

Handfasting

Handfasting is a traditional form of betrothal or wedding ceremony, the origins of which are largely lost in the mists of time. There is evidence to suggest that Handfastings were still conducted publicly in Scotland until the 19th century and several customs associated with this form of marriage still survive today. The word itself is a derivative of hand fastening and one of the common features of a handfasting is the loose binding of the hands of the couple together.

Modern handfastings are usually associated with Pagans but they also appeal to many interested in alternative lifestyles and personalised ceremonies. Most take place outdoors and in Scotland they can be a fully legal ceremony.

A Handfasting ceremony can include the exchanging of vows and rings, readings, a symbolic first meal of the married couple (most often this involves the sharing of bread or cake and wine or mead), the handfasting itself (loosely binding the hands of the couple) and blessings.

Usually family and friends will gather in a circle with the couple and celebrant in the centre. The circle is an important in many faiths including Paganism and symbolises unity, equality and eternity. The Celebrant will usually walk round the circle in a clockwise direction before the ceremony starts, this is called casting a circle and is a way of making the space temporarily more sacred for the duration of the ceremony. At the end of the ceremony the Celebrant will reverse this process, this is called opening the circle.

If the handfasting is fully Pagan the Celebrant, possibly with the aid of others taking part in the ceremony, will call upon Spirits of the Elements, Ancestral Spirits, Spirits of the Place and Deities and ask these beings to join the ceremony and witness what is taking place. This is usually done directly after the circle is cast. At the end of the ceremony these beings will all be thanked and said goodbye to before the circle is opened. It is up to the couple involved how much of this process they wish included in their ceremony.

A modern handfasting ceremony is usually highly personalised for the couple involved. The Celebrant will offer advice and suggestions but apart from the simple requirements for a legal ceremony the decisions on what to include are up to the couple.