

# Just blame it on the weathervane

Once only made to resemble cockerels thanks to a papal decree, weathervanes now come in all shapes and sizes, from dolphins and *fleurs-de-lys* to gryphons and witches, finds Harry Pearson





EVERY weathervane tells a story,' declares Karen Green, who has been handcrafting them for most of her adult life. An American, she was apprenticed to the US's best-known maker, in Martha's Vineyard, before relocating to the Herefordshire countryside in the 1990s. 'In the US, each small town would commission elaborate, three-dimensional copper weathervanes as a means of establishing an identity,' she explains, 'whereas, in the British Isles, you had the old tradition of the cockerel silhouette, usually made from wrought iron.'

Although this might have led to some dull and predictable designs, the opposite is true, as Mrs Green explains: 'Each British weathercock was made by a local blacksmith, so you get this wonderful, quirky variety—some are incredibly accurate depictions, others look like boats with a ragged sail or have great fat bodies and tiny heads. They are the product of the imagination and craftsmanship of the people that made them. Most have been battered by the elements and restored. Bits have been added. Parts have fallen off. It gives each a unique and special charm.'

The cockerel shape is practical. To work to best effect, the weathervane—vane derives from the old English *fane* meaning flag, a possible reference to the banner-shaped weathervanes that topped the masts of Viking longships—

must have an equal mass, but an unequal area on either side of the central fulcrum. The rooster, with its small head and great tangle of tail feathers, is the perfect shape to point into the wind. Even so, the barnyard fowl might not have reached its pre-eminent position had it not been for help from on high. 'In the ninth century, Pope Leo IV had a cockerel-shaped weathervane placed on the roof of Old St Peter's Basilica in Rome,' Mrs Green reveals. 'Then, Pope Nicholas I decreed that a cock should be placed on every church as a symbol of Peter's betrayal of Christ. The cockerel was a warning to the congregation to be vigilant against the same temptation.'

The first such weathercock we hear of in Britain was the one mounted on the new minster in Winchester during the reign of Edward the Elder. The first depiction is on the Bayeux Tapestry and

shows a weathercock being attached to the tower of the newly built Westminster Abbey.

Despite the papal decree, not all churches chose the cockerel. Some preferred to make a weathervane that was emblematic of their patron saint. In the City of London, St Lawrence Jewry's weathervane is in the shape of the gridiron on which the unfortunate Lawrence was cruelly roasted by his tormentors. Other popular choices were the dolphin, the gryphon (symbolic of strength and vigilance) and the *fleur-de-lys*. Some churches opted for a wyvern, cockatrice or dragon—symbols of Satan and a reminder that sin lurked in even the most bucolic English villages.

In Italy, great families were free to decorate their ramparts with weathervanes carrying elaborate emblems of wealth and power; in England, things were a little different. 'You had to get a licence from the monarch to erect one on a secular building,' continues Mrs Green. 'The king had to approve the design, because, clearly, he didn't want his nobles having a bigger and more beautiful weathervane than he did. In Tudor times, they got around this by mounting very simple weathervanes

on top of enormous stone beasts. I think there was a certain amount of weathercock envy going on.'

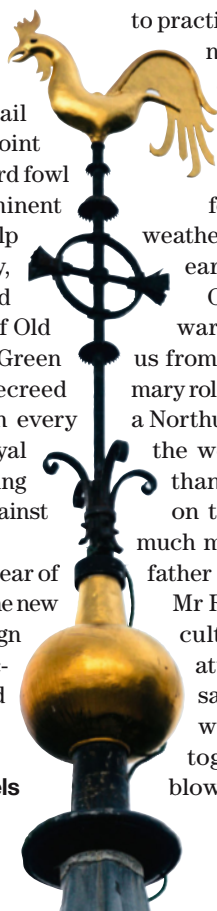
The spread of the weathercock was given a further boost by England's archery laws, which made it compulsory for all Englishmen

to practice with their bows on Sunday afternoons. Arrows blown off course were a hazard to livestock and passers-by, but aiming at a weathervane helped archers to judge the wind and shoot more accurately. Therefore, to some extent, the spread of the weathervane in medieval England was an early health-and-safety measure.

Of course, as well as telling a story, warning us to be pious and protecting us from being shot, the weathervane's primary role was meteorological. Oliver Robson, a Northumbrian farmer, says that although the weathercock (slightly more pigeon than rooster-like, to my eye) standing on the lintel of his cattle byre is not much more than an ornament to him, his father 'set great store by it'.

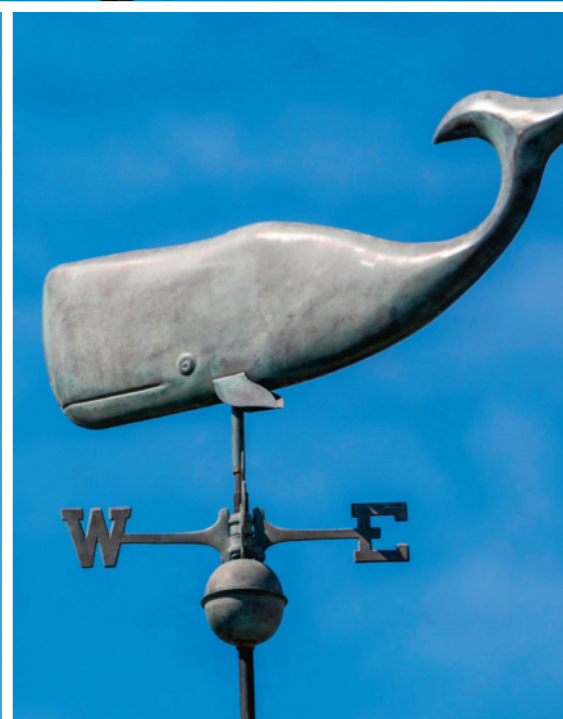
Mr Robson Snr, it seems, took the agriculturist's traditionally pessimistic attitude to the British weather. 'He'd say: "The west wind always brings wet weather/The east wind wet and cold together";' Mr Robson recalls. Wind blowing in other directions offered ➔

'Most have been battered by the elements and restored. It gives each a unique and special charm'



**Weathervanes depict everything from elaborate scenes to cockerels**







little more comfort. 'I think the wind from the south was perhaps the worst, but they all created problems of one sort or other.'

Such rhymes have long formed part of English country lore and are rooted in a genuine understanding of the effects of the wind. Those with knowledge could use the weathervane to make reasonable short-term forecasts. 'Wind direction plays a crucial role in weather forecasting, especially in the UK, because it tells us where our weather is coming from,' Met Office meteorologist and presenter Aidan McGivern divulges. 'The UK, sitting in the mid latitudes with an ocean to the west and a continent to the south and east, often borrows its weather from other climes. Winds from the north will bring cold Arctic air with snow showers in the winter. Winds from the south-west will be mild, but often rather damp. Winds from the east will be dry, but bitterly cold in the winter and much warmer in the summer.'

There's more to it than that, too. 'With a weathervane, looking out for a change in wind direction can be useful when trying to predict the weather,' adds Mr McGivern. 'Winds can strengthen and back slightly (turn anti-clockwise) ahead of a weather front (a band of rain or snow) and then veer (turn clockwise) as the front clears and the weather improves.'

In the early-Victorian era, Royal Navy officers such as Francis Beaufort and Robert FitzRoy started to make weather forecasting more scientific. In 1861, *The Times* began to publish the world's first daily weather forecasts and, at about the same time, commercially produced aneroid barometers became widely available. Ironically, as the weathervane's use as a practical tool diminished, so its popularity as a decorative item soared.

Advances in technology helped. Weathercocks made from copper, bronze or wrought iron were handmade and expensive, whereas the introduction of cast-iron weathervanes made from moulds allowed mass production



The tradition of using wind to predict the weather can be traced back to ancient Greece

## ‘The Victorians—who believed that more meant more—put them up by the cartload’

and more elaborate designs at much lower prices than the bespoke version, placing them within the pocket of the burgeoning, aspirant middle classes. The Victorians—who reversed the old minimalist slogan and believed that more meant more—put up these weathervanes by the cartload. They tinkered with the design, too, producing examples that rang bells when they turned or oiled themselves from special calibrated canisters. The latter was by no means an absurdity, as maintaining vanes was hazardous: in 1938, a steeplejack from Blackburn named Walter Nuttall fell to his death from the tower of a parish church in Wigan when greasing its weathercock.

The weathervane became increasingly idiosyncratic and whimsical, with subjects

ranging from witches to W. G. Grace via fire-breathing dragons and mythical black hounds. In Sonning, Berkshire, the weathervane on the deanery depicted a parson preaching to empty pews in satirical reference to a former and unpopular vicar and in Ripon a weathervane shaped like a bugle commemorated the ‘wakeman’s horn’ that had once roused the townsfolk for work. Sir Edwin Lutyens was responsible for one of the more outlandish designs—a gilded Lewis machine gun produced for the arms dealer Henry Rudd.

Although some of the new weathervanes, such as Sir Herbert Baker’s Old Father Time at Lord’s Cricket Ground, were embraced by the public, others did not go down so well. In 1932, the civic council in Cromer, Norfolk, was forced to take down a weathervane depicting a crow (which features on the town coat of arms) after local fishermen complained that this ‘bird of ill-reputation’ had encouraged bad weather and driven the lobsters and crabs away.

Despite such inventiveness, the cockerel still predominates. The oldest surviving weathercock in England is on the church at Ottery St Mary in Devon, which dates from 1340. The rooster there was originally fitted with lead tubes that emitted a cock-like crowing when the wind blew through them, but, predictably, this proved an irritant to the villagers and the pipes were soon sealed up. Said cockerel also survived an attempt on its life mounted by Oliver Cromwell’s troops, who used it as a target for musketry practice during the English Civil War.

According to Mrs Green, that sort of treatment was not uncommon: ‘Most of the really old weathercocks in Britain have been shot at. I mean, what soldier with a gun or kid with a catapult could resist? It would make such a satisfying ping!’ Every dent and hole adds another twist to the fascinating tale our weathervanes have to tell. 🐓

### Where to buy weathervanes

#### Jankowski Weathervanes, Llanfyllin, Wales

Stan Jankowski makes bespoke copper and brass weathervanes at his workshop in Wales, including a wonderfully summery flight of swallows (07929 566342; [www.panjankowski.com](http://www.panjankowski.com))

#### Greensvanes, Madley, Herefordshire

Karen and Gordon Green make copper weathervanes to commission. A majestic, soaring red kite is a fine example (01981 500584; [www.greensvanes.co.uk](http://www.greensvanes.co.uk))

#### Original Forgery, Morebath, Devon

Original Forgery creates handmade

wrought-iron and copper weathervanes on the edge of Exmoor, among them an impressive eight-point stag (01398 331400; [www.originalforgery.co.uk](http://www.originalforgery.co.uk))

#### Black Forge Art Weathervanes, Wittersham, Kent

Black Forge makes traditional wrought-iron weathervanes, including a handsome and alert-looking pointer (01797 270073; [www.blackforgeart.co.uk/weathervanes](http://www.blackforgeart.co.uk/weathervanes))

#### Forging Ahead, Stourbridge, Worcestershire

Paul Margetts works in wrought iron and his range includes eye-catching Wassily Kandinsky-inspired designs (07784 770900; [www.forging-ahead.co.uk/weather1.htm](http://www.forging-ahead.co.uk/weather1.htm))