

3 things you didn't know about St Brigid's crosses.

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A folklore report tells us the very first cross was made by St Brigid herself.

Analysis: The most common custom associated with St Brigid's Day is still to make a cross on the final night of January.

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St Brigid's Day has been long celebrated in Ireland as a religious and cultural festival. The most common practice associated with her feast day is to make a cross, or perhaps a 'Brideog', on the final night of January. Many customs and stories have been forgotten in the last century, but here are some things you might not know about St. Brigid and her cross.

The first St. Brigid's cross.

Many people around the country will make a cross today. The making of crosses is such an institution that it has actually become the object of satire. The first cross, according to a report from Leitrim preserved in the National Folklore Collection, Schools' Collection, was made by the saint herself. The story goes that the saint was walking past a house and heard a man groaning in pain. Upon inspection, she discovered that the man was dying. Realising that the man was a pagan, Brigid attempted to convert him before his death. She told the story of how Jesus died nailed to the cross and that this sacrifice redeemed humankind. The man did not know what a cross was so the saint ran outside, grabbing the first thing she saw to try to demonstrate what a cross is. It just so happened that the first thing she saw were some rushes growing by the door. Brigid fashioned these rushes into a cross and converted the dying man to Christianity. We now make crosses out of rushes, supposedly, in commemoration of this event. Some accounts also mention crosses being made out of straw.

Another use for rushes.

Brigid didn't only use rushes to convert unbelievers, but to save her own life. A story collected in Mayo tells of Brigid entering a house one night to ask for a drink of water. The woman of the house

noticed the valuable cross around Brigid's neck and decided to add poison to the water in order to steal the necklace. Brigid realised what was happening and dipped a rush into the drink three times (probably a reference to the Holy Trinity).

The woman seems to have been amazed by Brigid's power and immediately asked for forgiveness. Brigid, being of a saintly disposition, grants this request but nuns have since been careful to wear their crosses inside their clothes. This story has been preserved in an expanded English version in Sligo.

What do the crosses do?

Traditionally, rushes were gathered and the crosses made on the final day of January. The crosses, along with the 'Brat Bhríde' (mentioned below), would then be left outside that night in order to receive Brigid's blessing. The crosses would then be hung in the rafters (a fact which may contribute to the decline of the tradition, given modern architecture), or in barns and outbuildings. The most commonly mentioned belief is that these crosses offered protection from fires. A lesser-known use for last year's crosses was that they could be buried in the fields in order to bless the current year's harvest. Given the time of years at which the feast occurs, this fertility aspect is of little surprise. We still tend to make crosses on St. Brigid's day, but there are plenty of things that our grandparents might have done that we have forgotten. One of these was to leave out a rag on the final night of January for Brigid to bless (it was important not to leave any other clothes out to dry that night). This rag, mentioned above, was known as a 'Brat Bhríde' and this tradition was observed in light of the power of her cloak. The rag was then rubbed on the afflicted area if someone had, for example, a sore throat. That clock also figures in some other stories. When a pagan king agreed to award her the amount of land that her cloak would cover to build a convent, the 'cloak' in question is said to have magically grown in order to cover a vast amount of land. This story is preserved all around the country, such as this Galway version. The pagan king is occasionally replaced by a farmer.

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