

# The Corn Queene

Form  
Function  
Evolution

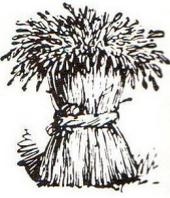


A Natural  
History

David Perkins  
Sarah Wilson  
Sonia Ritter

The **Corn Queene** has been manifest with **the Lions part** since the late 20th century. From 2004 she has emerged each year at Roots and Shoots in Lambeth and, like another mythical old bird, she takes form, rises, briefly reigns, before dissipating in a great shout. Her cycles of regeneration are glorious and annual. Here she is in 2019:





Much earlier and more widespread forms of the Queene have been recorded. Corn dollies, mothers or queens are created across Europe and the British Isles to represent or pay tribute to different spirits of nature that for many were behind the drive of the seasons. Made from the last sheaves of the crop and often decorated with other crops, ribbons and material, she was variously named Kirn Baby, Mother Earth, Corn Queene, Old Hag, Old Barley, The Ben, Sheaf Mother, Kent Girl and Corn Wolf. Such creations were undoubtedly closely linked to ancient faiths that worshipped such harvest goddesses as Demeter and Ceres (who features in Shakespearean form in our October Plenty festival). Sometimes as the last load entered the threshing yard, it was met by a volley of apples or drenched with water. A person might be chosen to 'become' the corn spirit and might be subjected to the same treatment during the festivities. General feasting supplied by the farmer would follow and all would sit at table alike. The feast was sometimes known as the Inngathering or Innings. In the Americas similar traditions are associated with other harvest crops such as maize and quinoa.

In almost all festivities, a doll sized corn dolly or plait of corn made from the last sheaf cut would be kept from the day and set in a place in the house until ploughing time. Then it would be fed to the animals or cast into the earth to ensure that the spirit of the last year's harvest and the plenty it produced would inspire the next crop. These dollies or plaits are still made today, from the very simple to highly ornate. They also feature in our festivities.

Corn Queenes are rare today in Western Europe as intensive agribusiness has erased this seasonal collective activity. In a few places, such as South London, the spirit of the season has been recalled and revived with great success.

*'As we were returning home from the inn, we happened to meet some country people celebrating the Harvest Home. Their last load of corn they crowned with flowers, having besides an image richly dressed, by which they would signify Ceres: this they keep moving about while men and women...riding through the streets in the cart shout as loud as they can till they come to the barn.'* **Paul Hentzner** *Travels in England 1598*



# Anatomy of the Corn Queene

## Osteology

The main axial structure (four shafts of dowel the diameter of broom handles, *yellow, right*) supports the head and upper body and transmits weight downwards to the lower basal structure (a modified pallet). At the waist these cross and are firmly linked with tendons (rope). The lower parts of the two front axial poles also function as femoral limbs.

The axial poles pass through a thoracic cage (circular ply, *amber coloured*) at breast level. This has two sternal projections (2x1) which help to support the weight of the bosom. A central block on the top of the thoracic structure helps to anchor the cervical vertebral column (*orange, 2x2*), which passes down through the clavicle-scapular structure (the 'shoulder yoke' of timber laths and blocks that rests upon the axial structure, *brown, right*). The central block on the thoracic cage has two holes that align with a hole through the cervical column. A steel pin (tent peg) passes through these holes to firmly anchor the head and neck to the main axial structure.

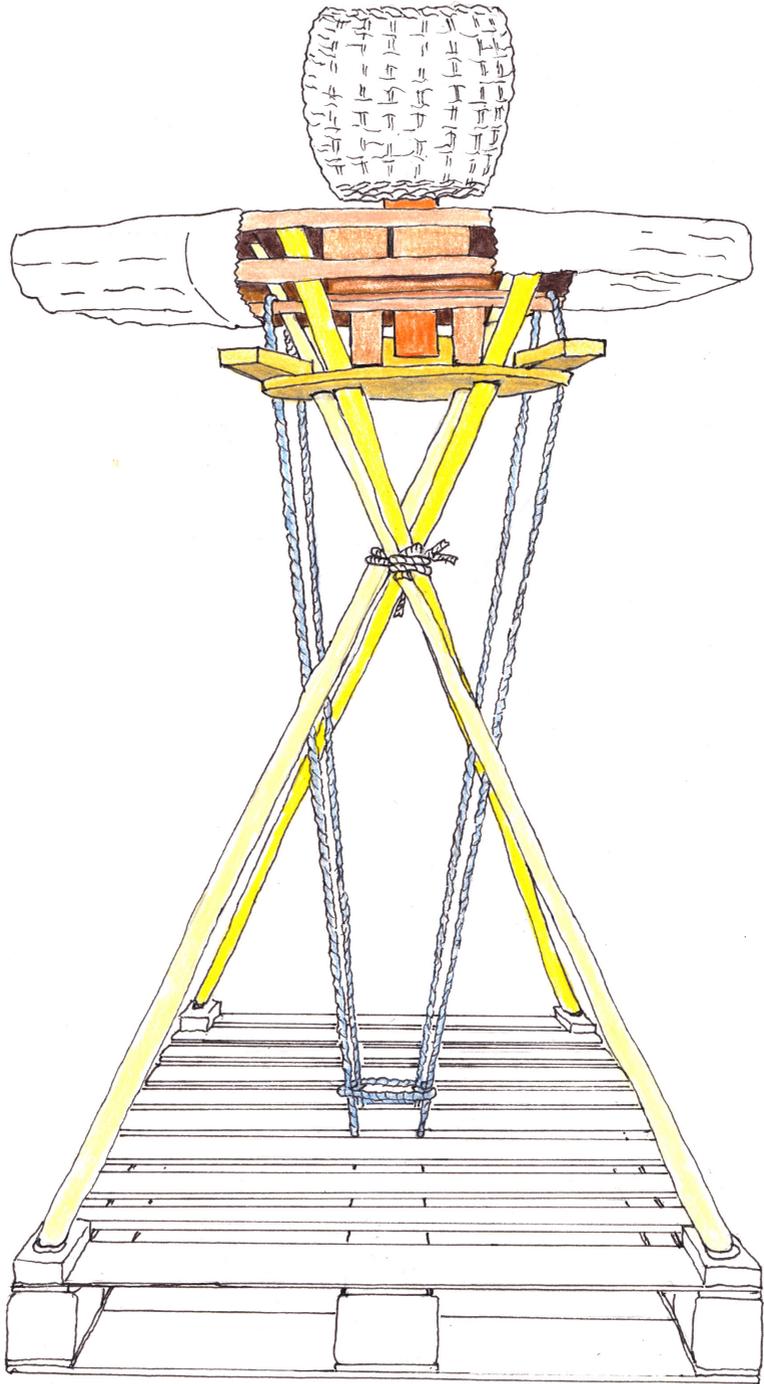
The yoke that forms the shape of the shoulder girdle and clavicles is covered with a skin of canvas for attaching biotic superstructure and clothing.

The skull (a willow basket) is permanently attached to the cervical column which passes through an orifice in the shoulder yoke.

Stability of the whole structure is assisted by four long tendons (of one long rope, *blue, right*) that pass from the clavicle-scapular yoke, around the thoracic cage and down to the basal pallet.

Two hoops are placed around the axial poles before they are installed. This is to provide firm attachment for features of the lower abdomen and buttocks.







## The external body envelope

The musculature and tissue envelope of the Corn Queene are provided by a series of generous overlapping hessian coverings and stuffings of straw. These provide a base for attaching other anatomical features, clothing and accessories.



Purpose-made bags of straw within this hessian envelope are attached to the thoracic cage, the axial poles and the hoops around the poles. These provide shape-ly bulk for the chest, the abdomen and the buttocks.



The upper limbs are suspended from a cowl of hessian that is spread across, and suspended from, the shoulder yoke. In earlier forms of the Queene the arms were unjointed and consisted only of straight hessian tubes stuffed with straw. In later incarnations the arms are articulated: the (2x2 timber) humerus of the upper arm is sewn into the hessian and is linked to the single radius-ulna with a bolt.



## The head & torso



The head, with attached cervical column, is anchored to the torso through a hole in the shoulder yoke. The current skull is more shapely than an earlier manifestation which resembled a bucket. The breasts vary in colour, sometimes form, and, often being weighty, are firmly attached through holes in the sternal projections to the thoracic cage structure. Attachment requires careful drilling of a hole and the threading of thick garden wire or strong twine through the pumpkins.



The attachment point is obscured in the bodice (see page 19), which also provides additional and shapely support, preventing the wire from tearing through the pumpkin.



The Queene's facial features are very colourful, often with an interesting complexion and skin texture. Her nose generally resembles a small gourd (regrettably warty at times) and she almost always has decidedly hot lips. Lashes can be long, perhaps enhanced with extensions (*wire, right*). Beauty spots have appeared now and then and she has favoured ear decorations on a number of occasions (*small gourds or radish, maybe*). A sequence of images of the Queene's facial appearance over a decade and a half can be seen on pages 30-31. Her demeanour can seem bemused, condescending, even dismissive, of the antics of much smaller humans.



## The hands of the Queene



The Queene's hands will get shaken a lot - by the setts, speed bumps and pot-holes of her journey - and kissed. They need to be robust. Carrots are carefully shaped, drilled (to avoid splitting) and linked with thick, plastic-coated garden wire. This gives stability whilst remaining flexible. The wire passes through the rear of a suitably sized pattypan squash, also carefully drilled.



Rings, perhaps garlic or mangosteen, set with stones of radish or tiny onion, are a strong symbol of personal power as are hot red finger nails (small chilli peppers, a challenge for the nail bar to attach). See page 20 for more examples.

## Dressing the Corn Queene

The emergence of the Corn Queene's anatomy is a challenging time, but she then requires considerable effort from her dressers. Large quantities of wheat are required, bundled into small sheaves. This work can often be done in advance by students and groups of volunteers in the greenhouse and barn at Roots and Shoots. The organic wheat has come each year from Yoxall, Staffs and is the variety Maris Widgeon. In 2015 Roots and Shoots also grew Emmer wheat in part of the Cellini Orchard. This is a bronze-age variety with long awns ('tufted ears') and it was used in both 2015 and 2016 for the ruffs, bodice and fan (see pp. 18-19, 21).



However, there is 'sheaf-tying', and sheaf-tying. Good knots are required, tightly and close under the ears of a bunch of about a dozen stems. The core team of dressers - Mary-Jo, Sarah and David - would find poor, loose examples, *left* amidst excellent, neat bunches, *right*.





**Defining the figure,** picking out waist, buttocks and torso, is begun in the early stages of sewing the wheat bundles onto the hessian envelope (with garden twine for ease of removal).

She can end up with a 'go-faster' air or a more commanding dalek-look. A band of wheat across the shoulders with stems tapering to the waist is very power-dressing.





With the straw bag beneath producing the look of a farthingale (or even a bustle), large and very beautiful cabbage leaves can then be used to emphasise the buttocks (2017).



**The Veggie Corn Queene** requires the stringing of large numbers of onions, shallots, carrots, leeks, sprouts, runner beans, radish, beet.....



Supplied by Ted's Veg in the Borough Market the cornucopia is strung together by the gatherings of volunteers and students. A light hand-drill, used carefully, is more easily controlled and therefore safer, than forcing a bodkin or a gimlet through onions or carrots. It will also avoid splitting. In 2015 there was an additional donation of woven bread.

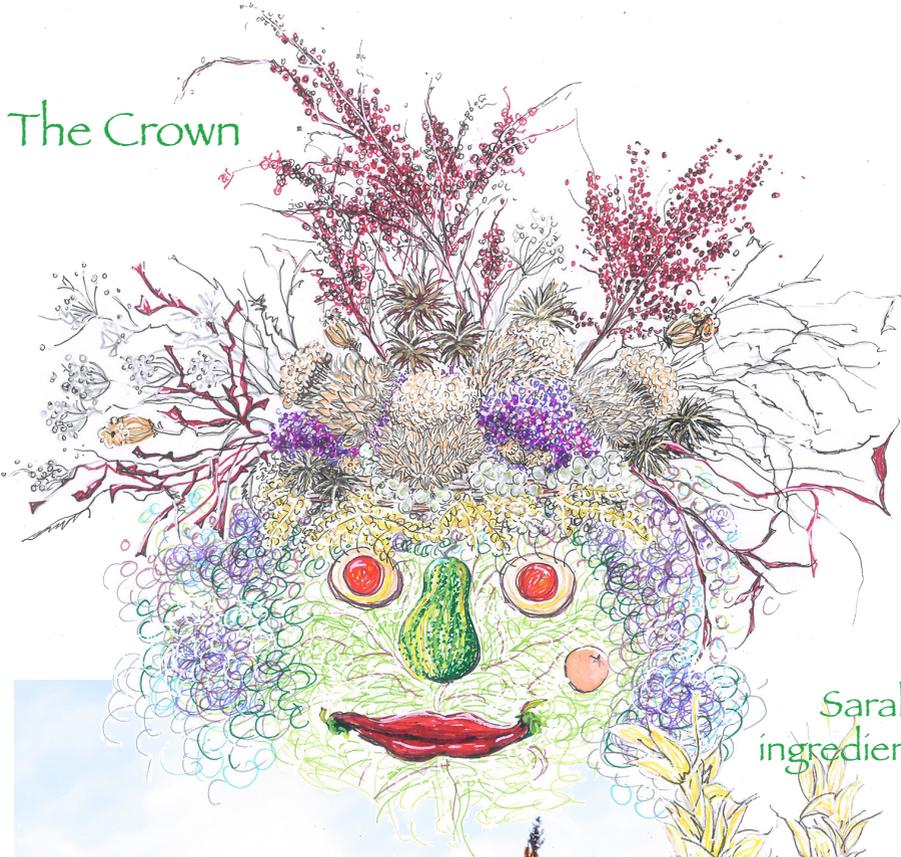




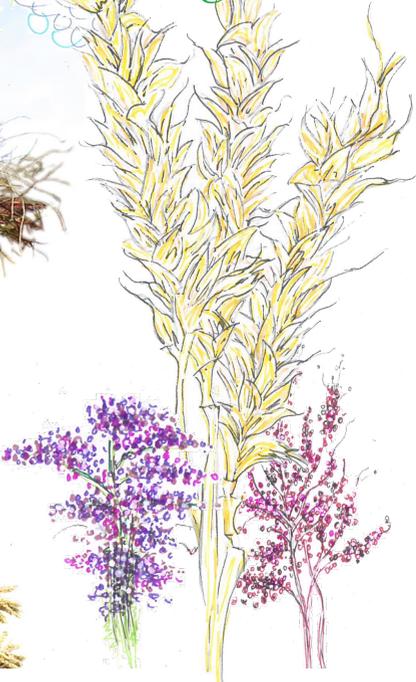
Large darning needles or needles made from wire are used for sewing in the wheat and veg; *enroute* adjustment is often needed.



# The Crown



Sarah's ingredients

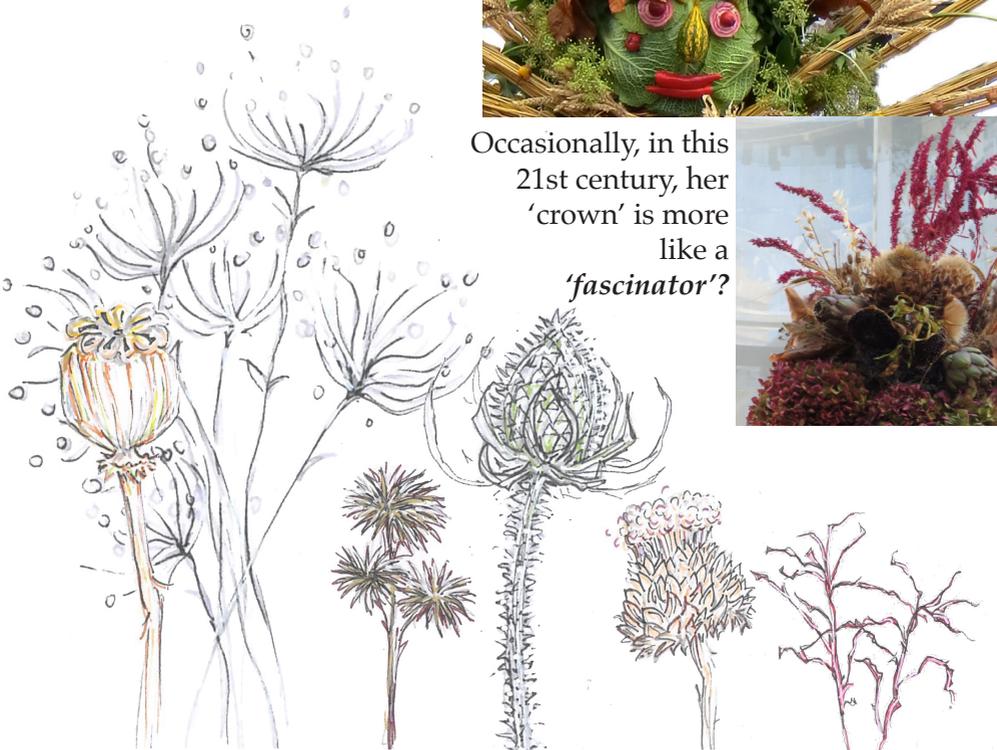




With a suitable base such as a circular basket or woven disc the crown can be made separately from the Queene.



Occasionally, in this 21st century, her 'crown' is more like a *'fascinator'*?



## The ruffs and the bodice:

Aware, and maybe a little jealous, of regal competition from a much earlier Queen, by 2015 ruffs were being insisted upon. Ancient emmer wheat created a fine tufted fringe, mounted onto arcs formed with willow (or hazel) withies attached firmly to the shoulder yoke. In later years two additional chin ruffs were added and in 2016 these were jewelled along their shafts with scarlet and golden hornet crab apples.





The Queen's bodice has altered from the old net of earlier incarnations to the caress of hessian cups reinforced with parts of a chicken run, to the current, generous jute webbing support. The webbing provides ample opportunities for the Queen to collect jewels and other decorations.





The orb, the mace/sceptre,  
the rings



Again, aware of historical rivalry, the Corn Queene has had to have an orb and sceptre, occasionally even a mace (*various materials including an impressive bottle gourd in 2014*).

Her rings are important: here are some examples (*left to right*) from 2014, 2019, 2016 and 2017.



## The necklace, the handbag, the sleeves



The Queene chooses her necklace from a wide range of colourful crops.



Left, handbag, 2019, a gift from Mary Jo McPherson.

The fan (*right*) is of ancient emmer wheat.



For several years now her sleeves have shown fashionable slits exposing bright materials (*celery, leeks, rhubarb, runner beans, bread*) and large colourful buttons (*beets*). Cuffs are gathered heads of wheat. Note the extended finger nails in 2016.



## The Corn Queene's carriage



The Corn Queene's carriage in recent years has been one of the two oldest market barrows at Roots and Shoots. The red barrow on the right is an original Joe Tappy market barrow from Lambeth Walk and is very sturdy for the bearing of the Queene. The green barrow on the left is used to hold the wheat for Corn Queene and Corn Dolly construction during Apple Days at Roots and Shoots. Joe Tappy made a living hiring out barrows to stall holders in the Lambeth Walk market from early in the 20th century. The inscription on our barrow gives his address as "2-4 Topaz Street, Fitzalan St., SE11" (next door to Roots and Shoots). Assisting the Queene to mount her carriage is a team effort, here at the Borough Market in 2016:





Before we renovated the Tappy barrow in 2011 (*far left, team is Sarah, Ryan, Poppy and David, behind the camera*), we used a barrow constructed at R&S from old components (*left*). This was longer and higher and so could carry decorations and baskets of produce fore and aft of the Queene.

It was, however, less manoeuvrable than the Tappy barrow - and a little too high (problems getting under wires and into Borough Market). It also had pneumatic tyres on wheels from WW11 aircraft which were difficult to replace. Of course, the Tappy barrow does now appear to suggest the Queene is a bit cheapskate and can only *hire* her carriages!



# The Procession

The annual reincarnation of the Corn Queene has evolved primarily so that she can play a central role in the October Plenty festival - in particular the procession along Bankside. Her first emergence since 2004 has been at Roots and Shoots in Lambeth and from 2012 her full metamorphosis has taken place within the Borough Market. Before that she emerged fully only in the streets of Southwark before moving to the Globe Theatre.



She is first led to the Globe Theatre by Sonia and the Berryman, along with the players and musicians of the Lions part and the mayor of Southwark.





Until 2017 the  
Queene had to wait  
outside the Globe  
whilst the players  
went into the  
theatre for their first  
plays. During this  
time respects would  
be paid to her  
*imperious* presence,  
hands kissed.





### To the Market!

From the Globe the Queene's retinue and all her followers would pass along Bankside to the Borough Market.



Willing volunteers from the crowd have often helped David haul the Queene, but Alex has come every year since 2013.





Train-bearers also appear on the way. Down at the Borough Market **the Lions part** have set up their stage for an afternoon of plays, music and dancing. Corn Queene presides.



# 2019: The Queene breaks new ground

For 2019 full emergence occurred at Roots and Shoots (see page 2). The gathering was at the Peace Garden in Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park with performance and procession starting from in front of the IWM.



From there the new route took us down the Lambeth Walk...



After doing the Lambeth Walk, back at Roots and Shoots the Queene, as usual, stands over the stage (the tale of John Barleycorn, *below*).



*Right:* Corn Queene 2017: elegant headpiece, well-formed ruffs, classy autumnal hair, striking necklace, a challenging décolletage and powerful bodice.



2019



2018



### Evolution and reincarnation

In the Queen's regeneration each year, as with all organisms, there is inheritance - but inheritance with change. Since 2010, when Sarah joined the Queen's court, there seems to have been more consistency in her appearance: for example, she has often had a beauty spot - but on which cheek?

2017



2016



2014



2013



2012



The shape and colour of her nose is another feature that is particularly fluid: smooth or warty, bulbous or pendulous?

2015





2011



2009



2010



2006



2005



2007

Her complexion has sometimes shown remarkable shifts in texture and colour. With only a couple of exceptions, however, she has generally had pretty hot lips!



Before she found the market barrows at Roots and Shoots, the Queen's dignity was a little curtailed by having a carriage stuck at road level  
(bottom left).

In her early manifestations:



2004

alarming arms,



and a bit spooky!



pre-2004



# Reproduction/breakdown/dormancy



In her earlier incarnations, she *reproduced* - just before her final breakdown a mass of apples appears from her belly! In her mature state this no longer occurs.

The final act of the Queene is to distribute herself: the stripping of the Queene. With the plays over, the conkers smashed, stories told, then every piece of wheat, fruit or veg on the Queene is thrown to the crowd. She is spread forth between her subjects and so ensures another October Plenty.



This is done freely apart from her primary nurturing elements: these are auctioned off.





Other elements of her dress are also auctioned, in particular the crown. All of the Queene's retinue, the dressers, the players, the musicians - all of **the Lions part** - work without pay: the Queene's auction provides some recompense, enabling the continuation of the festival in the following year, when the Queene regenerates once more.



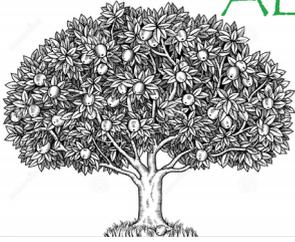
By the end of October Plenty the Queene, in her fundamental state, is ready to return to hibernation.



The Queene flags down a bus in the Kennington Road!

The connection between the Corn Queene and Roots and Shoots began when Duncan Law of the Lions part came to a solar energy open day David had organised in (?) 2003. He spotted the barrow recreated from parts of old market barrows in the Roots workshop. After talking with David, the Lions part and Roots and Shoots joined forces to give the Corn Queene a proper 'mount'. In the first years David organised the first work on the emergence of the Queene and then relied on the actors to finish her quickly on the day in the streets of Southwark behind the Globe Theatre. From 2007, we were able to use the yard at the back of the Globe which was at least secure. At Roots we were joined in 2010 by Sarah Wilson whose creativity massively enhanced the Queene's character. However, we were still restricted to building outside in the day or two before October Plenty, so had to do as much as possible at Roots and Shoots first. Collaboration with the Market improved in 2012 when they began organising their own Apple Day and from then until 2018 most of the work on the Queene could take place under cover in the newly refurbished area of the Market. Although noisy it was, of course, right next to Ted's Veg, it gave us 3 or 4 days to work on her and built up attention during that time. In 2019 we made the significant shift to Lambeth with the Queene emerging and fledging completely at Roots and Shoots and the procession passing from the Tibetan Peace Garden/ Imperial War Museum via Lambeth Walk back to Roots and Shoots and our 21st Apple Day.

# ALL OUR APPLE DAYS



The Corn Queene and October Plenty were a natural fit with Roots and Shoots Apple Days. Common Ground established National Apple Day in 1990, 21st October, (<https://www.commonground.org.uk/apple-day/>) to promote the diversity of apple varieties to be found in the UK

beyond those routinely sold in supermarkets. David began planting apples as soon as he arrived in 1999 - in the wild garden (the planting of the espalier row appears in the Common Ground Book of Orchards (2000)) and then from 2003 in the neighbouring public open space now known as the Cellini Orchard. The first Roots and Shoots Apple Day in 1999 was a fairly humble affair compared with the 100 plus varieties shown each year (totalling around 2000 varieties) between 2003 and 2019. When R&S and the Lions part joined forces in 2004 we organised the two festivals to be two weeks apart. Sonia would come to Roots' Apple Day with her wheat and making of corn dollies (and for the first few years, starting off the Corn Queene as well), then David would co-ordinate the Corn Queene in the intervening two weeks. Finally, in 2019, we united the two into one grand festival:

Roots & Shoots  
*with*  
the Lions part  
*present*  
APPLE DAY and October Plenty  
*a grand joint festival*



# The Corn Queene's Court

For the Corn Queene to complete her life cycle (emergence, dressing, procession, oversight, dispersal, hibernation), she needs a strong team. Prior to 2004 this comprised Sonia Ritter, Duncan Law and the Lions part actors and musicians. Since 2004 it has been driven forwards by David Perkins at Roots and Shoots with vital input from the Lions part and Roots and Shoots volunteers. From 2010 the core team became David, Sarah Wilson and Mary Jo McPherson with additional help from R&S volunteers, staff (for example, Madeleine Dunn, Joe Brand, Anita Gwyn, Jean Willmott) and students from Roots and Shoots and Sonia Ritter and Rosalind Riley from the Lions part.

Wheat is from Rosemary Sault's farm in Yoxall, Staffordshire, fruit and veg from Ted's Veg (Borough Market). The Queene's temporary residence in the Borough Market was facilitated in recent years by David Gledhill, Lucy Charles, Rachel Pickles and the very helpful security staff at the market. Earlier occupation of the Globe Theatre's backyard was facilitated by Mark Rylance and staff of Shakespeare's Globe.

Photography in this book is by David, Sarah, Mary Jo McPherson, Sally McPherson, members of the Lions part, staff at Roots and Shoots and Sas Astro, who has taken superb photos of October Plenty since 2013: see <https://www.flickr.com/photos/sasastro/albums/72157711469534603>.

**The Corn Queene's dormancy (in the Apple Barn at Roots and Shoots) has been extended for 2020.** Delayed emergence to avoid environmentally stressful conditions is not uncommon (a proportion of the population of many solitary bee species, for example, can remain within the nest hole for two or three years before completing metamorphosis and emerging). She should rise again in 2021.

**In 2020 both festivals could not take place,** with October Plenty online (#OPDAY2020) instead:

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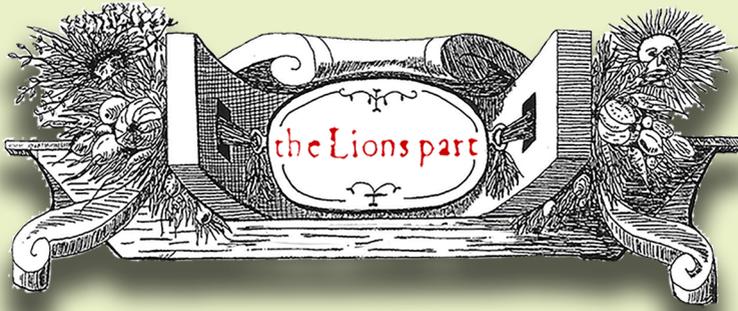
\* Robert Burns: *To a mouse, on turning her up in her nest with the plough*.  
The Corn Queene is herself a habitat of bounty and has regularly hosted other creatures.



The Corn Queen's essence is of Bounty: October Plenty.  
And of hope: for future plenty.  
And a place in that plenty  
For all - for the wee,  
for the cowran,  
the tim'rous:



"I'm truly sorry  
Man's dominion  
Has broken Nature's  
social union..." \*



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