

Hat's the spirit!

Brimming with the promise of brighter days and frivolous fun, the Easter bonnet is one of our most colourful and intriguing traditions, finds Deborah Nicholls-Lee

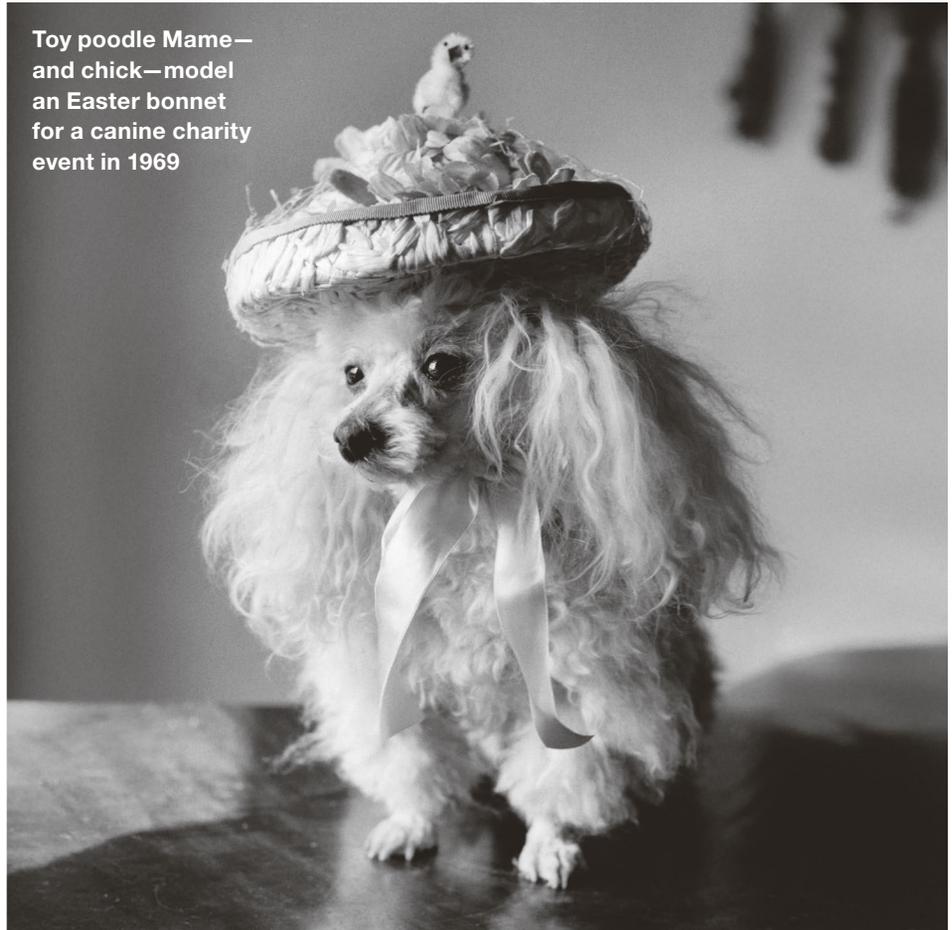
EXTRAVAGANTLY feminine' and 'flower-fresh', 'the Easter bonnet sets out joyfully to allure,' wrote Elspeth Grant in *The Tatler* in April 1956. 'It can banish in a trice the memory of winter woes... and brighten, as otherwise only a new love affair can, the eyes above which it ideally perches.'

Festooned with spring flowers and feathers, the Easter bonnet throws off the hardship of the cold months now behind us and celebrates Nature's resurgence. Yet, for all its frivolity, the tradition was born from austerity, arriving at the end of the 40 days of fasting that are undertaken by Christians observing Lent.

If Lent is a period of repentance and reflection, Easter Sunday, which marks Jesus's resurrection, is a time for spiritual renewal. Traditionally, it was at this moment that churchgoers would present, like butterflies emerging from a chrysalis, the very best version of themselves, topped by a fancy new hat. Even as far back as medieval times, lords and

‘Fifth Avenue was the perfect place for the affluent to peacock their Easter best’

Toy poodle Mame—and chick—model an Easter bonnet for a canine charity event in 1969



ladies would prepare for Easter by refreshing their wardrobe, with Easter livery (their used clothes) passed onto their servants, who now also had something new to wear.

‘At Easter let your clothes be new, or else be sure you will it rue,’ advises the 17th-century satirical almanac *Poor Robin*.

However, timing is everything.

Do not, as Shakespeare cautions, don your finery too early. ‘Didst thou not fall out with a tailor for wearing his new doublet before Easter?’ Mercutio teases Benvolio in *Romeo and Juliet*. By the 19th century, the convention of wearing new clothes on Easter Sunday was stronger than ever. ‘Easter proper... always required new clothing of some kind...’, writes Elizabeth Gaskell in her serialised novel *Wives and Daughters*, first published as a book in 1866. ‘Piety demanded a new

bonnet, or a new gown; and was barely satisfied with an Easter pair of gloves.’

According to the Museum of the City of New York, US, the idea of parading your bonnet is ‘rooted in the custom of a Sunday walk following religious service’, a pastime that was ‘particularly popular on Easter Sunday as it marked a time to show off the latest trends in fashion’. New York’s Fifth Avenue, where the 150-year-old Easter Parade and Easter Bonnet Festival still draws huge crowds, was once lined with mansions and the perfect place for the affluent to peacock their Easter best. ‘Dressmakers and milliners would line the streets producing sketches of the ensembles later copied by department stores’, we learn, and although fashions came and went, ‘the excessive hats have always remained in style’.

A demonstration of religious observance had transitioned into a decadent display →



Left: Elizabeth II's flowered Easter bonnet, worn at a Windsor Castle service. Facing page: Sandie Shaw's hat took 'flower' in a fresh direction (up!)





The eggs-travagant winners of a 1977 Easter bonnet parade organised by Age Concern

Cock of the walk: an eye-catching Easter bonnet from about 1966



of the best money could buy. The bonnet was the crowning glory and soon putting on far too many airs to be a true symbol of redemption and renewal, with publications such as *The Chatelaine* of April 1929, extolling ‘the look of confirmed knowledge of personal superiority which the well-chosen Easter hat imparts’.

The guileless young lady in a pretty hat was a trope that even Hollywood couldn’t resist toying with. ‘In your Easter Bonnet, with all the frills upon it, you’ll be the grandest lady in the Easter parade,’ sings Bing Crosby to Marjorie Reynolds in the 1942 film *Holiday Inn* as they leave church in an open-topped carriage. However, as romantic as the cherry-blossom-filled scene is, with her charming hat framing her face with daisies and finished with a bouncy bow at the back, they both know it’s also a wonderful publicity opportunity. ‘The photographers will snap us,’ continues Crosby. ‘And you’ll find that you’re in the rotogravure.’

The early 1930s poem *Sweet Charity* by Edith B. Henderson admits to the unholy pleasures of flaunting the season’s fancy attire:

I went to church the other morn
And wore my brand new Easter bonnet
Oh, what joyous thrill was mine
When envious eyes were fixed upon it.

Yet, the narrator’s questionable morals do not go unnoticed:

The preacher spoke of vanity—
I saw him gazing straight at me.

The Easter bonnet’s early forms, in wool and straw, were somewhat humbler, gaining embellishments in the 1700s, such as ribbons and flowers, and large brims behind which shy faces could nestle deeply. By the mid 1880s, bonnets were increasingly cast off in favour of hats, and the initial propriety and modesty of early-Victorian dress gave way to ostentatious designs trimmed with silk, ostrich plumes and taxidermy birds: exotic emblems of the Empire’s conquests.

‘We have forgotten the pleasure that this extravagant headwear brought’

During the post-Second World War period, the fashion for Easter bonnets broadened out, bolstered by rising prosperity and a more optimistic vision for the future. Film stars such as Elizabeth Taylor, posing with a delicately



Cecil Beaton won an Oscar for his hat and costume work on 1964's *My Fair Lady*

woven basket of chicks on her head in 1949, helped fuel the trend, but it was no longer limited to the wealthy. Magazines taught thrifty women how to dress up last year's bonnet with a niftily positioned satin sash or remnant of lace, as a joyful explosion of Easter-bonnet parades (see box) processed through our towns and villages.

The power of a show-stealing hat was also harnessed by the era's leading photographers. Cecil Beaton's famous photograph of Audrey Hepburn in an Easter bonnet woven from flowers, including orchids, daisies and violets, all tied together with a large lilac bow, was one of several images garnering publicity for her upcoming appearance as Eliza Doolittle in the 1964 film *My Fair Lady*, where her extravagant hats—most memorably in the pivotal Ascot scene—took up significant screen space. Another hat series, this time shot by Terry Fincher in 1970, featured Sandie Shaw in a range of flamboyant Easter creations, from a giant frilly bonnet in broderie anglaise laden with ostrich feathers to a police helmet sprouting a long-legged sunflower.

However, neither fame nor wealth were prerequisites for making hat history, as 20-year-old student teacher Christine Hodgson discovered in 1959. She won first prize in the comic

Easter Bonnet Parade at the seaside town of Morecambe, Lancashire, for a precariously balanced bonnet fashioned from two large—and full—egg trays, populated by inquisitive handmade chicks. The image of her shy smile peering into the camera resurfaces every April: a demonstration, not only of the democratisation of the Easter bonnet, but of the delight even the simplest designs can bring.

It is regrettable that this vibrant symbol of fresh starts, warmer weather and happy times ahead should have fallen into decline in Britain—the victim of a dwindling market for hats and a downturn in church attendance. Today, the Easter bonnet is more commonly seen perched on the tousled heads of school children than being paraded by a style-conscious parent. We have, no doubt, forgotten the pleasure that this extravagant headwear brought, not only to the onlooker, but to the wearer, as frothy lace and primrose-yellow ribbons streamed behind them and floral embellishments scented the breeze. As *The Chatelaine* declared in 1929: 'If a musical reproduction could be preserved of what they feel when the soft brim of a becoming Easter hat nestles about their brows, the *1812 Overture* would sound like the faint hissing in a tea kettle.' 🐣

Heads up



It may have rained on their parade in 1951, but the crowds that gathered at Hyde Park did not let it dampen their spirits. 'Though it was sou'wester weather, those Easter bonnets bravely came out in strength to bemuse the onlookers,' quips a commentator in archive footage of 50,000 Londoners who gathered for the annual parade. Twice this number attended in 1949, when the mercury rose to a record-breaking 29.4°C and men in top hats and Panamas rode in open-top carriages alongside women wearing bonnets the size of parasols.

Although Hyde Park was a magnet for designers and celebrities, the mid 20th century saw a proliferation of Easter-bonnet parades across the country, from a 1960s celebration of chic hats and vintage cars, hosted by the Duke and Duchess of Bedford in the grounds of Woburn Abbey, Bedfordshire, to a parade reserved for the over-sixties in Buxton, Derbyshire, in the 1970s, replete with daffodils, gauzy ribbons and grins. Today, towns such as Faversham in Kent and Lyme Regis in Dorset are among the few to keep up the tradition. Battersea Park's—sadly no more—lasted longer than most. 'When Easter comes, can summer be far behind?' asked the event's commentator in 1960, a year when penny farthings, an open-top bus and even a camel, joined the parade. 'If you can't be gay at Easter, when can you?'



J. C. Leyendecker's illustration captures the pomp of an Easter parade from 1912