

HANDBASTING

Handfasting is an ancient Celtic custom in which a man and woman came together at the start of their marriage relationship. Their hands, or more accurately, their wrists, were literally tied together. This practice gave way to the expression "tying the knot" which has come to mean getting married or engaged. The hands are generally bound with a cord as part of the ritual.

One custom is that while facing each other, the couple placed their right hands together and then their left hands together to form an infinity symbol while the cord is tied around their hands in a knot. Another custom is that the man and woman place their right hands only together while the cord is used to tie a knot around their wrists. In some versions, this is only done for as long as the ceremony lasts, but in others, the cord is not untied until the marriage is physically consummated. There are probably as many rituals for this as there are people who have joined themselves together.

If a handfasting was performed with the two left hands together without the tying of the knot, it meant that the woman was a mistress and would not be able to claim the name, inheritance, property, etc. of the real wife and was only in the protection of the man. But her offspring would be taken care of as legal heirs second in line to the man's legal and first wife. Having lots of children was once the only form of "Social Security" in one's old age. The previous combinations were all considered legal and binding in an engagement or marriage except for the "left hand ritual."

The handfasting ritual recognized just one of many forms of marriages permitted under the ancient Brehon law. The man and woman who came together for the handfasting agreed to stay together for a specific period of time, usually a year and a day. At the end of the year the couple faced a choice. They could enter into a longer-term "permanent" marriage contract, renew their agreement for another year, or go their separate ways.

The ritual itself might have been led by a respected non-church affiliate such as a chieftain, priest or elder of the community while the couple took turns reciting their vows of promise to be engaged for a year and a day in front of witnesses. On the last day of "the year and a day promise," they would then make a promise for infinity repeating their promise to each again.

In days of old, records were not kept who got engaged, married, had kids, and died. Today the Sacraments of the church has the responsibility of taking care of these things. Before the church took over these duties, these things were overseen by the whole community and, therefore, were set in law by their witnessing what happened between the couple making the promise.

Two-handed handfasting still constituted a fully legal marriage throughout Europe whether the blessing of the church was sought or not. Clergymen, of course, recommended that newlyweds attend church as soon as possible after the signing of the contract and the handfasting. Marriage is now one the Seven Sacraments that had been ignored by the church for centuries. Only the very wealthy and affluent could afford church marriages. Handfastings were under the jurisdiction of common law rather than canon law.

Handfasting survives in several forms today. It is present in part in many Western religious and secular ceremonies as the celebrant asks, "Who gives this woman to be married?" The giving of the bride's hand to the groom is reminiscent of the handfasting ceremony.



Colors of the Cord used in tying the knot and their significance :

- Dark Blue - for a safe journey and longevity
- Light Blue - for understanding and patience
- Pink - for romance, honor, partnership and happiness
- Green - for health, prosperity, luck, fertility and beauty
- Red - for courage, strength and passion
- Yellow - for wisdom and harmony
- Brown - for healing animals and the home
- Silver - for creativity and protection
- Gold - for unity, prosperity, and longevity
- White - for peace, sincerity and devotion



HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY!

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