

A Short History of Wedding Traditions

Kevin and I, my photographer were driving back from a Warwickshire wedding last week, he contemplating the hours of work that lay before him editing the several hundred pics. he had taken during day, and I satisfied with the way the day had panned out, when the subject of wedding history the why and wherefore of everything that takes place on the wedding day. We are very much in tune with the couples emotions and the joy of the occasion but like most, we take it for granted that the bride will be wearing a big white dress probably topped with a veil, that she will be carrying a wedding bouquet, and be cutting the cake at some point during the wedding breakfast. The wedding day is steeped in tradition and the history of weddings is a fascinating subject.

The Bridal Shower

Have you ever wondered why we give gifts to the wedding couple? Its just the norm these days, but in times past when a father disapproved of his daughter's intended the local villagers would club together and give the bride a collection of items from their homes, (ye old toast rack etc.) to be used as a dowry. Things have come a long way since then with specialist companies now producing lists and doing the shopping for the guests. The most unusual present we witnessed earlier this year was a fantastic aerobic display over the grounds of the reception hotel – a present from the brides uncle.

We don't see too many wooden spoons given to the bride these days but the tradition of giving a wooden spoon dates back many years, the wooden spoon was considered to be the most useful utensil to be used by the women of the house in her kitchen and would be used to help and assist the new Bride in her kitchen to enable her to cook and produce the best meals for her new husband and the later family.

The Honeymoon

Have you ever wondered why the bride and groom go on 'honeymoon'? It used to be called The Honey-month and was the period of time the groom and his bride were in hiding from her friends and family. Once the couple reappeared the bride would be pregnant.

All's fair in War and Weddings.

The groom would hold the bride on his left arm, so that his sword arm was free to fight off other suitors. This is why the groom normally stands on the right of the bride during the wedding ceremony. If the groom needed help to kidnap his bride he would ask his best friend to be his 'best man'.

Marriage was often used as a means to bring together two conflicting tribes so the families sat opposite sides of the church to avoid any fighting in the church.

The Wedding Ring

In the times of the pharaohs a bride will have worn a ring made of hemp or rushes. The circular shape of the ring was and still is today a sign of undying, never ending love without beginning or end an oft quoted phrase during civil and religious ceremonies. Some of the early engagement rings were also used as a wedding ring to show the 'sale' of the women from her father to the groom, they were usually made of gold as a sign of the groom's wealth. The perfect finger for the wedding ring was on the third finger of the left hand, as it was thought that this contained a vein that went straight to the heart.

Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue and a Silver Sixpence in Her Shoe.

Nearly every couple is aware of the old rhyme but what does it all signify? The 'something old' is to reflect the durability of the marriage and the continuity of your old life into your new married one. 'something new' symbolizing the start of building your new life together as a married couple. The 'something borrowed' item is the one which you may wish to choose most carefully as it should be from a happily married women whose virtues you most wish to emulate, to assist in ensuring marital bliss. The 'something blue' is used to promise love, fidelity and purity.

And what of the "silver sixpence in her shoe"? At one time a bride-to-be was given a silver sixpence (equivalent to two and a half pence in today's money) to place in her shoe on the wedding day in the hope that she would have a life filled with fortune.

The Button Hole

Traditionally men wear their buttonholes on their left lapel pointing upwards, whilst women wear theirs on the right lapel. The custom follows on from the early days of jousting, where a knight would wear his lady's colours to represent his love for her.?

The Wedding Dress

In the ancient world of the Greeks and the Romans, brides were normally dressed in white for the wedding ceremony. The white robes were used to symbolize youth, joy and purity. Despite this, white wedding dresses have not always in fashion in this country and only came to the fore in Victorian times as a show of wealth. The symbolism of a white wedding dress as denoting virginity is of fairly recent origins, but is probably an adaptation of the ancient association with purity.

The bridesmaids were traditionally dressed as beautifully as the bride to confuse any evil spirits who may have been waiting to snatch the bride.?

The Wedding Veil

The bridal veil can be traced back to Roman times when it was a complete head to toe cover. In a custom dating back to arranged marriages, the groom's family very rarely let him see the bride prior to the ceremony. If the groom was displeased with the bride's look he may have refused to marry her. It was a bit like a lucky dip! Only after the wedding ceremony was the groom allowed to lift the veil and see his bride for the first time.

The Wedding Purse

Wedding Purses (Dorothy bag) was carried by the bridesmaids to carry the confetti in. Throwing confetti is probably a relic of former fertility rights. Variations occur through the world, flowers, petals, grain, cakes, sugar, almonds and rice are all used. The modern use of the dolly bag is as a convenient wedding accessory for carrying some of the brides or bridesmaids personal effects.

That First Kiss

In Roman times a kiss was seen as a legal bond that sealed all contracts, and has become a staple ending to a wedding ceremony.

The Wedding Bouquet

The wedding bouquet was originally a special wedding gift from the bridegroom to his wife on the wedding day. On the special day, the bridegroom would pick flowers from the field and arrange them himself to present his bride. This act of love was greatly treasured by the bride who carried it with pride the whole day – the day most significant in their lives.

Throwing the Wedding Bouquet

In the 14th Century, it was customary for the bride to toss her garter to the male guests, but frequently the men got too drunk and would become impatient and try and remove the garter ahead of time. In the interest of decorum the custom changed to tossing the bridal bouquet.

The bride is supposed to throw her bouquet over her shoulder to all those unmarried female guests present. In the theory the person who catches the bouquet will be next to marry. Tossing the bouquet in England it is believed that the bride could pass along her good fortune to others.

The Wedding Cake

The history of the wedding cake is a fascinating one, it starts with the celebration of nuptials as far back as ancient Roman times when a simple cake of wheat or barley would have been broken over the bride's head in order to ensure her future fertility. Guests would scramble to seize a crumb for themselves, a custom that led to the sharing of the modern traditional wedding cake. Eventually the cake evolved in both size and decoration until breaking it over the brides head became impractical, if not impossible.

Many couples are at a loss at how to cut the cake – four hands, two bodies and one knife can lead to a tangle of confusion so it's worth detailing how we ask a bride and groom to cut the cake. The bride stands in front of the groom her back to his front. The groom's left hand clasps the knife and the brides left hand rests around the grooms left hand. Whenever we see a bride and groom cutting the wedding cake, we're witnessing a very long tradition of the bride vowing to help her groom wherever possible, and when (though this part of the celebration doesn't happen very often these days) they proceed to feed one another from that first slice they're committing to provide for one another for as long as they live.

A Very Short History of the Wedding Dress

Now, you won't be surprised to hear that white is definitely the traditional colour of a wedding dress, going right back to ancient times. It was at Roman weddings where brides donned softly pleated white robes as a tribute to Hymen, the god of fertility and marriage, who was said to have particularly admired the colour white.

In ancient Egypt, for example, brides were traditionally draped in layers of pleated white linen. And in Greece, white was the colour of celebration and therefore generally worn for weddings as an emblem of joy.