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Object(s): Bird scarer

Object Number(s): STMEA:A.7499

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Bird scarer

This interesting object in our collection is a bird scarer made of ash, in use from 1890 to 1974 at Wickham Skeith. It was originally used by the donor, and his father-in-law, John Mullinger, who made it. Little is known about the two owners of this item but it's certain that Mr. Mullinger worked as a market gardener in Wickham Skeith and ran a business that was afterwards carried on by his son-in-law.

The object consists of a tapering stock with a slot along which a thread of black cotton passes, to emerge through an aperture at the end. The cotton reel revolves on a twig transversely through the stock, above the handle. Firstly, the free end of the cotton was tied to a matchstick which was hooked onto a branch of a fruit tree or bush and tied. Afterwards, it was unravelled all over the bush.

Function and different typologies of bird scarers

Ever since the advent of agriculture farmers have had issues with birds and other crop predators damaging the harvest. Throughout the ages, numerous methods have been invented to keep crop predation by birds and wild animals away. Bird scarers are one of these and are considered essential to protect crops. Designed to scare birds, these devices are used by farmers in the spring time to dissuade birds from eating fruit, field, seedling vegetables or emerging crop seeds.

A wide variety of bird scarers and other deterrents exist nowadays just like in the past. Clappers, for instance, were particularly common in the 19th century, consisting of two or three pieces of flat wood tied together with a string¹. Similar to the clapper type bird scarer were castanets used in medieval times not only for scaring animals but also as instruments of music². Another common device, also used in the British countryside throughout the 19th century, was the bird scarer of the rattle type consisting of a thin wooden strip which vibrated against a toothed cog and produced a

¹ University of Reading | Archive and Museum Database [Internet]. Reading.ac.uk. 2021. [cited 2 February 2021]. Available from: <http://www.reading.ac.uk/adlib/Details/collect/2210>

² Blades, J. Percussion Instruments and Their History. Wesport, Connecticut; 2005. [cited 2 February 2021]. Available from:

https://books.google.it/books?id=a8V3Z6j2ExEC&pg=PA195&lpg=PA195&dq=clapper+bird+scarer+history&source=bl&ots=A_KKwIwMI&sig=ACfU3U3pAHTUrS0s3Qr4t1-ogDpa1r9Dbw&hl=it&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjF2vbL1InuAhVFyaQKHVTPBSUQ6AEwG3oECAoQAg#v=onepage&q=clapper%20bird%20scarer%20history&f=false

noise when the tool was rotated³. Among others is a very peculiar type of bird scarer called “klopotec”, a wooden mechanical device on a high wooden pole, similar to a windmill, used in the vineyards of the wine-growing landscapes of Slovenia, Austria, and Croatia from July to November. It is believed that this technology was developed around the second half of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century⁴.

In this array of methods and objects of fear, the scarecrow is still considered the most popular bird scarer of all times with a history of approximately 3,000 years⁵, and the object of numerous film backgrounds and popular television programmes.

History of bird scarers around the world

The earliest record we have of something akin to a scarecrow dates back to ancient Egypt. Here the first precursors of the scarecrow were built along Nile River to protect wheat fields from hungry birds. Egyptian farmers crafted wooden frames and covered them with nets to trap any errant birds; then they hid in the fields and scared the animals into the nets to eat them⁶. Later, the Greeks began carving wooden effigies of Priapus, son of the god Dionysus and the goddess Aphrodite, to protect their vineyards from birds. According to the myth, Priapus was very ugly and it was believed that his hideous appearance chased away the birds. As a result, farmers decided to make statues that looked like Priapus; they painted the figures purple, put a club in one hand to make the statue look more dangerous, and a sickle in the other for a good harvest⁷. Seeing that this pest control method was quite effective, the Romans copied the Greek custom and through their travels shared the concept of building Priapus scarecrows with England, Germany and France.

In the middle ages, the belief that scarecrows had special powers became increasingly popular. German farmers made wooden witches with the hope they would draw winter into them and allow spring to arrive; whereas Italian farmers placed animal skulls atop poles to scare away birds and protect crops from diseases. In England, farmers developed another agricultural practice beyond just the typical wood-carved scarecrows – they employed young boys to work in the fields as “bird scarers” or “bird shooers”⁸. The boys, and sometimes girls, patrolled the fields yelling or tossing

³ University of Reading | Archive and Museum Database [Internet]. Reading.ac.uk. 2021 [cited 2 February 2021]. Available from: <http://www.reading.ac.uk/adlib/Details/collect/102>

⁴ Klopotec: A Bird-Scaring Wind-Rattle [Internet]. NO TECH MAGAZINE. 2020 [cited 2 February 2021]. Available from: <https://www.notechmagazine.com/2018/10/klopotec-a-bird-scaring-wind-rattle.html>

⁵ Dr. Lederer, R. Bird Scarers [Internet]. Ornithology. The Science of Birds. 2016 [cited 2 February 2021]. Available from: <https://ornithology.com/bird-scarers/>

⁶ Scarecrows: History of the Classic DIY Bird Control Method [Internet]. JP Pest Services. 2021 [cited 3 February 2021]. Available from: <https://www.jppestservices.com/blog/scarecrows-history-of-the-classic-diy-bird-control-method>

⁷ Valentini, K. A short history of the scarecrow [Internet]. Thebargainhunter.com. 2021 [cited 3 February 2021]. Available from: <https://thebargainhunter.com/news/features/a-short-history-of-the-scarecrow>

⁸ Bird Scaring | Victorian School and Work in Preston [Internet]. Mylearning.org. 2021 [cited 8 February 2021]. Available from: <https://www.mylearning.org/stories/victorian-school-and-work-in-preston/370>

stones at the crows and starlings that were looking for food. They would also use items like wooden clappers to drive them off.

The Great Plague hit Europe in 1348 and in Britain almost half the population, including children, were wiped out and there were not enough people to work in the fields. Thus, farmers created the scarecrows we know of today by making them out of stuffed sacks of straw and carving faces out of gourds or turnips, which stood against a pole⁹. This innovation proved to be effective, although some bird scarers continued to patrol British fields until the early 1800s when better paying jobs were made available during the industrial revolution.

Over the centuries these objects have popped up in various areas around the globe. American colonists brought the tradition of the scarecrow with them from their native countries. However, it is believed that some practices, like adopting living bird scarers, existed even before the 1300s among Native American tribes – here the responsibility of chasing away agricultural pests was given to adult men¹⁰. Similarly, in India and some Arab countries, farmers stationed old men in chairs to throw stones at birds to keep them away from the crops – a common practice that still exists today¹¹. Japanese farmers, instead, carried on the ancient tradition of making the so-called “kakashi”, which literally means “something that smells badly”, to protect their paddies. Originally, these were made of bamboo poles holding dirty rags, noisemakers or rotten meat which was set on fire to produce a pungent aroma to keep the birds away. Eventually however, the Japanese started making realistic scarecrows resembling people that continued to be called kakashi despite their lack of stench¹².

⁹ A scarecrow's origin may surprise you [Internet]. The Jamestown Sun. 2011 [cited 8 February 2021]. Available from: <https://www.jamestownsun.com/lifestyle/1852621-scarecrows-origin-may-surprise-you>

¹⁰ Wigington, P. Scarecrow Folklore and Magic [Internet]. Learn Religions. 2018 [cited 8 February 2021]. Available from: <https://www.learnreligions.com/scarecrows-guardians-of-the-harvest-2562307>

¹¹ Warnes, K. Scarecrows Historically Speaking [Internet]. History? Because it's Here!. 2021 [cited 8 February 2021]. Available from: <https://historybecauseitshere.weebly.com/scarecrows-historically-speaking.html>

¹² The Wise Scarecrow of Japan and the origin of Scarecrow Festivals, Rituals and Legends [Internet]. JAPANESE MYTHOLOGY & FOLKLORE. 2021 [cited 8 February 2021]. Available from: <https://japanesemythology.wordpress.com/tag/kakashi/>