



# selvedge

## THE FABRIC OF YOUR LIFE





## BIAS

Marie Taillefer



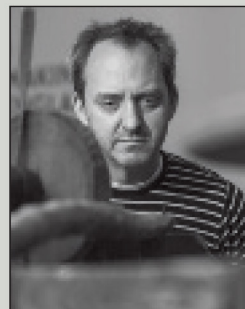
**I have lived** on the edge of Hampstead Heath for more than 25 years and am ashamed to say paid it scant regard for the majority of that time, enjoying nothing more than a cream tea at Kenwood House on Sunday afternoon and kite flying adventures with my children when they were young. It is only now, after spending the majority of the last year exploring my immediate surroundings, that have I come to appreciate its wonders. This discovery

initiated the ideas behind this issue, where we look again at that which we once considered commonplace.

Straw is the most mundane and abundant waste material. Yet we discover that it is extraordinary in the diversity of its practical applications: everything from architecture, clothing, delicate embroidery and folklore icons. This material is not always benign, playing a part in riots and rituals world wide. My research was undertaken with the assistance of Ollie Douglas, the curator of the Museum of English Rural Life, (well worth a pilgrimage if you are ever in Berkshire) to whom I am extremely grateful for the knowledge he so generously shared.

I have discovered both fresh approaches and reverence for ancient crafts of thatching, basket making and millinery. As well as pondering the research and development needed to create compostable fibre from desolvable pulp, we look afresh at woven oak swill baskets and the aromatic rush matting used to cover the floor of traditional English interiors. If you are lucky enough to enjoy a walk in the countryside this spring, consider humble straw and wear a straw hat to shield you from the sun.

*Polly Leonard*  
**Polly Leonard, Founder**



OLLIE DOUGLAS



FIONA IBBETSON

For me, the process of creation is as important, if not more so, than the final product. This includes the materials used. My beloved bicycle basket, made from elephant grass, was woven by hand by a cooperative of artisans. It is always attached to my bike when I'm cycling though it serves as a regular basket too. Knowing it was crafted by highly skilled artisans using an undervalued material that naturally grows in abundance means that I truly treasure it.



YUKO KAWASHIMA

Throughout over 20 years of photography experience, I have met many farmers and craftsmen. I have realised that I am a part of nature and many times have experienced a sense of wonder in the world around me. For Japanese people, rice is a vital staple food. Watching the ever-changing landscape of rice fields brings forth strong emotions of the progressing seasons. When I decorate my room with an ornament expertly handcrafted by the rice straw craft studio 'Takubo' it inspires dignity in me. Rice straws represent my roots and guardian deity.



KARIN LE ROUX

Nama women who live in the southern part of Namibia wear a distinct traditional dress that adds colour to the dry and arid region. Influenced by the attire of the Victorian missionaries in the 1880's, they piece together squares of colourful off-cut fabrics to create unique patch-work dresses. In the early 1990's, Namibia's independence was celebrated in the little village of Gibeon with a patch-work competition. The winning dress was hand-stitched by an 80-year-old Nama woman.



# FESTIVAL OF BRITAIN







## HELLO DOLLY

### *The Highs and Lows of the Corn Dolly*

**Seventy years ago, in 1951, several displays** at the Festival of Britain featured large, corn dolly style sculptures made by Essex straw craftsman Fred Mizen. A series of smaller works hung in a section of the Country Pavilion devoted to rural crafts. Downstream, in the imaginative wonderland of the Lion and Unicorn Pavilion, two towering straw beasts greeted visitors. As the guide put it, they served to symbolise national character: 'on the one hand, realism and strength, on the other, fantasy, independence and imagination.'

Mizen himself was a familiar name in strawcraft circles. Collector of twentieth century craft, Muriel Rose, had included examples of his dollies in British Council exhibitions that toured abroad during the 1940s and 1950s. Rose also worked for the Rural Industries Bureau and knew all the best-known makers. With Mizen's Festival contributions so prominent in displays of international significance, the art of the humble corn dolly appeared to be going global. However, after the Festival site was rapidly dismantled, these same strawcraft skills fell subject to increased criticism, and corn dolly making was once again relegated to the fringe.

In 1968, the Rural Industries Bureau published a guide to country workshops, catering to those keen to visit makers at work. The volume included the 'corn dolly maker', seemingly affirming the place of such creations within the traditional craft canon. Not everyone approved. In tones of condescending disdain, folklorist Margaret Dean-Smith wrote to the journal *Folklore* to share her displeasure: '... corn-dollies are not a "craft", to be equated with thatching, carving, saddlery and other essential skills. The

"corn dolly maker" is an upstart (dare one say it?) recently come into being'. It is perhaps hard to imagine why decorative strawcraft might elicit such an angry response. But, helpfully, her letter offered various clues to the source of her irritation.

Her first complaint centred on the misguided notion that, whereas other crafts were grounded in practical trades, corn dollies lacked real-world purpose. In actual fact, the skills stemmed directly from applied working contexts. Even before we consider the possibility of calendar customs, the techniques involved had been harvested from the straw-plaiting industry, decorative thatch work, hayrick finials, straw rope making, and the binding of sheaves. In short, the skills demonstrated by makers like Mizen were gleaned from established and substantial craft traditions.

Dean-Smith's second grievance was that corn dollies were a recent invention, lacking the deeper history often attributed to them. It seems odd that someone steeped in arts and crafts as she was should take a dim view of attempts to revive the making of things that had been more common in pre-industrial times. This was folk revivalism at its finest, with practitioners basing their dollies on sketches, photos, or replicas produced to order for fin de siècle antiquarians or interwar folk collectors. Indeed, many seemingly 'genuine' corn dollies were just as manufactured or contrived as the whimsical ideas applied to them. Furthermore, the fact that Mizen's Festival pieces didn't replicate traditional forms did not mean they could not still signify continuity of creativity, playfulness, and seasonality. Despite Dean-Smith's qualms, this mutability of form and meaning was almost certainly true of the deeper past as well. ▶



*'Corn Dolly:  
"Tis but a thing of straw," they say,  
Yet even straw can sturdy be  
Plainted into doll like me.  
And in the days of long ago  
To help the seeds once more to grow  
I was an offering to the gods.  
A very simple way indeed  
Of asking them to intercede  
That barn and granary o'erflow  
At Harvest time, with fruit and corn  
To fill again Amalthea's horn.'*

Her next argument decried that twentieth century rural stalwart, the Women's Institute. The WI did indeed publish corn dolly booklets, but this was hardly sinful. Indeed, its membership was far more interested in participation and creative practice than accurate history and folklore. Community spirit was more vital to them than the 'corn spirits' conjured up by anthropologist James George Frazer in *The Golden Bough*. His late-nineteenth-century thesis argued that, throughout European prehistory, people practiced fertility rites to maintain this imaginary spirit. Farfetched as his animist idea was, in many contexts people did reshape sheaves to serve as home decorations over winter. And in others, the final sheaf of harvest was routinely ploughed into the next year's first furrow. However, rather than linking to an all-encompassing spirit, diverse, loosely-connected, local traditions existed in arable cultures throughout Europe and beyond. What they shared was not universal superstitious beliefs or rituals but similar crops and comparable skills in using straw to represent the world.

In spite of Dean-Smith's claims, whilst the WI was focussed on women makers, corn dolly making was also practiced by plenty of men too, often far more prominently. The Rural Industry Bureau's own photo albums from the 1930s and 1940s show male farm workers twisting and plaiting and the handful of named corn dolly makers recorded by the British Council were all men. The work of women such as Margaret Lambeth, Emmie White, and others certainly dominated the publication of instruction booklets, which had so annoyed Dean-Smith, but many men were also involved in teaching corn dolly making. Perhaps what really annoyed her was that the modern practice didn't

fit with the often highly-gendered presentation of our rural past. But of course, harvest teams had actually been much more inclusive in the past than their later-twentieth century equivalents and so the making of corn dollies historically was almost certainly something that both men and women had done.

At the heart of things, the most substantial argument made by Dean-Smith against modern corn dolly makers was about the flawed and fanciful folklore they favoured. However, in hindsight, it is easy to see how so many leaflets, booklets, and corn dolly makers simply replicated this simple story, complete with the romance and magic it conjured. Frazer's fictitious but dominant narrative became the default origin myth, and was reprinted and shared by enthusiastic strawcraft practitioners.

Whilst folklorists whined on about inaccuracies and worried about reputations being tarnished by the continual reinvention of the corn spirit, corn dolly makers got on with the business of ensuring that the handcraft skills were salvaged and safeguarded, taught and retained. In actual fact, the work of corn dolly makers throughout the twentieth century served to keep the living heritage of corn dollies alive and relevant and its fruits can be seen today in both amateur craft forums and contemporary art contexts alike.

Far from the 'upstarts' that Dean-Smith claimed they were, corn dolly makers displayed those same characteristics symbolised by Mizen's magnificent Lion and Unicorn, a plait of vital 'realism and strength' with an exciting twist of 'fantasy, independence and imagination.'...

**Dr Ollie Douglas**