

REVIVAL OF THE WELL DRESSING IN ASHFORD-IN-THE-WATER

The Ashford Leader. No. 6, June 1966:

“ The following contribution has been sent by Mrs Ida Thorpe and tells of her efforts to revive the custom of dressing the wells which, earlier in the century, had fallen into disuse.

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The well dressing had fallen into disuse for about 30 years in the village of Ashford and no one seemed to know much about it. Mrs Thorpe was approached and she too said, “Oh, I don’t know a thing about well dressing. I haven’t the foggiest idea but I will see what can be done.”

That afternoon out came Mrs Thorpe’s cycle; over to Youlgreave she pedalled to the Vicarage to see the Vicar. Her appeal: please could he put her in contact with someone who would not mind giving the secrets of the tradition of well dressing away, as we were very keen to revive them in Ashford.

“Certainly, you go and see Mr & Mrs Boardman. They’re most obliging and will be of great help to you I feel sure.”

Mrs Thorpe feels half way to having them done at this, and pedals off to see this kind lady and gentleman. Having found the house she gives a brisk Postwoman’s knock and the Gentleman himself appears. After Mrs Thorpe had told him of her errand, this is what takes place:

Mr B “Certainly, Mrs Thorpe, when do you want to do them?”

Mrs T “For Trinity Sunday, that is our Church’s Patronal Festival. Trinity Sunday, Mr. Boardman, Trinity Sunday, Trinity Sunday.”

Mr B “Why, you have left it late, you have only nine days left.”

Mrs T “Does it take a long time to do them, Mr B?”

Mr B “Oh, now you have to do the whole thing in a week but tonight you must not fail to go and dig the clay, six sacks to a board, and put and clay in the river as it takes nine days to get the clay like butter so you can puddle it through your hands for stones, grass, etc., or anything that would be detrimental to the drawing.” (Mrs T is thinking “what drawing?”)

Mr B "What picture are you doing, Mrs T?"

Mrs T "Must you have a picture, Mr B?"

Mr B "You cannot do a well dressing without, and it must be a Biblical picture and you have to draw it the size of the board."

Mrs T "What board, Mr B.?"

Mr B "You have to have a board for the picture, Mrs T. Have you got one?"

Mrs T "I will enquire when I get back to Ashford."

Mr B "Well now, Mrs T, get your picture drawn to the size of the board ..."

Mrs T "Oh, but Mr B, I couldn't draw a bird, never mind a picture. I've never drawn a thing in my life. I've no idea."

Then Mrs Boardman comes forward. "Look, Mrs T, my daughter won't mind drawing you the (Mrs T thinking she's saved!) border".

Mrs T "The border!"

Mrs B "Yes, so you see you'll only have the picture to draw. You'll be alright. Go and see what you can do now in finding the board, measure it up and draw your picture to the size of the centre board."

Arriving back at *Clematis* with a heavy heart and disappointed, Mrs Thorpe looked across the road and saw over Mr Carter's door the word *Sunrise*. That put an idea into her head and off she went to Mr Carter.

Knock. Knock.

Mrs T "Oh, Mr Carter, have you such a thing as a very simple Biblical picture you could lend me to draw?"

Mr C "Yes, I have the very thing", and upstairs he went to bring down what Mr Carter said was a simple picture. A steel engraving called the "True Vine". All was hushed and nothing stirred as Mrs T looked at this so-called simple drawing, her thoughts making her feel helpless.

Mrs T "I couldn't draw that, Mr C."

But Mrs Thorpe left with the "True Vine" and hopes for the best. Mrs T can't remember how many pencils and rubbers she wore down to nothing and how much paper and patience she had to have but, as the saying goes, with the Lord, all things were possible, and so it was in this case.

At the end of nine days all was set for our friends to show us the way. After claying, the picture is laid on the board and pricked out with a large horseshoe nail and lifted off when all lines of the picture have been punctured. Then all is outlined with alder knobs or whatever you have to outline with. Mr and Mrs Boardman and their daughter Mrs Fell gave us lessons on petalling, working from the bottom of the picture up to the top, each petal tipped with the horseshoe nail into the clay. The results were wonderful and resulted in the wells being dressed each year since 1954.

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The Ashford Leader. No. 8, August 1966:

“ LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Alport Road,
Youlgreave.

June 22nd 1966.

Dear Mr. Whittaker,

While in Ashford visiting your Well Dressing Festival, I purchased a copy of the “Ashford Leader”. Even as an “outsider” I enjoyed reading it and thought the magazine both interesting and entertaining.

Since your Well Dressing I have been rather troubled on several occasions to discover that a good many people seem to be under the impression that I was responsible for designing Mrs Thorpe’s well – the story seems to be quite widespread but it is quite untrue.

Mrs Thorpe is a most enthusiastic and able well dresser and she was solely responsible for the production of the designs for both picture and border at the Sheepwash well. I would be most grateful if you could include a short item in your next edition discouraging the story that I played any major role in the dressing of Sheepwash well.

Yours sincerely,

Margaret Fell.

*Transcribed by Ian Pykett, with thanks to David Windle
for providing original copies of “The Ashford Leader”.*

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Puddling the clay at The Vicarage. L-R: Arthur Hawley, Sheila Hawley, Jack Newton, Revd Thomas George



L-R: Final touches with Sheila Hawley (kneeling), Ida Thorpe, Clifford Roberts, George Thorpe.



*The finished
well dressing.*

*Photographs courtesy of
Sheila Bettney, Pat Paulett,
David Windle and the late
Dorothy Daybell.*



Sheepwash Well, 2024, in honour of Ida Thorpe