

Wrenboy Traditions Alive and Well in the West



Dingle awoke to the sounds of the Green and Gold Wren on December the 26th, helping the town to shake off the haziness of Christmas Day 2019. This traditional activity was as busy and intense this year as in many years previously. The four main wren groups who were out in traditional garb were the Green and Gold, along with the Sráid Eoin, The Quay, and the Goat Street Wrens.

The traditional rivalry remains strong between the Green and Gold Wren and the three others. The smaller wrens are generally weaker in numbers due to the draw of the larger Green and Gold Wren. People coming in from the outskirts of the town often join in with the Green street Wren because it stands out, swelling its numbers. People from all around Dingle explained how they have taken part in the Wren every year ever since they were children. Fergus O' Flaherty from the Green Street Wren said, "I think they also see it as 'coming of age' and it's a great concept to be able to grab hold of that and stake out your heritage and there's a sense of belonging to that and being 'ón áit' or from the place. It's our identity really."

Added to this, centuries old traditions such as the making of the strawboys attire are being kept alive and vibrant. Preparations for this year's wren began months before December 26th. To make the attire, each straw is taken out individually and cleaned, the rough bits are removed, before being placed in a bucket of water to soften the stalks, making them more pliable for the weaving process to make the skirts and capes and, eventually, the hats.

This year the feud between the Sráid Eoin Wren and the Green Street Wren was reignited on a number of occasions as, despite efforts to organise routes for both groups, they encountered each other in the same locations. A battle of the bands ensued underneath the gleaming Christmas lights with shouts of "Green and Gold!" clashing with the Sráid Eoin Wren's response of "Up the Blue and White!".

At midnight all united on the bridge at the foot of Dingle's medieval Main Street to usher in 2020 ensuring the continuation of a centuries old tradition with

European links. The Wren's day has strong connections to similar European traditions. The events described above used happen every year all around Ireland dating back to the 1500s. But since then the tradition has died out almost everywhere, however it remains strong in Dingle. It is slightly ironic that in Ireland, the European tradition has lasted the longest in the most westerly of Europe's towns.

The tradition used to consist of "hunting" a fake wren and putting it on top of a decorated pole. Then the crowds of strawboys, known elsewhere as mummers, celebrated the wren by dressing up in masks, straw suits, and a colourful motley of clothing. They formed music bands and paraded through towns and villages. These crowds were sometimes called wrenboys. In past times and going into the 20th century, an actual wren was hunted by the wrenboys. The captured wren was tied to the wrenboy leader's staff or a net was put on a pitchfork. The wren is said to have betrayed Irish soldiers fighting Norsemen by beating their wings on their shields. The poor wren is also blamed for betraying St. Stephen the first Christian martyr.

This is why the wren was once hunted on this day.

*"The wren the wren the kings of all birds,
On St. Stephen's Day it was caught in the furze
Up with the kettle and down with the pan
Give me a penny to bury the wren - Poem of the Wren."*