



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND



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WINCHESTER

PLOUGH SUNDAY

A bit of background

Plough Sunday is thought to be a very ancient festival, abandoned at the Reformation and then revived by the Victorians. Traditionally it was celebrated on the first Sunday after Epiphany, which falls on 6 January, and then ploughing began the next day, Plough Monday. Since Victorian times many farms have owned their own plough, so a representative plough was brought into church for a blessing, but in the medieval period, when there was only one plough in each village, the village plough was drawn through the streets to be blessed at the church, and was followed with much food, drinking and revelry.

For medieval farmers it was an important occasion. The village plough was cleaned and decorated, it was then dragged to the church to be blessed and for prayers for a good harvest before the start of the new season's work. During the service the 'plough light' - a candle kept lit in the church throughout the year - was paraded ceremonially. After the blessing, the plough was pulled through the village again, led by a Fool and a boy dressed as a woman called a 'Betsy'. The procession stopped at as many pubs and friendly houses as possible for revellers to demand drinks. Pennies were also collected along route as a contribution towards keeping the plough light going in the church throughout the year - though others say it could have been to boost the kitty for "ale" that evening at the tavern. It would appear that anyone not paying a penny was likely to find a furrow cut across their land by morning! The day ended with a village feast, ale or beer flowed, and the traditional centrepiece was always a large Plough Pudding - a suet pudding stuffed with sausage-meat, bacon, onion, and sage. The recipe is readily available on the internet for anyone who wishes to give it a go.

Modern farming practices have changed, of course, and the widespread sowing of winter wheat means that much farming is now carried out in the autumn, but how marvellous to have two opportunities to celebrate the work of our farmers – both at Harvest Festival and on Plough Sunday.

Why did we do it?

Probably most of us have a Harvest Festival service, and many of the local farming folk do come along to the service in our United Parish of five villages and churches. We wanted to find a way of showing them how much we value all that they do and represent to us in our villages - make them feel special. We came up with the idea of reviving the Plough Service which was once very popular in rural villages but rather faded away in Victorian times.

What did we do?

We asked our Parish Priest to write a special liturgy – you'll find a copy of this here in case you find it helpful. Others formed a team to think about how we could make the service creative and meaningful. It needed to be attractive to farmers who are busy all year round, including on Sundays. In the end we asked the farmers to bring a pot of soil from their land to be blessed during the service, and also invited them to bring tractors and ploughs to be blessed as well. Not only did they bring some along, they had also gone to a lot of trouble to clean them and make them look very special. It was a shame that in 2017 it was absolutely teaming down with rain! After the service, all the congregation was invited to a hearty lunch in a nearby barn.

How did it work?

We wrote to all the farmers who live or work the land in the five villages of the United Parish inviting them to come along. We've put up a copy of the letter to give you an idea. Some we contacted beforehand to ask them to take a part in the service itself, and this year it was mainly the farmers' children who shared the parts between them. During the service pots of soil from the farmers' land were placed on the altar and blessed. Had it not been raining so hard, we would have all gone outside after the service to bless the tractors and other farming equipment outside. As it was we encouraged everyone to go straight to the barn for lunch, and the vicar blessed the equipment with one hand and held an umbrella in the other!

The 3-course meal was a moment of great fellowship. Donations went a long way to covering the cost of the food, and we also had a raffle to raise funds for RABI (The Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution) and the Parish. The collection in church was split between the two as well. Most of the prizes were model farm equipment donated by various suppliers to the farmers. It helps that two of our local farmers are also Churchwardens!

What would we have done differently?

Next time we would write to farmers earlier than we did this year to give them more opportunity to make themselves available on a Sunday morning.

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