

Corn Dollies

and How to Make Them

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The Story of the Dolly

From earliest times when man first discovered the secret of seed germination and worshipped it in the form of the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis, country people have lived their lives to the slow rhythm of the seasons.

Seed-time and harvest both had originally a religious significance and were treated as seasonal festivals at which solemn rites were performed. Demeter, the Greek goddess of the corn, the Corn Mother, was crowned on the harvest field, and corn puppets or dollies were made in her form. Equally her daughter, Persephone (whose worship was confused with that of her mother) symbolized the great mystery of the birth and death of the corn.

Handed down from generation to generation, the solemn spring and harvest rites were felt to be an essential part of the well-being and fertility of the crops. Although they were originally used in the worship of the gods, as the years went by the gods came to be thought of as spirits who looked after the corn. In Europe, every farm had its Corn Mother or Corn Maiden, and although they were not worshipped, their co-operation was asked for in the care of the corn, and the ritual employed was magical, not propitiatory.

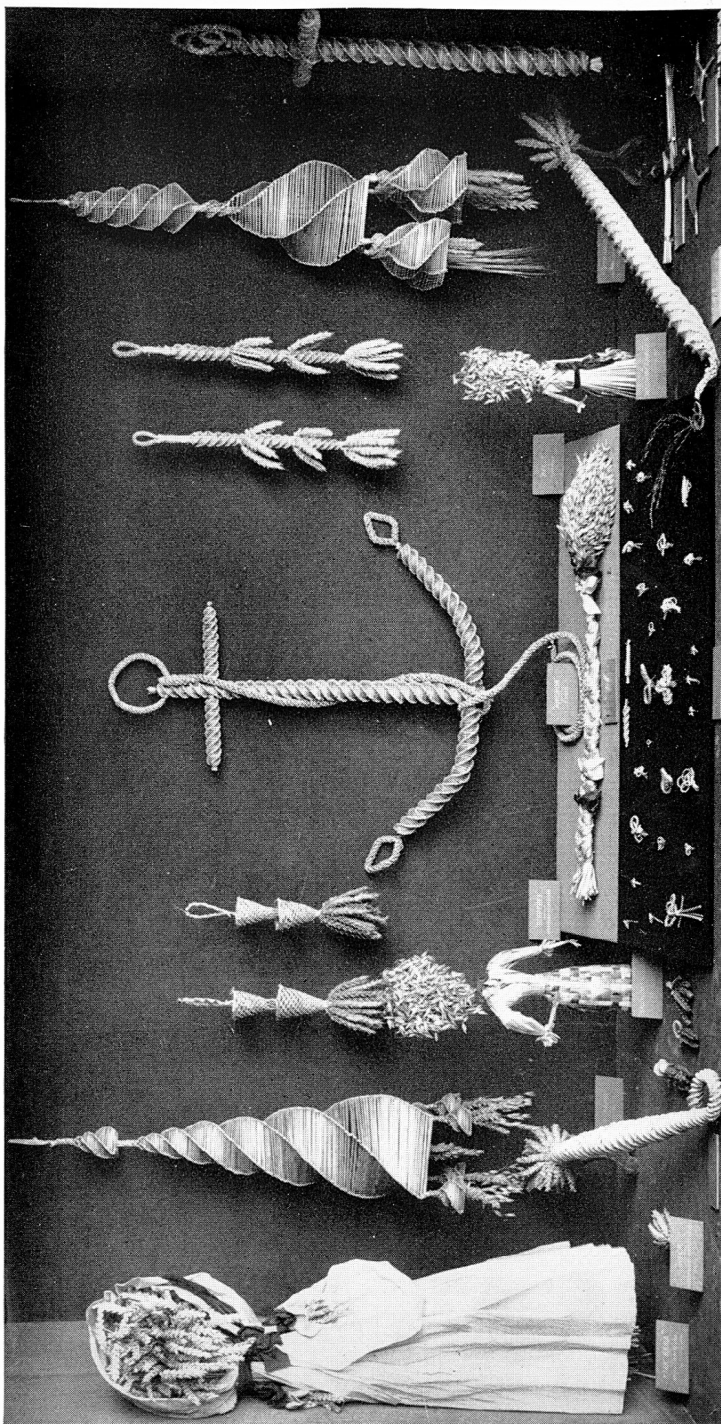
The Corn Spirit was supposed to live in the cornfield and die as the last sheaf was cut, to be re-born in the Corn Doll or Kern Baby, the plaited straw ornament made from the last corn of the harvest. This was not necessarily made to look like a figure, but must be considered as the resting-place of the Corn Spirit, and was kept in the house until the next harvest to ensure the continuance of the crops. This was sometimes called the Neck of corn, and straw ornaments in animal form were often put on the ricks.

Fragments of these ancient European and Asiatic beliefs were still associated with the end of the harvest as late as 1820, though their meaning had long since been forgotten.

William Hone's *Everyday Book* published in 1827 mentions the ceremony of Crying the Neck in Devon. At the end of the harvest the men and women stand round in a circle with, in their midst, an old man who has plaited a straw ornament (the Neck) from the best ears of corn. They all chant, 'Wee-en, Way-en', mournfully, while he first touches the ground with the Neck and then raises it on high while they all shout for joy. Thus the Corn Spirit's death was mourned and its re-birth acclaimed in the Neck, and this portent of next year's harvest was carried into the house and kept till the following year.

It has been suggested that this strange chanting may have its origin in the cries of the Egyptian reapers as they announced the death of the Corn Spirit, at the end of the harvest.

Corn Dollies of the British Isles



In Frazer's *The Golden Bough* there is a record of an old Phrygian custom that may have some bearing on the word Neck. If any stranger was near when the last of the reaping was at hand, it was supposed that the Corn Spirit might escape into him, and, to make sure it was killed – an essential part of the ceremony – he was seized, wrapped in a sheaf of corn, his head was cut off, and he was either thrown into the river or water was poured over him, for a rain charm.

Harvest ceremonies differ from county to county, and different stories come from Wales, Scotland and Ireland. In some places the straw was made into a rough human shape with bonnet and dress; in others the corn is dressed on the field with paper streamers and a young man races to the farmhouse with it. If he succeeded in entering without being doused with water by the girls who awaited him, it was a sign of a dry harvest next year. It had its origin as a form of rain charm.

Sometimes it is a young girl in a white dress and yellow sash who leads home the reapers, while the Ivy Girl or Corn Baby, made from the last sheaf and often given paper clothes by the women, is carried high above her on the waggon. In other tales it is a life-sized straw figure, called the harvest Queen, that is carried on to the harvest field in the morning with a sickle under her arm, to be taken home in the evening 'with music and much clamour'.

Mrs Leather's *Folk Lore* tells of Crying the Mare in Herefordshire, and other counties have the same story with variations. In this, the last blades of corn were tied into four bunches to make the legs of the mare, and a contest was held between the reapers, who threw their sickles at the mare to cut the knots that held it. He who succeeded had a prize, with acclamations and good cheer. After various questions and answers three times repeated, the mare is sent on to a neighbour who has not finished his harvest.

There are obviously two ways of considering the Corn Spirit: care to preserve it till the next year, and fear to be the last to possess it.

The Corn Dolly has many names and forms. To quote a few: Cross, Crook, Apple, Boat, Turnip, Crown, Clyack, Churn, Mare, Mell Kirn or Kirk Baba, Puppet, Hag, etc. (see back of front cover).

Corn Dollies are still made, some to decorate the tops of ricks, some to commemorate an important occasion; and many are made every year for the Harvest Festival in church and chapel, and in this way the pagan Corn Dolly has been turned into a Christian symbol of harvest.

There are still craftsmen, masters of the intricacies of straw work, but they themselves wonder who will carry on their craft in these days of the combine harvester.

The Herefordshire Federation of Women's Institutes hope, by the following simple charts and photographs, to encourage others to learn and preserve this ancient skill.

Material and General Construction

Present-day farming methods demand a short, stiff straw, not altogether suitable for making Corn Dollies. The ideal is a long straw which is pliable down to the first joint, with sufficient cavity to enable joining one stalk with another.

Corn is a general term meaning wheat, barley, oats and rye. Corn Dollies can be made from any or all of these. The straw of oats or barley, though not of such pleasing colour as wheat, is more easily worked.

The corn should be gathered when just on the turn from green to yellow. As only the straw down to the first joint is used, it should be cut immediately above this joint.

The Dolly is best made at once. The old ones were nearly always made in the harvest field, but, if it is impossible to use the straw at once, it should be soaked for a short time in rain water, in a butt or clean oil drum, failing these, in the sink. Wrap in an old sack and leave overnight, when the straw will be found to be pliable and easy to work.

If using butt or oil drum, care should be taken that the heads rest on wire netting out of the water, to ensure that they do not sprout. If sink is used, total immersion is inevitable, and the heads must be dried off in a warm atmosphere as soon as possible after the work is completed to avoid discoloration and sprouting.

Originally the Dolly was made from the corn of the last sheaf, but modern varieties of corn tend to become too stiff, and so the first corn is to be preferred.

Dollies can be tied with ordinary string, red or yellow ribbon, bass, or linen thread. Their shapes vary enormously. Some are made with a central core of corn, which is either partially or completely covered with a pattern made from the straw; while with others the pattern is achieved by weaving the individual stalks into a formal twisted cone. Others again consist of simple wheat plaits.

In Wales toys were made with the same patterns, using rushes instead of corn. Most European Corn Dollies are made by tying together single pieces of straw to form geometric shapes.

Joining

Avoid handling straw except at the point of work. Do not wait until straw is stiff and splits. Cut off any damaged portion and insert the thin end (with head removed) of a new straw of suitable size.

In fine work the twist holds the join in place, but in larger spirals the join is generally made immediately before a twist, and only the preceding and succeeding twists hold it in place. It is wise to distribute the joins throughout the work.

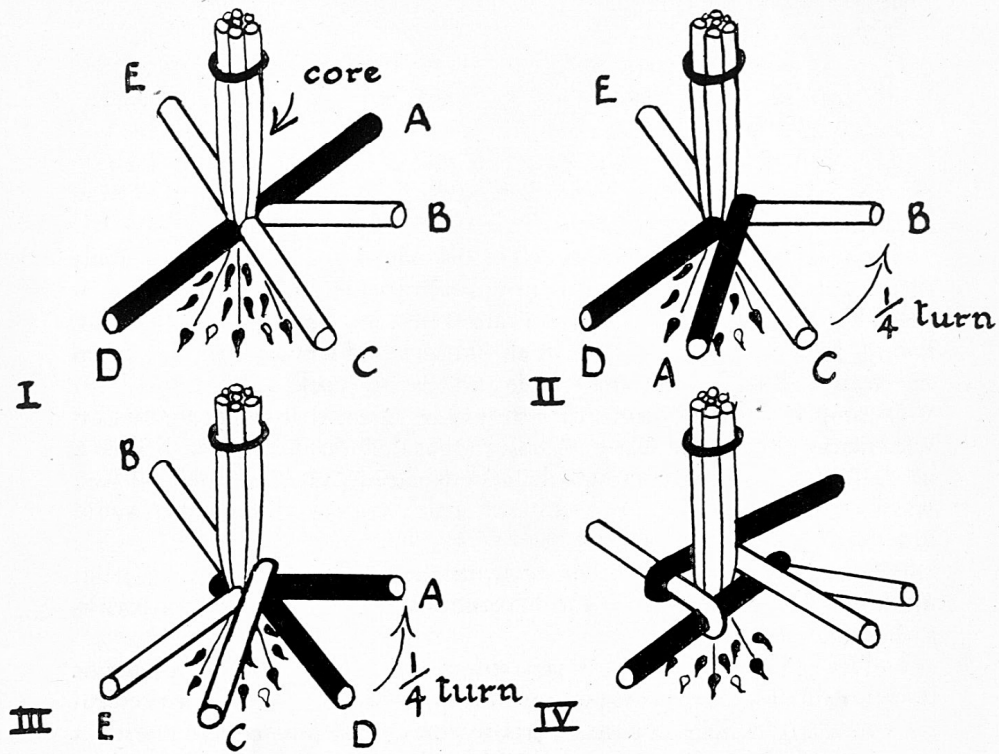


FIG. I. Tie together a bunch of straw as near the heads as possible. Select five straws and spread them out so that 'A' and 'B' lie to the right of the worker and the heads face downwards.

FIG. II. Holding the core with thumb and first finger of left hand, pass 'A' over 'B' and 'C' with thumb and first finger of right hand. Keep close to point of work and give a quarter turn anti-clockwise.

FIG. III. Pass 'C' over 'A' and 'D', giving a quarter turn anti-clockwise. Repeat these movements rhythmically with straws 'D' and 'E'. When the four movements are complete, a square is formed around the core.

FIG. IV. Shows the square.

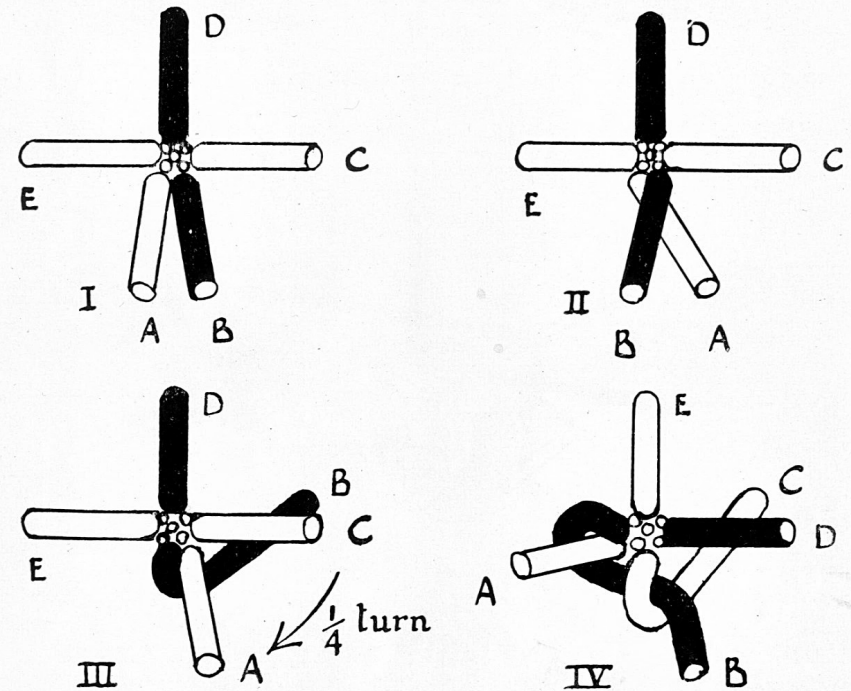
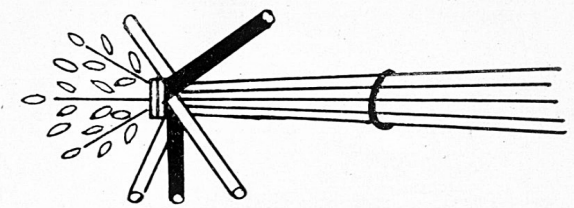


FIG. I. Tie together a bunch of corn as near the heads as possible. Select five straws from the bunch and spread them out so that two face the worker and the heads face upwards.

FIG. II. Pass 'A' under 'B'.

FIG. III. With thumb underneath and fingers on top give sharp twist to left. 'B' is now underneath and ready to pass under 'C'.

FIG. IV. Give work a quarter turn clockwise so that twist is always made in same position facing worker. This movement is repeated throughout and there should be an equal distance between each twist in every round.

To increase size of the core, insert straws up the middle, and to taper, cut off one at a time.

The direction of spiral may be clockwise or counter-clockwise. Directions can be reversed accordingly.

SPIRAL WITHOUT CORE (LANTERN)

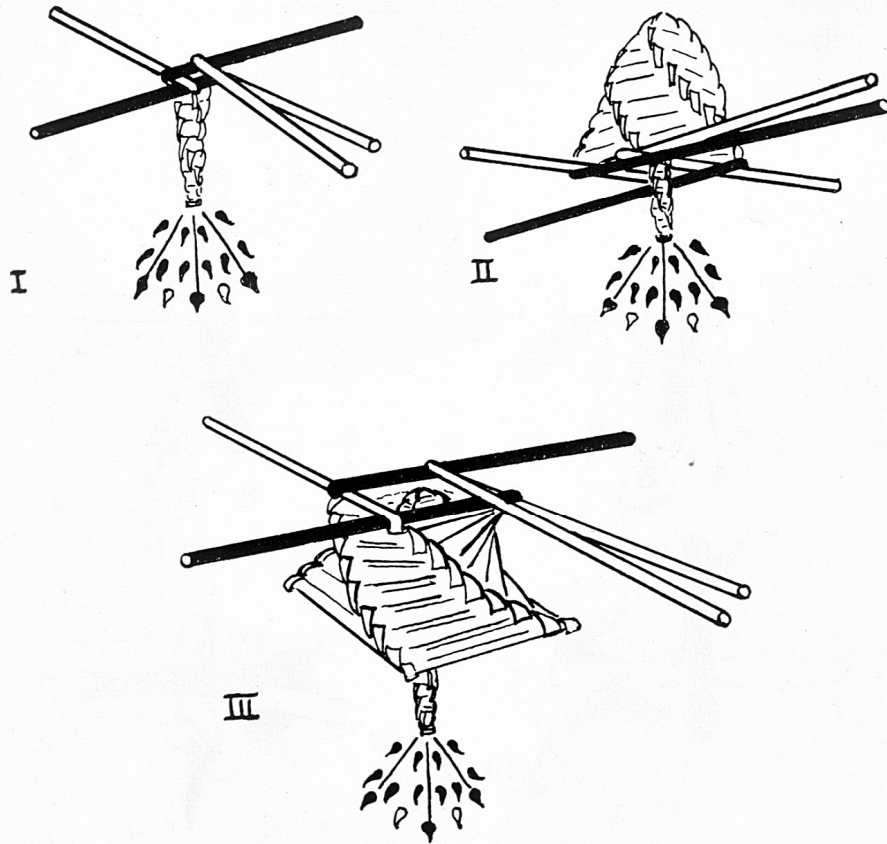
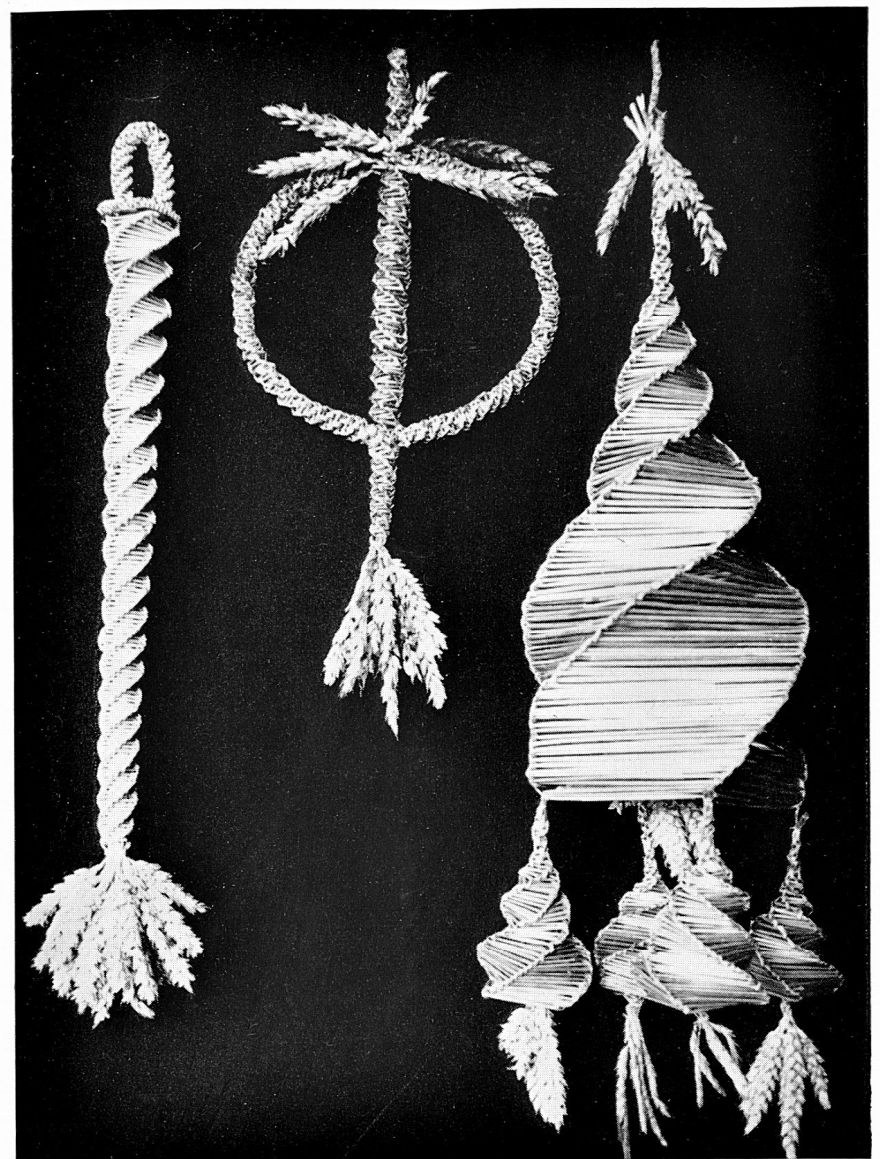


FIG. I. Select five straws and tie together. Spread out as in Spiral with Core method one, but using no core. Work a short length in this way.

FIG. II. Change to Spiral with Core method two, but still keep heads facing downwards. Work each succeeding square so that the straw lies just outside the straw of the preceding square until the desired size is achieved. This forms the inner structure not visible except from below.

FIG. III. Still keeping heads facing downwards, change to method one. Bring last working straw back and over as in Fig. II of method one. To decrease, the working straw should lie just inside the straw of the preceding square. Increase and decrease should not be done too rapidly.



LEFT: Neck from Co. Durham
(Spiral with Core)

RIGHT: Lantern from Herefordshire
(Spiral without Core)

CENTRE: Corn Dolly from Welsh Border
(Development of Spiral with Core)

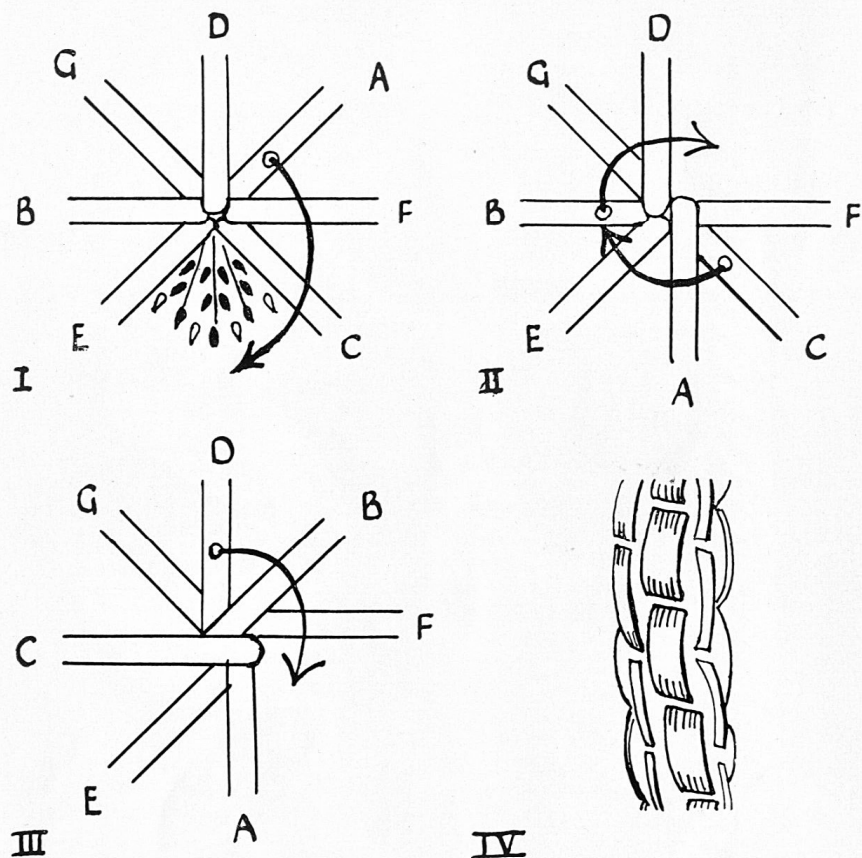


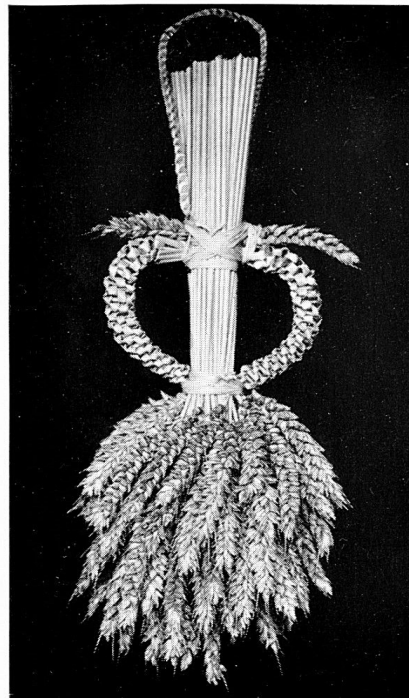
FIG. I. Tie together seven straws as near heads as possible and spread them out.

FIG. II. Fold 'A' over 'F' and 'C', so that it lies in the space between 'C' and 'E'.

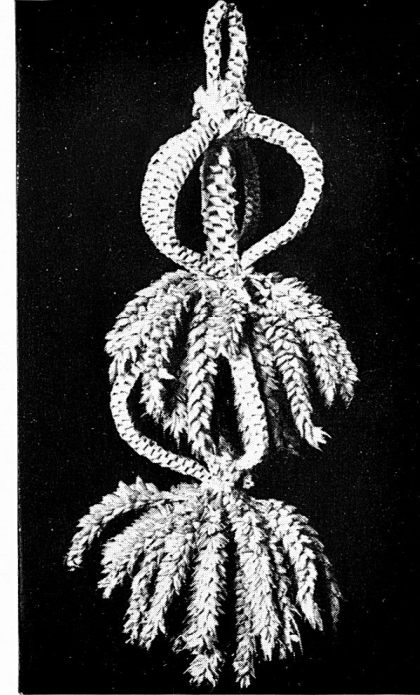
FIG. III. Fold 'B' over 'G' and 'D', to lie in 'A's' original place. Fold 'C' over 'A' and 'E', to lie in 'B's' original place. This movement is repeated throughout.

Each straw passes clockwise over two straws, thus 'D' passes over 'B' and 'F' into 'C's' original place and 'E' passes over 'C' and 'G' into 'D's' original place.

FIG. IV. Finished Plait.



Corn Dolly from Mordiford

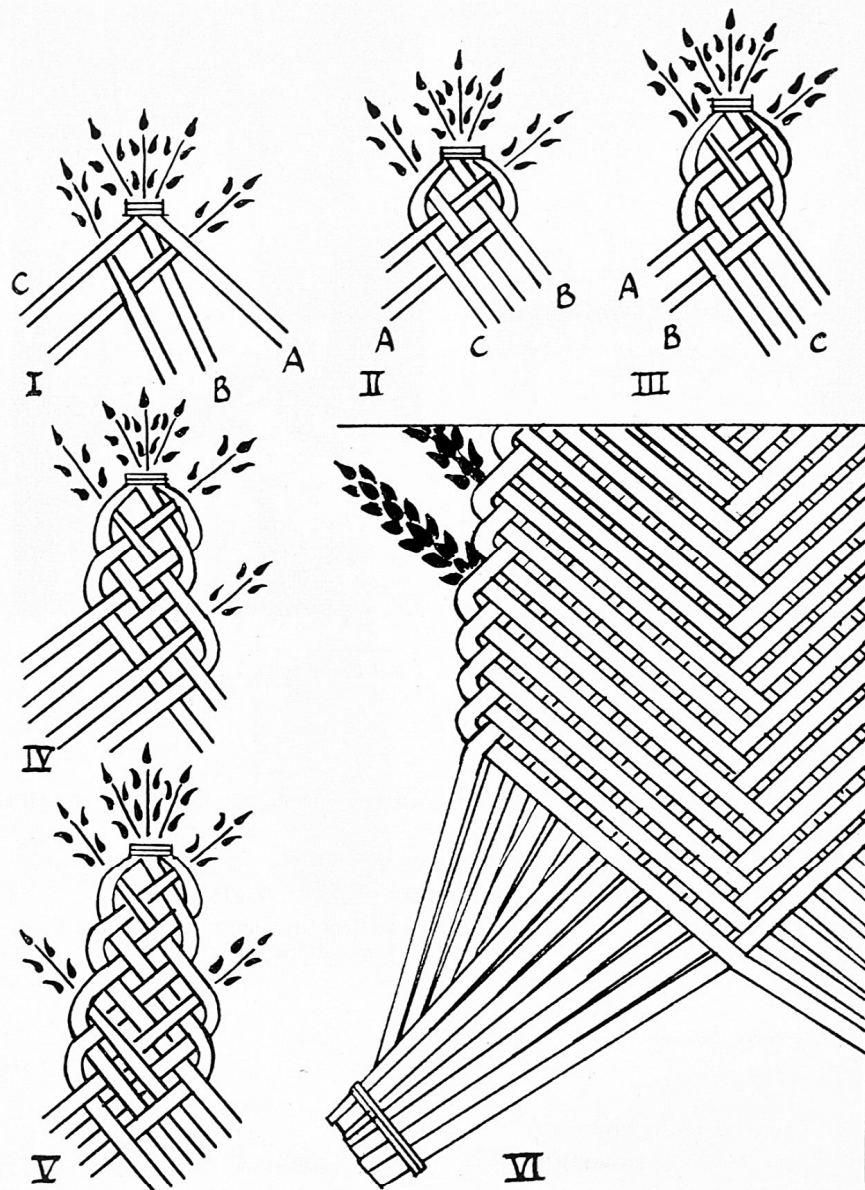


Corn Dolly from Yockleton

These Corn Dollies are fine examples of traditional work illustrating the use of Seven Plait.

No two Corn Dollies are alike and in this lies their charm. In the older types, made quickly on the field, the corn stalks were often left unadorned and the whole effect is more individual and less finished than the elaborate ornamental examples made at leisure in inn or barn.





Select twenty-five straws with well-matched heads and of a good length. Joining is not recommended and the corn should not be too ripe.

FIG. I. Tie together three straws and spread out. Insert a straw under 'A' and over 'B'. Insert a straw under 'C' and over the one already inserted.

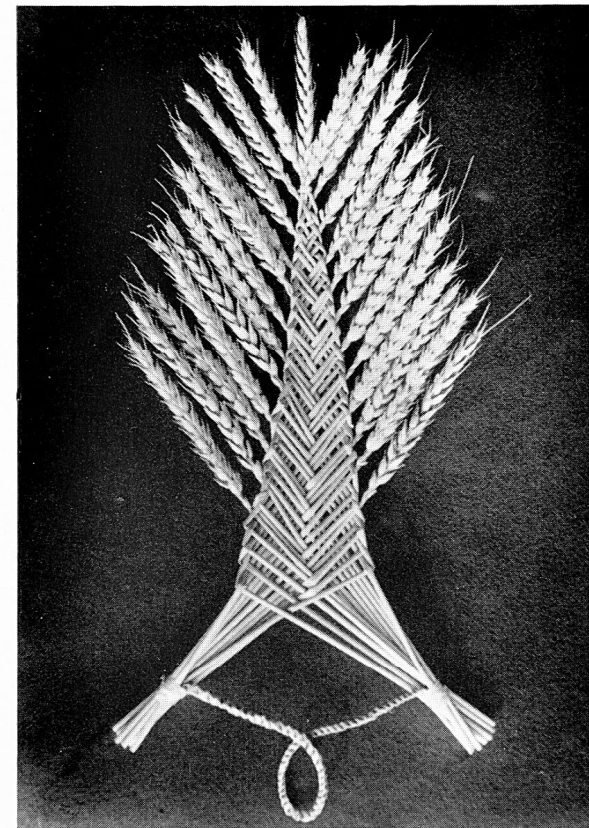
FIG. II. Take the outside right-hand straw 'A' back and under 'B' and let it lie to the left. Do the same with straw 'C' but let it lie to the right.

FIG. III. Repeat with outside right-hand straw and outside left-hand straw.

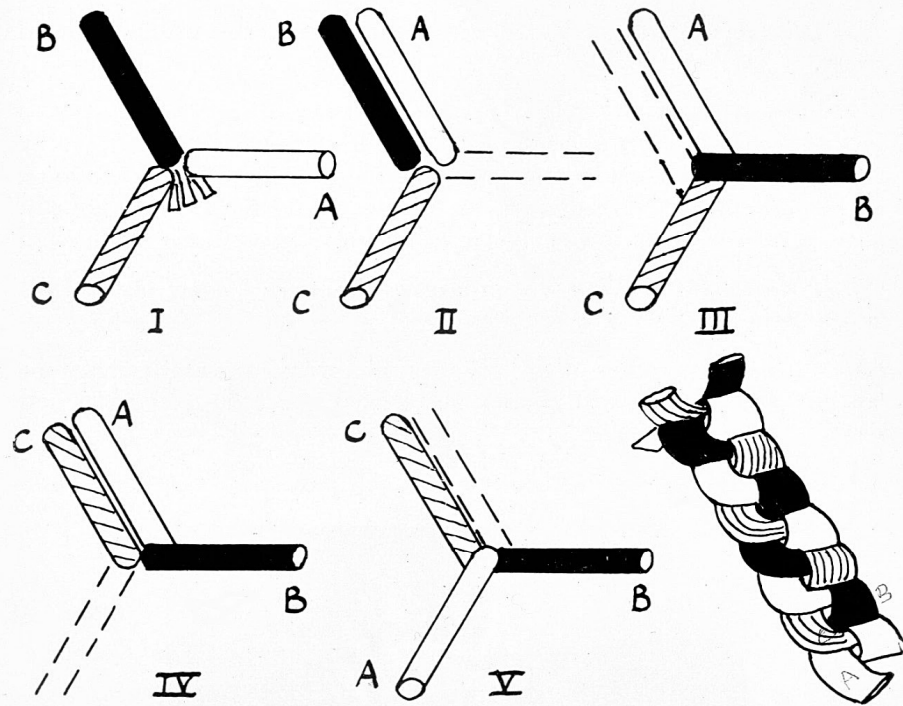
FIG. IV. Insert a straw under the right-hand outside straw and over all other straws and let it lie to the left. Lock this at once into position by taking right-hand outside straw and repeating the right-hand movement in Fig. II, making sure that having passed under the outside straw it passes over the other straws. Repeat this double movement on the left.

FIG. V shows that as the work progresses the outside straw travels over an increasing number of other straws.

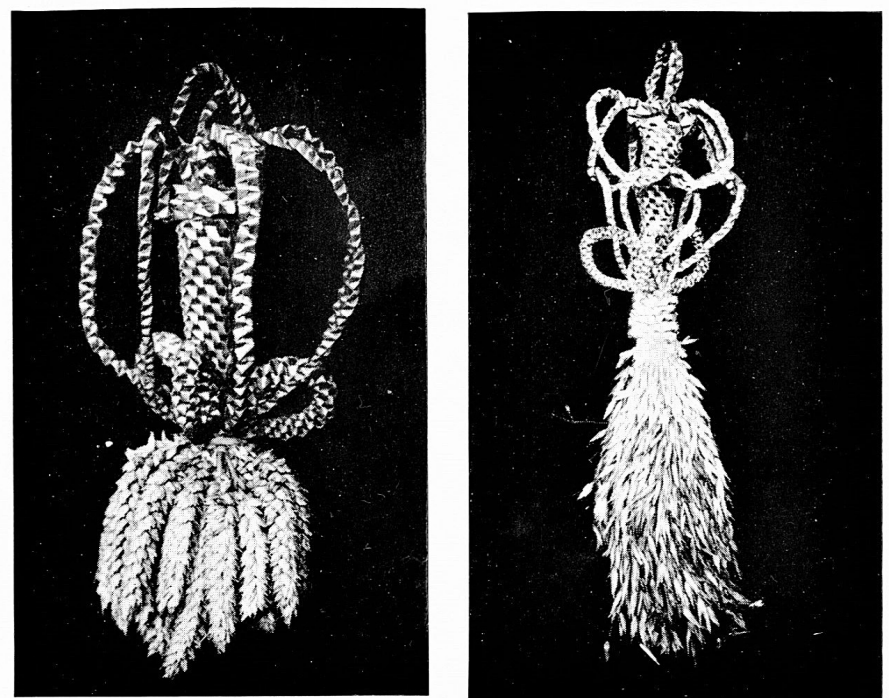
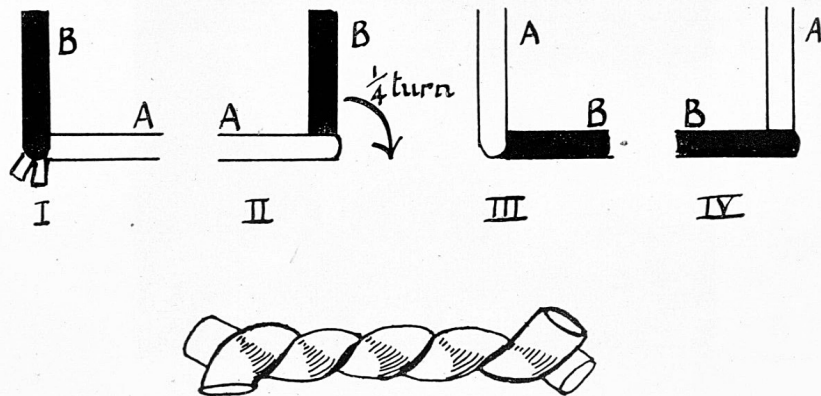
FIG. VI shows a section of the plait completed and the finish. After the last new straws have been inserted and locked, repeat Fig. III *ad lib.* and secure at each side.



THREE PLAIT



TWO PLAIT



Corn Dollies from the Teme Valley

THREE PLAIT (CAT FOOT)

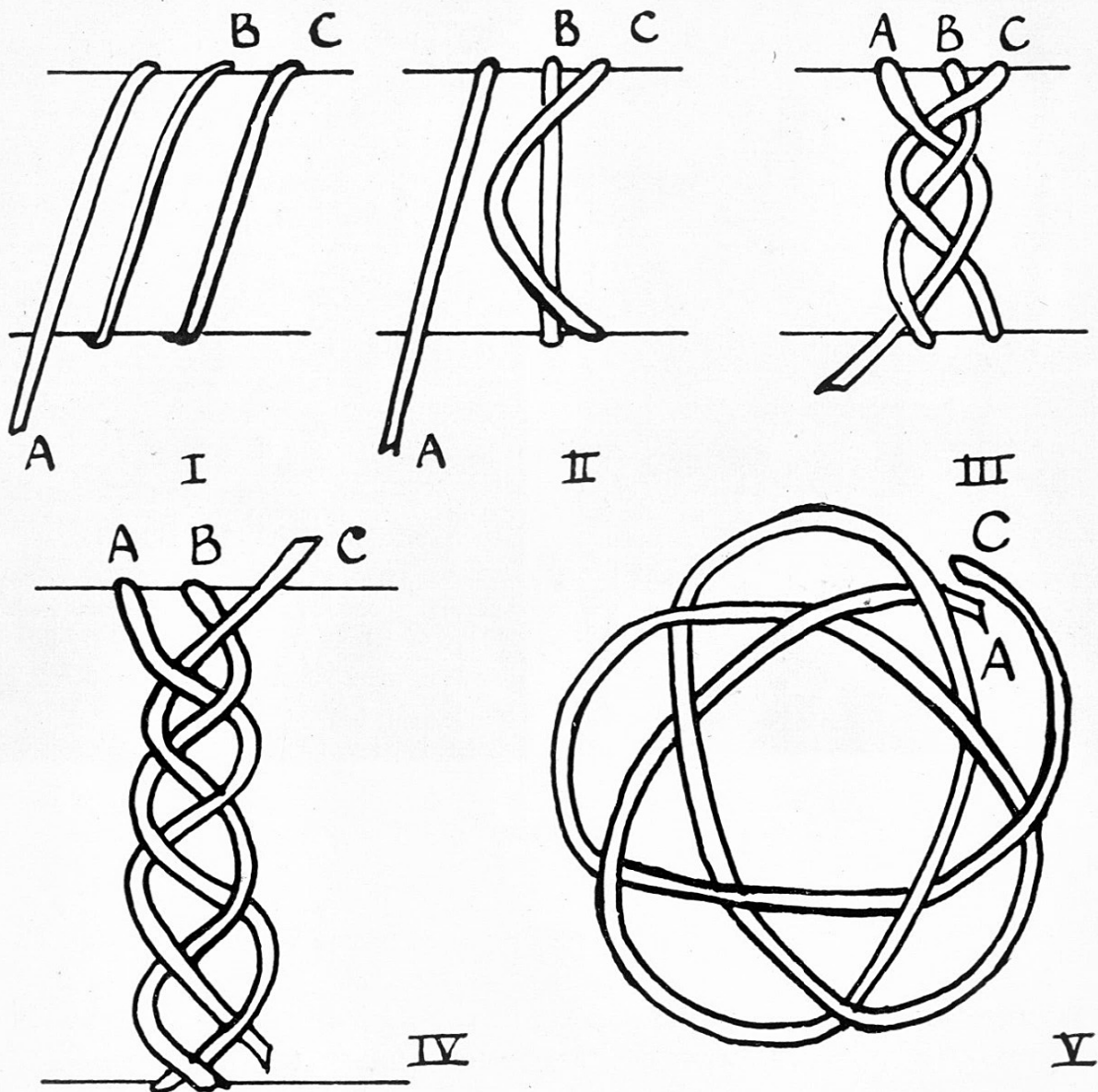
It is important that the angles shown in the figures are maintained. The position of 'B' in Fig. I shows the line along which the plait must be built.

- FIG. II. Fold 'A' alongside 'B'.
 - FIG. III. Fold 'B' over to take 'A's' original place.
 - FIG. IV. Fold 'C' alongside 'A'.
 - FIG. V. Fold 'A' over to take 'C's' original place.
- These four movements are repeated throughout.

TWO PLAIT

- FIG. I. Take two straws and place at right angles.
- FIG. II. Fold 'A' over 'B'.
- FIG. III. Give work a quarter turn clockwise.
- FIG. IV. Fold 'B' over 'A'. These alternate movements are repeated throughout.

TURK'S HEAD



The Turk's Head is used as a finish and is formed with a continuous length of fine plait. For the sake of clarity the plait is represented by double lines only in the diagram.

FIG. I. Wind the plait loosely three times round three fingers or a stick, leaving a working length at 'A'.

FIG. II. Draw 'C' over 'B'.

FIG. III. Pass the end of 'A' over 'C' and under 'B' and back over 'C' and under 'B'.

FIG. IV. Draw 'C' over 'B' and thread 'A' over 'C' and under 'B'.

FIG. V. Secure the ends of 'A' and 'C'.