

WELLDRESSING

Almost the exclusive preserve of Derbyshire life, Well Dressing has long since attracted tourists from all over the country, and abroad. This rewarding, but backbreaking tradition is, however, starting to be taken up further afield.

The origins of Well Dressing are unclear, but it is widely believed they date back to pagan times, when sacrifices were made to the water gods. These sacrifices took the form of human or animal offerings which, over time, were exchanged for garlands of flowers. They were not only tokens of thanks for the supply of vital water that year, but would, it

was hoped, encourage the gods to ensure the water would continue to flow the next.

Well Dressing as we know it today, however, has clear religious links to the established church, as can be seen in the biblical references in the designs found in Youlgrave's five Well Dressings.

The process is as follows, with a little variation from well to well:

STAGE ONE

Each Well Dressing begins with the design, which in Youlgrave is created by the team responsible for that particular well.



STAGE TWO

For most of us, the first indication that Well Dressings are upon us again, is the sight of the boards in the river, soaking in preparation. They are then removed and a layer of clay (mixed with salt and water) is placed upon them. To mix the clay it's all wellies to the pumps for 'puddling' – a messy, but enjoyable pastime.



The Fountain Well Dressing (above) pictured 1991.

The Children's Well Dressing at the Church (left) pictured 1991.

Since the Well Dressings in 1869, when the second water supply was undertaken, they have been produced annually up to the present day with only a break for war. However, in 1945 only one well was dressed.

Holywell Lane Well Dressing (above) pictured 1982.

STAGE THREE

The design is then pricked through the paper onto the clay or marked out with pen, and the picture starts to take shape.

Gradually, using the least perishable items first, thousands of petals, berries, twigs and other materials are added. For large areas of colour, petals are stuck into the clay and laid down like tiles on a roof. The results are beautiful and often extremely intricate and a tribute to the long and exhausting hours of work on the part of the dedicated teams of Well Dressers.

Picture of success . . .



Pictured (above) is an example of

The preparation of a Well Dressing is an exhausting process, requiring considerable skill, dedication and more than a little patience. Here are a few facts about Well Dressing in Youlgrave:

- The Well Dressings take place the Saturday nearest St. John the Baptist Day (June 24th).
- It is generally believed that Well Dressing in Youlgrave began with the introduction of a piped water supply to the village from a local spring to The Fountain in



1829 and continued for about 20 years.

- 1869 saw its revival, when a second waterworks scheme introduced a number of stop taps around the village. It is on, or near, these taps that modern Well Dressings are located.
- Such is the fame of the Well Dressers, that their skills have been sought as far afield as Germany.
- Every year, the Well Dressings raise valuable funds for charity.
- The Well Dressings bring hundreds of visitors to the village, boosting trade for local businesses.
- Well Dressing provides an excellent opportunity for new residents to meet the locals.

The 1914 Well Dressings Parade (pictured above), showing either the Foresters Friendly Society or the Buffaloes with their Banner and Youlgrave Silver Band. Garlands used to be draped around the boards.



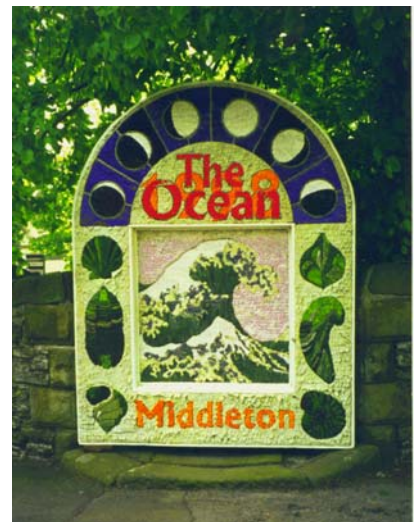
The Bank Top Well (above) pictured 1982.

MATERIAL INVESTMENTS

Well Dressers use only natural materials, but don't stop at flowers:

- Egg shells are an ideal skin colour when depicting faces.
- The grey moss that grows on local gritstone is also used. Soot is sometimes used to darken the back of the moss to make it really jet black.
- If you hear well dressers on the look-out for black knobs, don't worry, they are the cones from the alder tree and make an excellent outline.

Middleton Well Dressing (right) 1998
'The International Year of the Ocean'



MIDDLETON WELLDRESSING

Middleton's Well Dressing was revived in 1977 for Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee. A Village Market is held to mark the beginning of well dressing week, the proceeds of which boost parish funds.

Middleton does not use Biblical references for the design of its displays. Local, National or International events are chosen and money collected at the Well is sent to a relevant charity.

At Middleton there are two smaller boards in the shape of arrows, which are placed at the road-side on the approaches to the village. The children in the village who are interested, learn the methods of well dressing on these.



The 'Top' Well (above) pictured 1982