

Well dressing is an ancient Peak District tradition and its true origins are unknown. Today the blessing of the local wells has taken on a Christian meaning and often involves the whole village participating in a short outdoor service, usually accompanied by a brass band. More than sixty towns and villages, mainly in the limestone villages of the central and southern Peak District, dress their wells in a succession of celebrations between May and early September.

CURRICULUM LINKS

History

KS1 – 1ab, 2ab, 3, 4ab, 5, 6abd

KS2 – 1ab, 2ab, 3, 4ab, 5abc, 6, 7

KS3 – 1, 2ab, 3ab, 4ab, 5abc, 7abcde

Geography

KS1 – 1abcd, 2abcde,

3abcde, 4ab, 5ab, 6ab, 7ab

KS2 – 3abcdefg, 4ab, 5ab, 6abcde, 7abc

KS3 – 3abcde, 4ab, 5ab

Art & Design

KS1 – 1ab, 2abc, 3ab, 4abc, 5abcd

KS2 – 1abc, 2abc, 3ab, 4abc, 5abcd

KS3 – 1abc, 2abc, 3ab, 4abc, 5abcd

Design & Technology

KS1 – 1abcde, 2abcde, 3ab, 4ab, 5abc

KS2 – 1abcd, 2abcde, 3abc, 4ab, 5abc

KS3 – 1abcde, 2abcde, 3abc, 4abcd, 6b, 7b

Science

KS1 – SC1, SC2, SC3

KS2 – SC1, SC2, SC3

KS3 – SC1, SC2

English

KS1 – En1, En3,

KS2 – En1, En3,

KS3 – En1, En2, En3

HOW TO MAKE a Well Dressing

The well dressing on display in the Growing Schools Garden was designed and made by Elton CE Primary School, a small rural school in the heart of Derbyshire.

Making a full-size well dressing is hard work and requires artistic dexterity, but having little fingers is a great advantage.

Once you have decided on a theme for the design, ask pupils to draw suitable pictures. For the show garden, Elton depicted the story of Noah's Ark.

First make the board on which the design will be displayed, using stout pine or oak planks. Elton's board measured 1m high by 60cm wide. It needs a 2cm rim to hold the clay, like a large tray, and is studded with nails to stop the clay sliding out when the board is vertical. Hammer flat-headed nails in rows approximately 4cm apart all over the board, leaving them with about 1cm protruding. Decide how the heavy board will be held in place and attach appropriate fixings.

Two weeks before the well dressing is to be made, leave the boards to soak in water for a week. They need to be thoroughly saturated or they will draw the moisture out of the clay. If your school has a pond, the easiest way is to immerse them in the water. Otherwise borrow a large inflatable paddling pool.

Preparation of the clay should start at least a week before the well dressing is to be displayed. Use grey-coloured buff powder clay and mix it with water to make a butter-like texture, adding salt to keep the moisture in. This mixing process is called 'puddling', especially enjoyed by pupils who like to get messy. They can mix it in an old tin bath or similar either with bare feet or wearing wellington boots.

Once the board has been soaked and the clay puddled, place the board face up on a strong table, and using a wet plaster trowel, smooth the clay onto the board. Leave to stand for 24 hours to allow excess water to evaporate and a skin to form. Now the board is ready to decorate.

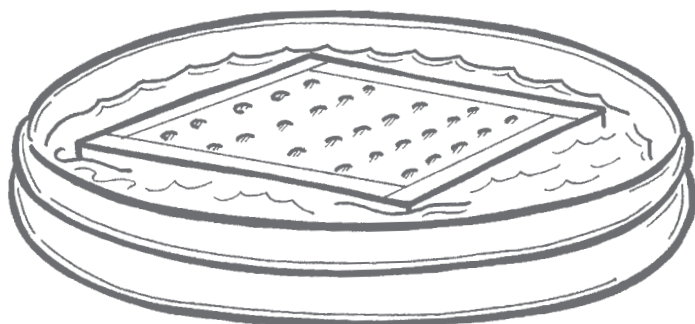
Transfer the design to the clay by placing a full-size copy of the design over the clay board and pricking out the design, piercing

the paper with a cocktail stick or darning needle. Once complete, carefully peel back the paper and 'join the dots'. This can be done by drawing a line in the clay with the cocktail stick or by placing lengths of black wool over the dots.

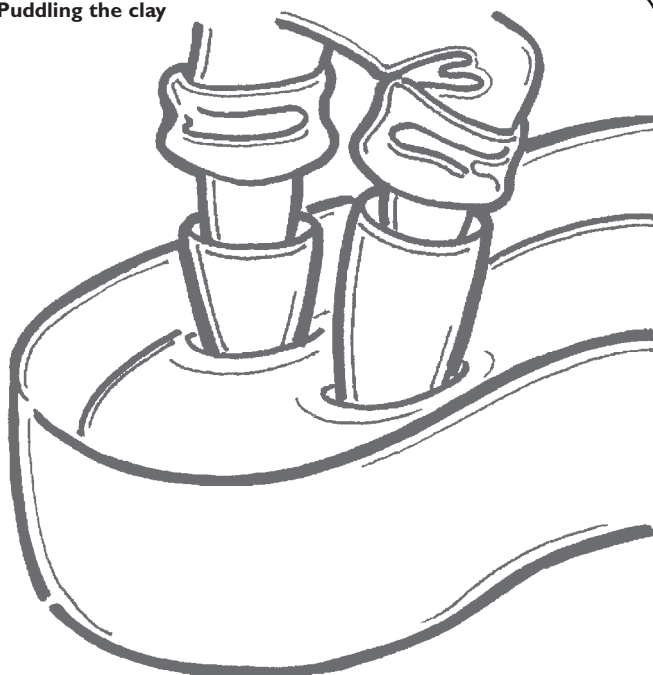
Natural materials are then used to colour in the design like a collage, pressing the different materials securely into the clay one at a time. This process is referred to as 'making it live'. As a large well dressing may take a few days to complete, the non-perishable materials should be added first, such as alder cones, stones, bark, wool, feathers, leaves and seeds, as well as coffee beans, rice and even dry macaroni. Flower petals should be applied as late as possible. Press each petal into the clay with a cocktail stick, working from the bottom up, ensuring each row slightly overlaps the next, to shed any rain.

Finally, fix the board securely and safely into position, bearing in mind the weight of the clay will make it very heavy. A well dressing will only last for a week in good condition, but the finished result is very rewarding and ensures the survival of a venerable local tradition.

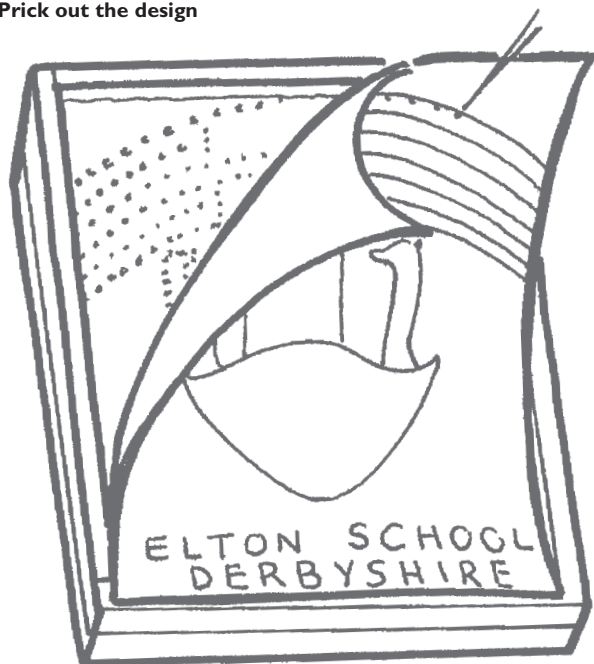
1 Make the frame and then immerse in water



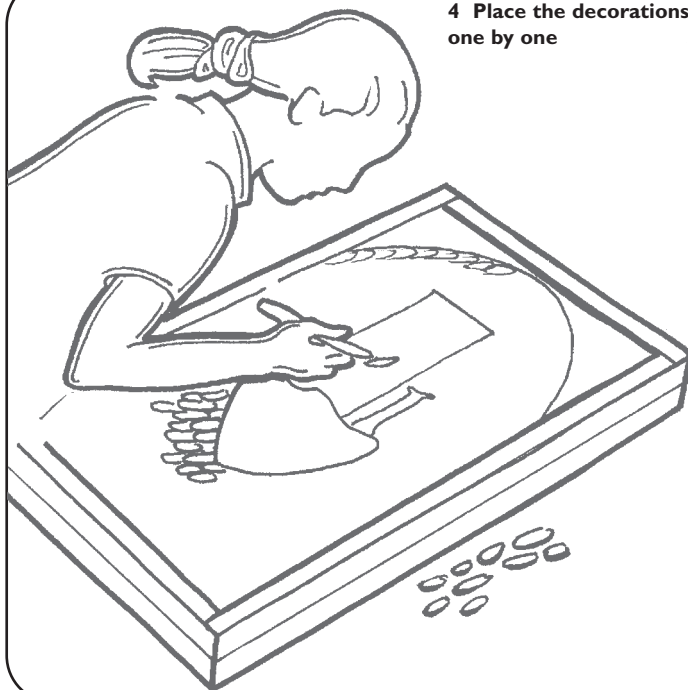
2 Puddling the clay



3 Prick out the design



4 Place the decorations one by one



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Suppliers of clay and pottery-making materials: **POTTERY CRAFTS** ☎ 020 7720 0050 www.pottery crafts.co.uk