

We Didn't Know Owt

Maureen Sutton, Wednesday 6th March

This was the title of Maureen's first book, which was about "Sex, Superstition and Death" back in the Swinging Sixties and Seventies. It could also be applied to today's talk, as we all certainly learned a great deal about British superstitions and customs.

Maureen has been fascinated by this subject for over 30 years and has been on Look North, The Frank Skinner Show and countless radio programmes. Her most recent publication is *A Lincolnshire Calendar*, dealing with the links between tradition and season. Today, Maureen was discussing those associated with spring amongst many other topics, made even more vivid by her lovely local dialect.

For example, did you know that the superstition about walking under a ladder is based on religion? If you think of the wall, the ground and then the ladder, you have a triangular shape, which you disrupt by walking through it, hence disturbing The Holy Trinity and bringing you bad luck. Salt was a very valuable commodity and Roman soldiers were given this as wages, hence the word *salary*, from the Latin word *sal* for salt. It is regarded as unlucky because Judas spilt salt at The Last Supper, then hanged himself. We all know the story of Lot's unfortunate wife, and also I'm sure many of us throw a pinch of salt over our left shoulder if we spill any, to confound Old Nick! The Latin for left is *sinister*, hence the meaning of the word now, as if birds flew to the left, that was regarded as inauspicious by Roman augurers. It's amazing how far back these customs date.

My personal favourite was this feline form of contraception. If you had an unwanted pregnancy, you had to get hold of a black cat, take its tail and rub this over your eyes for the number of months you suspected you were pregnant-and hey presto! Not likely, but perhaps we should suggest this to Wes Streeting for use in the NHS?

Maureen looked back at crueller times, when harmless old ladies could be burned at the stake as witches out of pure superstition. Farm labourers worked 12 hour days, and only when the church bell tolled for a departed soul could they stop work to pay their respects. Putting clogs or shoes on the table is unlucky, and the saying "popping your clogs" comes from pawning your footwear to get much-needed cash. Also, keep umbrellas closed inside the house, as when you open them, you release evil sprites and goblins into your home.

It was a very entertaining half hour and she held us all engaged with her quirky tales, too numerous to mention. We may not have "known owt" when we started, but we certainly did by the conclusion of her talk. Many thanks, Maureen, for bringing spring sunshine and superstitions to Rustons.

Barbara Pearce