

The Virgin Crowns at St Mary's Church

The history of the crowns



Figure 1 Crown for Lily Myra Annetts

Every parish church has a unique contribution to make to history. At St Mary's it's the virgin crowns.

The custom was widespread from medieval times. Today, the earliest surviving example in England is from 1680 at Beverly, Yorkshire. The latest, at Ashford-in-the-Water Derbyshire, dates from 1995. But the largest collection in the country is at Abbots Ann where we have the remains of 49 crowns.

The custom of virgin crowns or maiden garlands celebrated the lives of girls who died before they could be married. Flowers that they would have worn at a wedding were woven into a crown - or Krantz in German.

There's a reference to virgin crowns in Hamlet. In Act 5, Scene 1, the priest grumbles that Ophelia, thought to have taken her own life,

was still allowed a churchyard burial: 'yet here she is allowed her virgin rites, her maiden strewments'.

The custom died out in the 18th century because it was thought to be superstitious. However, just as it was becoming less popular elsewhere it really took off at Abbots Ann. Most of our crowns were created in the 19th century. We don't know why but my guess is that when Robert Tasker, the staunchly Methodist blacksmith built a chapel in Abbots Ann, the rector used the custom as a way to encourage villagers to remain loyal to the parish church.

Crowns vary in shape around the country but are broadly similar. The frame is of willow or oak, bound in white cloth, adorned with paper rosettes and with 5 gloves or chaplets hanging below. These can be inscribed with verses from the Bible or hymns chosen by the dead person's family. All the elements of the crown symbolise purity.

The burial service



Figure 2 Funeral of Lily Myra Annetts, 1973

Crowns are awarded to girls, boys, men, women, who were unmarried, of good character, and had been born and died within the parish. This is the funeral of Lily Myra Annetts in 1973, our last recipient (Figure 2).

At the burial the crown would be carried by 2 girls dressed in white who lead the coffin to the graveside.



Figure 3 St Mary's Church, the gallery

After the service the crown would be hung on a hook (it's still there) at the front of the gallery (Figure 3), between the 2 pillars. If the crown did not fall down in the following 2 weeks, then the recipient's claim to virtue was acknowledged.



Figure 4 the crowns in situ

Thereafter the crown would be hung on a hook, or scutcheon, on the wall (Figure 4). Our earliest crown dates from 1740 and, as I say, our latest from 1973. In the past, when a crown fell down, they were thrown away. Now we are doing more to conserve this unusual piece of history.

A couple of problems



Figure 5 Three crowns

Finally, I just want to mention a couple of problems with the story I've told you. In Figure 5 are 3 crowns. Lily Myra Annetts (left) and her brother William George were both life-long residents of Abbotts Ann but Mary Jane Baker (centre) was not. At the time of her death she worked as a maid at the rectory. But she originated in Houghton. Every recipient should have been born and died within the parish. But on examining the registers we found that one third of people awarded crowns did not meet this criterion. So the story we give out is a myth.



Figure 6 teenage girls carrying the crown

The second problem is this. Carrying the crown in 1973 are Sylvia Meade and Ruth Keene who were given the afternoon off school. The funeral was unusual and attracted press interest. Ruth's mother tells me the most difficult part of the whole process was to persuade 2 young teenage girls to dress up in white and be the centre of attention!

Tim Tayler.