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## Traditional autumn crafts – corn dollies

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CIC Registration 9435120

## An ancient tradition



Corn dollies are a form of straw work made as part of harvest customs. The tradition can be found across Europe and can be traced back to pre-Christian times.

The tradition was that the corn spirit would spend the winter in a home until the "corn dolly" was ploughed into the first furrow of the new season to ensure plenty the following year. The tradition came to an end when harvest became mechanised.

This corn dolly was made from ornamental grass and hops cut from the garden. We named him **Covid** because he is in desperate need of a hair cut!

## Corn dollies



Before the 20th century, when the final patch of corn was cut some straw, with the ears of grain still attached, was saved and a figure or shape was made from this straw, usually by plaiting or weaving. The Dolly was hung up in a building until the following year.

Tradition said that the corn spirit would then spend the winter in this home until the "corn dolly" was ploughed into the first furrow of the new season.

The style of dolly varied from region to region. Pictured here are the Stafford Knot and the Essex Terret.

Watch how to make a simple dolly:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYpcfzd4ov0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYpcfzd4ov0)

# Countryman's favour

A countryman's favour was a plait of three or four straws and tied into a loose knot to represent a heart. Traditionally it made by a young man with straws picked up after the harvest and given to his loved one. If she was wearing it next to her heart when he saw her again then he would know that his love was reciprocated. To learn how to make a favour watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLzaF9p6kuM>

The colour of the ribbons used to tie the favour also had symbolism:  
WHITE is for purity  
BROWN is for the earth  
GREEN is for the germinating corn  
GOLD is the ripened wheat  
ORANGE is for the glowing sun  
RED is for warmth, and for the poppy  
BLUE is the colour of truth, and also the colour of the cornflower



# Tied straw work

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This type of straw work is particularly popular in Scandinavia and German-speaking countries. The straw is not plaited, but tied with wool, or similar materials to make shapes.

Another British tradition can still be seen on thatched roofs where the ridge is sometimes decorated with an animal of tied straw.



## Other traditions

A corn husk doll is a Native American doll made from the dried leaves a corn cob. Traditionally every part of the ear of corn was used to make rope, twine, containers and mats. Shredded husks made good kindling and filling mattresses, for scrubbing brushes and fuel.

Corn husk dolls were made by Native Americans probably more than a thousand years ago. The dolls do not have faces, and there are several explanations for this. One legend is that the Spirit of Corn, made a doll out of her husks to entertain children. The doll had a beautiful face and spent less time with children and more time contemplating her own loveliness. As a result of her vanity, the doll's face was taken away.

If you have corn on the cob this autumn, make a dolly from the leaves. This dolly was made from corn cobs grown on a local allotment.



Do you know of any other autumn traditions?  
We would love to hear from you.