickness, length and colour. Only then can the art of making Corn Dollies begin.

The techniques of corn dolly making have been handed down through generations of farmers and their workers, and although the original beliefs behind them have been long forgotten many designs have survived for us to recreate today, together with newer and more up-to-date ideas. British dollies vary from county to county. For example, the bell and the umbrella come from Cambridgeshire, the horseshoe is from Suffolk together with the colour of the ribbon used to signify different meanings.

We, the Friends of Bassetlaw Museum wish to 'Thank' Janet and those members who managed to attend the talk. It was a lovely and interesting evening.

Like so many of our traditions and crafts, which have been passed down from generation to generation, are gradually being lost forever to the commercial world. Therefore, it is so important for us to give our support to these Artisans such as Janet!