

A Brief History of Scarecrows

It would seem that hungry birds have always been a problem for farmers. In olden days, birds sometimes ate so much corn that people did not have enough food to last through the winter.

The earliest scarecrows were made some 3000 years ago by Egyptians, on the banks of the River Nile, to protect their wheat from hungry quail.

Five hundred years later Greeks carved wooden scarecrows to look like the rather ugly son of the god Dionysus and the goddess Aphrodite, after vineyard keepers noticed that when the boy played in the vineyards the birds stayed away from the grapes and the harvest was the best ever. I don't think that this had a great deal to do with his looks but you can make your scarecrow as pretty or as ugly as you like.

Romans copied the Greek custom and when Roman armies came to England, they introduced the people here to scarecrows.

During the Middle Ages, European farmers made scarecrows which they believed had magical powers. German farmers made wooden witches and put them in their fields at the end of winter. They believed that witches would draw the evil spirit of winter into their bodies so that spring could come along.

In Medieval Britain, scarecrows were actual live boys and girls who were around 9 years old and patrolled wheat fields carrying bags of stones. If crows or starlings landed in the fields they would chase them off by waving their arms and throwing the stones. When the Great Plague of 1348 killed almost half the people in Britain. Landowners couldn't find enough bird scarers to protect their crops, so started to stuff sacks with straw, carve faces in turnips and make scarecrows that stood against poles.

Boys and girls who survived the plague and still worked as bird scarers had to patrol 2 or 3 acres - that's about the size of the Mirfield Showground - by themselves. So, instead of bags of stone, the children carried clappers made of 2 or 3 pieces of wood joined together at one end. The noise made by the clappers scared off whole flocks of birds - hence the phrase "going like the clappers". Human bird scarers disappeared from British fields in the early 1800s when new factories and mines opened up and offered children better paying jobs - but I bet that these were no where near as much fun.

After World War II, when farming became a bigger business, a British company invented an automatic crop protector which was a metal box with 3 arms that was placed on top of a pole. The box contained caps that exploded every 45 minutes and made the 3 metal arms flap up and down. Unfortunately, the noise and clashing metal arms scared away the neighbours as well as the birds!

As long as birds are hungry, the world's farmers still look for ways to SCARE CROWS!

And as long as we need to chase away crows and other marauding birds, there will be a need to create imaginative and amusing scarecrows.