

What can objects tell us about Superstitions and Folklore in Rural Life?

In rural communities, people's lives depended on bountiful harvests and healthy livestock. They would, therefore, be vigilant for any signs of looming disaster. When things did sour, the people lacked the viewpoint of modern science to determine cause. Instead, they would place blame at the door of the evil eye, of witchcraft and devils, of envious fairies, knots of eels, and even mildly offended bees.

Objects can tell us many different stories. They provoke discussion, create memories, and build connections between the past and the present. This resource accompanies the Superstitions and Folklore online [exhibition](#), and explores six themes within the wider contexts of superstitions and folklore:

- Healthcare
- Love and friendship
- Spirituality
- Luck
- Witchcraft, magic and the supernatural
- Annual Events

Curriculum Links

Key Stage 3 – History

- The development of Church, state, and society in Britain (society, economy, and culture across the period: for example, work and leisure in town and country, religion, and superstition in daily life)
- Gain historical perspective by placing growing knowledge into different contexts, understanding the connections between cultural, religious, and social history.
- Understand the methods of historical enquiry, including how evidence is used rigorously to make historical claims, and discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed.

Teaching using museum collections

Using museum collections within your everyday teaching can help to support pupils to make connections between the past and present and provide context to their learning. The Superstitions and Folklore online [exhibition](#) and this accompanying resource explores highlighted objects in the Museum of English Rural Life's collections.

Whilst many of our objects are from a more recent period in history than the superstitions and folklore presented; they illustrate how these beliefs and stories have permeated history and continued to influence our lives through to the modern day.

The objects presented within the exhibition and booklet are just a small selection of the museum's collections. You can search the museum's wider collections through our [online databases](#); short videos explaining how to access and search our databases can be found on the museum's [YouTube channel](#).

Key Questions

Key questions such as these can be used to explore the objects and themes further and provide a gateway to engaging with contemporary people's lives and the context in which they lived.

- What superstitions do people have today?
- Where do superstitions and folklore come from?
- What does this tell us about lives in the past?
- How or why have superstitions, beliefs and folklore changed over time?
- How does this relate to what we already know?
- Why might people believe in superstitions?
- How do some superstitions and folklore compare or contradict each other?

Healthcare

Mice

Mice were most used in folk medicine for ailments such as whooping cough, bed wetting, sore throats and various fevers. They might be boiled, roasted or fried, or reduced to a powder and given in some 'pleasant or delightful drink', or mixed with jam and served in a sandwich. Cures of this kind were still used in some rural areas as late as the 1930s.



Mousetrap (57/125)

Making Rural England - On the hunt

This mousetrap is made from a block of wood with a hole on either side. A downward-springing wire traps the mouse when it's head is in the holes. It was found under the floorboards of the 15th century Asbury Manor House.



Mousetrap (2008/15)

Welcome Case

This mouse trap, called the 'Perpetual', was designed, and manufactured by Colin Pullinger and Sons of Silsey, West Sussex. The 'Perpetual' is a multi-catch live mouse trap with a see-saw mechanism.

Potatoes

One old remedy for getting rid of warts involved potatoes. The idea was to buy a potato (though a piece of meat or a bean would also work) and bury it at a crossroads. As the potato decayed, the wart would disappear. What this remedy fails to recognise is that potatoes tend to thrive underground rather than decay, so perhaps it would just make your wart problem worse!



Potato Basket (60/768)

A Year on the Farm - Winter Display

This potato basket, or skep, was used when planting potatoes. It is a round frame basket with two handle spaces made from ash and willow. It was made between 1945 and 1960 by Gwylim Jones, a basket maker in Ffostrasol, Ceredigion.

Dogs

Dog hair was also used in several remedies, most commonly to heal dogs bites. The thought was 'like cures like', something which is mirrored in many other home remedies. This is why we still use the phrase 'hair of the dog that bit you' to recover from a night out of partying. A slightly more dedicated healer would use the saliva of a dog to heal injuries, although we do not recommend this!

Red

The mixing of red and white flowers in one vase is considered to be very unlucky, with the potential to cause illness. It is avoided in hospitals, but you may find people practice this rule in their home. Don't panic if you do have this, by just adding one more coloured flower to the vase, the spell is broken!

Pruning set (2010/71)

Town and Country – Grow Your Own

This pruning set contains two pairs of Rolcut secateurs, plant ties, plant labels, pencils, and leaflets. These sets were sold by Suttons Seeds Ltd. in their garden shop at the trial grounds in Reading. This set was purchased from Suttons Seeds Ltd. in 1970.

Teeth

There are many superstitions about teeth as well as the common fact that the tooth fairy often provides financial settlement for children's teeth when they fall out. To dream about teeth falling out suggests you are keeping a secret!



Tooth Extractor (51/190)

Town and Country – Rural Healthcare

Nothing is known of the origin or use of this tooth extractor, but it was probably used for extracting human teeth. It is shaped like a corkscrew – the tip would be placed around the tooth and the tooth removed by twisting. It belonged to Mr Stanton of Winchcombe, Gloucestershire.

Eels

Historically, many believed that they were formed from horsehair thrown into running streams. They were also a popular ingredient in folk medicine, and it was commonly believed that eel oil could cure deafness. A more generally reported medical use was to wear their skins as stylish garters, to prevent cramps or cure rheumatism.



Eel trap (60/467)

Making Rural England – On the hunt

This eel trap was made by Great Yarmouth Stores Ltd in Norfolk. It is made of buff willow and centre cane. It has a funnel-entrance, a single non-return valve and a cork bung. This type of eel trap was baited, weighted so that it would sink, and tethered to the bank of a river.

Pigs

Some people in the Middle Ages carried out superstitious practices which were a curious mixture of pagan tradition and Christian belief. Pig bones were believed to have the power to prevent injury. For example, one rite involved placing a pig's shoulder bone on an altar and reading from four Gospels. The bone would then be fashioned into a cross which would protect the holder from misfortune.



Pig Ringer (91/35)

Town and Country – Animal Health

This steel tool, rather like a pair of pliers, has two jaws and two handles. The jaws are painted gold, and the handles are painted black. It is used for fixing nose rings in pigs.

Love and friendship

Buckets

It was the custom for the mother of a newly christened baby, in 19th Century Cumberland, to give a tea to her neighbours. When they were ready to leave, a bucket was placed in the doorway which all the women had to jump over. If they stumbled or tripped it was taken as a sign they were pregnant.

Another Cumberland tradition would be to leave a lit candle in the bucket and if the draught of a woman's skirt extinguished the flame, she would be the next to be pregnant. The link between pregnancy and a bucket is confirmed by a comment from a young Yorkshire woman reported in Opie and Tatem - "Jump over the bucket to bring on labour."



Bucket (59/118)

Welcome case

Nothing is known of the origin of this bucket. It is made of wooden slats held in place with metal bands and has a metal handle for carrying.

Nuts

Nuts are often associated with love and marriage. There were several games played on All Hallow's Eve. A couple was given a nut each, and they would be thrown into a fire. If the nuts popped it was good news for the couple! If they didn't, love was not in the cards!



Nutcracker (93/16)

Making Rural England – Hearth and Home

This is a pair of 'reversible' metal nutcrackers, designed to crack both large and small nuts. They were used at the home of the Lawrence family in Reading.

Sickles

Sickles were used for cutting crops; a job now done by a combine harvester. In many countries, it was a widely held superstition that marrying in midsummer would lead to a happy and long-lasting union. Marrying during harvest time would only add to your worries and result in a difficult marriage. This led to the saying: "Those wed between sickle and scythe will never thrive."



Sickle (73/44)

Year on the Farm - Summer

A sickle with a curved blade with a straight edge, with a bright and black finish, and a round wooden handle. It was manufactured by Spear & Jackson (Tools) Ltd. of Wednesbury, Staffordshire.

Brooms

Some believed that if a woman stepped over a broom before marriage, she would give birth to a child out of wedlock. Stories from Yorkshire's history speak of mothers fearing for their daughters stepping over brooms – and of mischievous young boys purposefully leaving them in awkward places.



Besom Broom (60/591)

Making Rural England – Working Wood

A besom is a broom made of brush or twigs which are bound with a bond known as a 'lap'. This is a three-lapped heather besom, for general use. It was probably made by, F. Saunders of Tadley, Hampshire, where besom making was a local industry.

Bees

Folk tradition about bees stresses how easily they might take offence, in which case they would cease to give honey, abandon their hive or die. They had to be treated as members of the household and must be told about deaths, births, and marriages in the family. Their hives must be appropriately adorned, and they had to have their share of festive or funeral food. They would then hum and show they consented to remain.



Beehive (82/27)

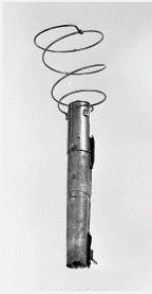
Making Rural England – Hearth and Home

This is a wooden, red painted beehive. The circular ventilator each end of the roof is made from a tin lid for 'Hudson's Extract Soap'. It was made by Mr Stewart; he was a carpenter and lived in Billericay, Essex.

Apples

For thousands of years, apples have been thought to have held magical powers relating to matters of love. For example, in Ancient Rome, young people would throw an apple seed onto the fire while saying the name of the one they loved. If the seed popped, the feeling was mutual!

Bobbing for apples was a tradition developed in Scotland. After successfully fishing up an apple, you would wrap the peel round your head three times and throw it over your shoulder. It would fall in the shape of the first letter of your love's name.



Apple picker (60/143)

Year on the Farm – Autumn

This is a fruit picker and was made by William Penn Ltd. of High Road, Finchley. It was used in Oxfordshire during World War II for picking apples and pears from tall trees without damaging the fruit.

Sugar

Whether you put your milk in before the tea or vice versa, it is recommended to never put sugar in after the milk. To do so could risk 'crossing a loved one' or never receiving a marriage proposal.



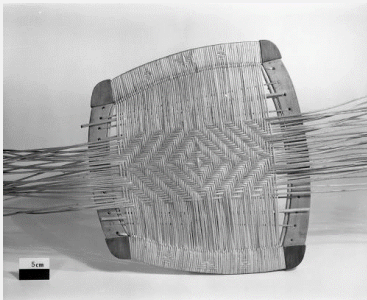
Sugar Cutters (52/47)

Making Rural England – Hearth and Home

These sugar cutters are a domestic utensil used for breaking loaf sugar into pieces suitable for table use. Its blades have been bent at right angles to their normal position to adapt the cutters for another use, possibly for holding a bull through the ring in its nose.

Chairs

There have been a number of superstitions regarding chairs, which include that falling off of a chair or knocking one over would suggest you would not get married that year. Others say that to return your seat under a table after a meal with a friend meant you would never eat together again.



Chair Seat (68/459)

Making Rural England – Masters at Work

This was made by Leslie Maltby who came from a family of basket makers, originally based in High Wycombe, the centre of the chair making industry in Britain. This seat, which is unfinished, is made of willow skein on an ash frame with an under weave of chair cane.

Spirituality

Bees

In medieval, Elizabethan and Stuart times, bees were regarded as mysterious, intelligent, and holy. Their wax was used in church candles, honey was a biblical image for God's Grace and the joys of Heaven. Poets praised the hive as a model for the perfect society, grouped around its King. It was only in the 1740s that English naturalists admitted the largest bee was female and in fact, a Queen.



Beehive (82/27)

Making Rural England – Hearth and Home

This is a wooden, red painted beehive. The circular ventilator each end of the roof is made from a tin lid for 'Hudson's Extract Soap'. It was made by Mr Stewart; he was a carpenter and lived in Billericay, Essex.

Willow

Willows were seen as trees of celebration in biblical times, but this changed over time and today willows are more associated with sadness and mourning.



Willow skeining machine (68/580)

Making Rural England – Makers at Work

This is a skeining machine for cleaving rods of willow into three or four to make skeins, and for shaving the skeins to reduce their thickness in preparation for weaving. Skeinwork is a German speciality, and the machine was made in Berlin. It is driven by a flywheel and a system of rollers.

Eggs

The tradition of giving children eggs at Easter dates to the 4th century BC, when the church forbade eating eggs during Lent. However, hens were not particularly cooperative with this order and continued laying, leading to an excess of eggs. As a result, boiled eggs were given to children to use as toys and were often dyed bright colours to make them more appealing.



Egg box (92/109)

Year on the Farm - Winter

This is a cardboard egg box from Stokes Farm in Wokingham, Berkshire. The label shows a picture of a chicken and young, and the words '6 free range eggs'.

Shepherds

The nature of shepherd's work kept them somewhat apart from other farmworkers, and they had traditions of their own: they continued wearing smocks when other labourers had long abandoned them, and they favoured regional differences in the designs of crooks.

It was customary for a shepherd to be buried with a tuft of wool so at Domesday he could prove what his job had been and be excused for occasionally missing Sunday Mass.

Birds

Birds have always been subject to superstition, being seen as messengers of the gods in old pagan myths. Even when Christianity became dominant in Europe, many superstitions persisted. In France and England, hearing a cuckoo call before breakfast transformed the hearer into a lazy idler for the rest of the year. Robins were often thought of as sacred, with great harm falling on those who stole from their nests. In addition, hearing a great chorus of sparrows was thought to signal a downpour of rain.



Bird Scarer (54/226)

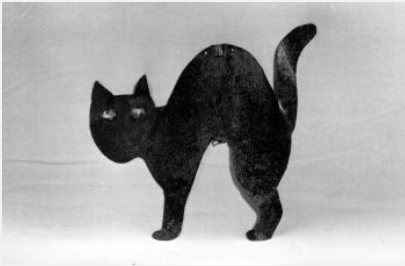
Year on the Farm - Autumn

This clapper type bird scarer was used on a farm at Sackers Green until 1918. The clappers consist of three pieces of wood each containing two holes through which a string passed to hold them together.

Luck

Cats

There are more superstitions about cats than any other domestic animal. Beliefs concerning cats, especially black ones are numerous and often contradictory. On the whole black cats are considered lucky in England and appear on greetings cards as charms. Many counties believe black cats to be bad luck, especially if one crosses your path, especially on the way to work or if it sits with its back to you.



Bird Scarer (56/371)

Welcome Case

This tin bird scarer is made in the shape of a cat. Bird scarers were used to keep birds away from crops. This bird scarer was used in Surrey.

Mice

Mice are considered an omen of bad luck, sickness or death if they arrive in large numbers in a house previously free of them, enter a bedroom, gnaw someone's clothes or run across someone's body. To get rid of them, one should speak politely, explaining that their presence is inconvenient and suggest another house that they might enjoy more. Another author suggest a politely written letter, left in burrows will convince the mice to move on.

Greek farmers cleared gardens of mice by politely offering alternative accommodation but promising swift retribution if the invitation was ignored. Before sunrise the well-greased message was stuck upon an unhewn stone where the mice could read it before eating.



Mousetrap (57/125)

Making Rural England - On the hunt

This mousetrap is made from a block of wood with a hole on either side. A downward-springing wire traps the mouse when it's head is in the holes. It was found under the floorboards of the 15th century Asbury Manor House.



Mousetrap (2008/15)

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This mouse trap, called the 'Perpetual', was designed, and manufactured by Colin Pullinger and Sons of Silsey, West Sussex. The 'Perpetual' is a multi-catch live mouse trap with a see-saw mechanism.

Bees

If a bee flies into your home it foretells the visit of a stranger. The length of time it stayed in the room denoted the length of your visitors stay. Other beliefs were that shouting and swearing could drive bees away and must be spoken to in soft tones.

Bees must never be bought with ordinary money, only gold coin. They can also be safely acquired by gift, loan or barter. A single bumblebee entering the house is a sign of good luck, normally in the form of money.

When bees swarmed it was usual for women and children of the house to follow them making lots of noise with pots and pans. It was a bad omen if bees swarmed on a dead branch, meaning death for someone in the owner's family, or for the person seeing the swarm there.



Beehive (82/27)

Making Rural England – Hearth and Home

This is a wooden, red painted beehive. The circular ventilator each end of the roof is made from a tin lid for 'Hudson's Extract Soap'. It was made by Mr Stewart; he was a carpenter and lived in Billericay, Essex.

Umbrellas

One of the most common superstitions still used today claims that it is unlucky to open an umbrella and hold it over your head whilst indoors. Most modern versions of the superstition say it is just bad luck, however older versions of the rule suggest it could bring death!

It is also wise to avoid putting an umbrella on your bed, or else you may suffer from a long illness and an umbrella on the table would be sure to cause an argument or quarrel in the household. Perhaps their link to stormy, miserable weather inclines them to be a risky object?



Umbrella (51/571)

Year on the Farm - Spring

This umbrella is the type used by shepherds and was probably acquired from a shepherd in the East Hendred area, Oxfordshire. It is made of blue cotton, reinforced at the top with a second layer of cotton, with wooden ribs and a turned wooden handle.

Bucket

Fishermen and other sea farers have long had a fear of bad omens before trips. One Yorkshire example suggests that if a fisherman saw an upturned bucket or bowl before his breakfast, he would not go to sea that day. It was also considered extremely unlucky to lose a bucket overboard whilst at sea.



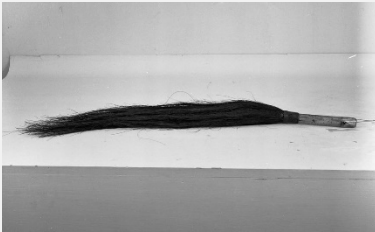
Bucket (59/118)

Welcome case

Nothing is known of the origin of this bucket. It is made of wooden slats held in place with metal bands and has a metal handle for carrying.

Flies

Several fly related superstitions have been recorded, although they are often quite contradictory. To see a fly in your house at Christmas it is considered lucky and should be left alone. However, in the North East of England, a fly in the house is an omen of death!



Fly Switch (55/181)

Town and Country – Animal Health

This is a farrier's fly switch. It was used to keep the flies off horses while they were being shod. The switch is made of horsehair, so the animal thinks it is his own tail - the donor said that brushing the flies off by hand made the horses restive and difficult to shoe.

Salt

One tradition around salt is that you must never give a person salt, even at the dinner table, it can only be taken for to "*pass salt is to pass ill will*". Another common tradition is to avoid spilling salt and if you do, you must toss some over your left shoulder, supposedly to hit the devil in the eye!



Salting Tray (91/40)

Making Rural England – Harsh Reality

This is a large wooden salting tray with a lead lining and a drainage hole which is closed with a cork. It was used for preserving pork by covering it in brine. The brine used for salting was a mixture of water (2 to 3 gallons), salt (4 lbs) and half a bottle of port wine.

Horses

Horseshoes are one of the most popular symbols of good luck, often featured on greetings cards. Tradition suggests nailing a horseshoe above your door in a 'U' shape to catch good luck.



Horseshoes (81/181)

Town and Country – Horse power

This is a hand fullered horse's fore-shoe. It was made by J. B. Packer & Son in Uffington Forge, Uffington, Oxfordshire. Three generations of the Packer family worked in the forge until 1981, when the business closed down leaving Uffington without a blacksmith or farrier.

Green

The idea that green is unlucky has stemmed from the late 18th Century until today. Originally it only applied to clothes but later came to apply to furnishings including curtains cars or bicycles. Two ideas are particularly well documented. One is that to wear green will bring death to the household “*wear green and you’ll soon wear black*”. It is also bad luck to wear green at a wedding as some believe it symbolises being forsaken or betrayed. In Elizabethan culture “buying someone a green dress” implied pregnancy outside of marriage.

Green also has more positive associations. Greenery and evergreens are used in many seasonal customs as signs of joy and celebration. It can also symbolise youthful vigour spring or summer, hope and nature.



Green Dress (2009/4)

Welcome Case

This 'folk' or 'prairie' dress was manufactured by Laura Ashley in the 1970s. It is made of light green cotton, with a white floral detail. It has puff sleeves, loop button enclosures and a pleated bodice.

Bellows

It was a common belief that bellows should never be placed on the table, as misfortune was sure to follow. Many thought the relation between blowing hot air and arguing caused this bad luck.



Bellows (59/92)

Making Rural England – The Last Turner

These small wood and leather bellows have a metal nozzle and a hole in the handle, enabling them to be hung up. They were made by George Lailey, of Bucklebury. George Lailey turned wooden bowls using a pole lathe in his hut at Turner's Green, on Bucklebury Common, until 1958.

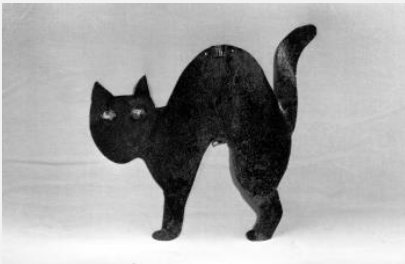
Witchcraft, magic and the supernatural

Cats

Black cats are commonly associated with witches, but this only became a predominate idea in the late 19th Century. Before this, witches were thought to have several 'familiars' that ranged from mice, weasels or toads as well as cats. The idea that cats could be witches' familiars is found in writings and trial reports of the 16th Century and has now become a cliché. But they were only one of many animals of which this was said.

Dreaming of cats is often interpreted as a warning that someone is being spiteful or treacherous towards you.

If a child got a cat's hair in their mouth, it would stick there and cause wens or the King's Evil. It was commonly said that a cat must never be allowed near a baby in their cot, lest it lie on the child and 'suck it's breath.'



Bird Scarer (56/371)

Welcome Case

This tin bird scarer is made in the shape of a cat. Bird scarers were used to keep birds away from crops. This bird scarer was used in Surrey.

Candles

Some people believed that if a candle sparked it was announcing the arrival of a letter. The direction of the spark towards a particular person identified the receiver of that letter. Other superstitions suggest that the spark was an omen of a stranger or even a thief!

Candles were also used as part of love spells. In the 1800s during the eve of St. Mark or St. Agnes, one would light a stolen candle and sit and watch it. When the flame turned blue your future husband or wife would appear before you!



Tinderbox (51/1230)

Making Rural England – Harsh Reality

This tinderbox is made of tinned iron and has a turned wooden handle. It consists of a round container with a candle socket in the centre of the lid and a damper for extinguishing the tinder, but no flint or steel. Tinderboxes were used to create fire before matches.

Brooms

The notion that witches favoured brooms as their mode of transport of choice was first popularised in 1612, at the time of the Lancashire Witch trials. Yet, older sources tell of witches travelling by more diverse means. These included riding pitchforks, plant stems, bowls, and even pig troughs. It was said that brooms are particularly unlucky if purchased in the month of May: *"buy a broom in May / sweep a friend away"*.



Besom Broom (60/591)

Making Rural England – Working Wood

A besom is a broom made of brush or twigs which are bound with a bond known as a 'lap'. This is a three-lapped heather besom, for general use. It was probably made by, F. Saunders of Tadley, Hampshire, where besom making was a local industry.

Horses

In folk tradition horses were regarded as very vulnerable to supernatural attack. Their night sweats and exhaustion were attributed to 'hag riding' from witches and fairies from whom horses must be protected by with 'hole stones'.

Their tendency to shy or refuse to move for no reason was (and often is) attributed to a physic awareness of the presence of evil, for example haunted spots of places where blood has been shed. It was also believed they can be tamed, immobilised, or rendered restive by those with magical powers.

In some regions of East Anglia men particularly skilled in working with farm horses had secret ways of controlling them, apparently by a mixture of magical ritual and material means such as substances that smell attracted or repelled them.

Horse skulls are occasionally found under floorboards in old houses. It is tempting to put a mythical spin on this, but many have said that this simply improves the acoustics for music making and has been confirmed by people in Bedfordshire, Suffolk, Ireland and Scandinavia.



Horse Collar (2007/41)

Town and Country – Horse Power

This black leather horse collar was made by Terry Davis, of Wistanstow, Shropshire. It has black and white checks with straw stuffing, and a Terry Davis leather label attached to the top, with the number 26 stamped on it.

Hazel

Hazel has long been considered a magical tree. A hazel rod is supposed to protect against evil spirits, as well as being used as a wand and for water-divining. Hazelnuts were carried as charms or held to ward off rheumatism.



Hazel spar (94/38)

Making Rural England – Masters at Work

This thatching spar was made by thatcher, Jeff King. It is made from split hazel and twisted into a staple shape. Spars are used to secure liggers (lengths of split wood used to hold the upper surface of the thatch in place) on the ridges of thatched roofs.

Cows

The care of cows, milking and butter making were surrounded by multiple magical precautions and fears, presumably because they were subject to various issues that were poorly understood at the time.

Failures in milk, such as blood in milk, or no milk production would be blamed on witchcraft. The issues would probably have been caused by diseases or poor hygiene, but these solutions would not come until much later. To guard against these malicious spells protective charms and plants were placed in or beside cattle sheds, the cows were blessed and wassailed and if needed, countercharms would be used.

Dairy work also had its problems for which many magical remedies are reported from many districts. As milk sours easily in thundery weather, it was wise to put thunderstones* on the windowsill. Witches might steal the goodness of the milk by spells, making it impossible to churn it into butter. The standard countercharm was to plunge a red-hot poker into the churn. There was also a verbal charm to be recited while churning:

“Come, butter, come! Come, butter, come! Peter stands at the gate, Waiting for a buttered cake, Come, butter, come! “



Milk Bottle (98/36)

Town and Country – Dairy to doorstep

This is a cream glazed bottle in the shape of a milk bottle with ‘Farm Fresh / Tools’ stamped on it.



Butter Print (55/760)

Making Rural England – Home and Hearth

This butter print, with a design of a cow, was used for measuring and marking blocks of butter. It is an 'ejector' type butter print, with a plunger to push out the butter.

Dogs

Dogs are believed to be sensitive to the supernatural, they can see ghosts and apparently predict death, and their behaviour can potentially predict luck, both good and bad.



Sheepdog Collar (51/858)

Year on the Farm - Spring

Judging from its size, this leather collar was probably for a sheepdog. It has a large buckle at one end and a copper plate pricked with the name 'J. Andrews'.

Annual events

Ploughing

Plough Monday is first Monday after the 12th day of the year and in rural communities this was a traditionally beginning of the agricultural year. It is the day which farmers would go back to work after the Christmas break and to start the all-important ploughing of the field ready for sowing later in the year.

The day itself had many traditions, including one of the farm lads getting to the kitchen to place one of the tools of his trade at the screen or fireplace before the maid had put the early morning water to boil.

More common however was some form of ceremony involving a plough. In many areas there was a common plough, housed in the church, which could be used by any smallholder too poor to own one himself. At New Year or Plough Monday the plough would be blessed by the parish priest and then decorated and paraded around the neighbourhood by the ploughboys of the local farms.

Money collected on this day would be used to supply the church with 'plough lights' which would be kept burning to ensure a continued divine blessing on those working in the fields throughout the year.

Shepherds

The nature of shepherd's work kept them somewhat apart from other farmworkers, and they had traditions of their own: they continued wearing smocks when other labourers had long abandoned them., and they favoured regional differences in the designs of crooks.

It was customary for a shepherd to be buried with a tuft of wool so at Domesday he could prove what his job had been and be excused for occasionally missing Sunday Mass.

Lambs

One of the most common rural superstitions of a good or bad springtime focuses on the first lamb you see in the year. Lambing season was and is one of the most important events in the farming year and this superstition would have carried a lot of meaning for the beginning of the agricultural year.

To secure a good spring, you had to make sure you saw the lamb face on, if you caught the tail end you would 'go backwards all year'.



Birthing forceps (61/228)

Year on the Farm - Spring

The inscriptions inside the handles of the forceps show suggest they were originally designed for human use. They were later used by a farmer as lambing hooks, for aiding in the birth of lambs. They were made by Young of Edinburgh.

Corn Dollies

Corn dollies are loosely based on the traditional figures made of straw. These dollies had various names such as corn baby, corn maidens, corn maiden or baby kern. The names and treatment of the dollies varied from place to place.

Some places would create large dollies as part of a processions, others would be kept in the house, or left for a year in a barnyard. Others would bury the dolly in their fields to ensure a good harvest for the next year.

Turnips

Centuries ago, it was not only pumpkins that were used for Halloween carvings; turnips were as well. A key element of Halloween was to reverse the natural order of things. Children would switch door numbers and move horses from stable to stable. This was the 'trick' element of 'trick or treat'. Following this theme, adults would be lured outside their home by a child tapping on a window, where they would be confronted with a turnip carved with a devil's face.



Turnip Peck (51/132)

Year on the Farm - Winter

This is a three-pronged turnip peck with an ash handle and a wrought iron head. The middle prong is set slightly behind the other two so that it lies between them when in use. The peck is used for lifting turnips and other root crops when feeding livestock.