

# *A Year of Days*

*A short history of our calendar  
and the significant Christian  
and pagan celebration days*

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# *Note on this Edition*

This book was originally put together in 2009 in preparation for the writing of a mystery story called 'The Year of Days'.

The mechanism of the plot revolved around the Christian calendar, and so it was necessary in the first place to work out the main elements of that calendar.

The cart has rather got before the horse, because the mystery story still hasn't been written. In the mean time the subject of the calendar took flight on its own wings, and became so interesting that this booklet has resulted, and is reproduced here.

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# *Introduction*

Calendars are capricious, illogical, and arbitrary man-made constructions, deeply rooted in the agricultural and religious practices of past peoples. Almost every aspect of our modern calendar reflects the abiding concerns of the farmer and the priest. The farmer needed some sort of yearly 'clock' to work by, whilst the priest made, organised and ultimately controlled this 'clock'.

This pagan and priestly presence dominates and bedevils our current calendar, creating contradictions and oddities which can almost be viewed as battleground between two great forces: earthly passions and spiritual salvation. The Christian calendar (which is also our calendar) is an unlikely amalgam of agricultural events, the Jewish moon calendar, Roman sun worship, and Catholic organisation. It has been created by expediency and convenience, and by any rational criteria it is not a pretty object.

Consider this remarkable fact: the reason that we celebrate Easter on the specific days that we do, is because it was too hot to travel in the desert by day. Excuse me?

The early Jews were a nomadic people, who wandered about the semi-desert lands in search of fod-

der for their stock, moving daily, or often in their case, nightly. It was often more convenient to travel at night and avoid the heat of the day, and many desert peoples have travelled this way, using the moon for both light and guidance.

Since the moon played such an active and benevolent role in their lives, the nomadic Jews had a calendar based upon the lunar month. Festivals like the Passover and Pentecost are fixed according to the moons phases, and the early Christians borrowed this habit from the Jews, calling their equivalent festivals Easter and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was a Jew, like most of his followers, and he was trying to reform the existing Jewish faith not start a new religion. The early Jewish Christians naturally borrowed the Jewish concept of the seven day week and the sabbath, but only in later Christianity did the sabbath become Sunday not Saturday.

As the Christian church became organised they fixed, not without considerable trouble, the date of Easter around the first full moon that occurs on or after the spring equinox on or about the 21 March.

For the Christian church the absence of any definite dates for Jesus's birth or death was both an advantage and a hindrance. A disadvantage, because it made the

person of Jesus less tangible; an advantage because the church could freely overlay pagan festivals with their own Christianised versions, with no need to try to match-up dates.

For example, it was relatively easy to make spring the resurrection festival, and Christmas and New Year, a time of beginning, into the date of Jesus's birth. Easter was not now a spring festival of physical copulation, but a time of spiritual rebirth. A thousand years ago this could be considered a sly marketing triumph, but the Catholic church continued to remain unhappy with the notion that the single most important date in the Christian calendar relied upon the activities of a pagan moon. It has been their policy since 1963 to fix the date of Easter permanently, however, this has not yet eventuated.

### **Following the Seasons**

At a fundamental level calendars are based on the natural cycle of events: the circling of the earth about the sun, the changing seasons and the ephemeral shiftings of the moon and the stars. Early societies had no urgency for a detailed calendar, but some sort of approximate calendar would have been useful.

The Egyptians famously measured the yearly arrival of the Nile floods. This brought a huge enrichment of silt to their agricultural lands, and by studying the brightest star in the night sky, Sirius, which they called the 'dog star', they made a fair fist of trying to predict when the beneficial floods would come. Star watching was particularly useful in parts of the world where seasons are relatively absent, for instance in warm climates near the equator. Pacific voyagers and fishermen used the movement of the stars to determine the 'seasons' of storms and fish migration patterns.

Early nomadic herders did not need minutes, hours or even days, but they did need some sort of account of the seasonal passage of time to trigger their migrations. They would have used the rising of certain stars to mark the oncoming winter seasons, and therefore indicating that it was time for them to shift their flocks to winter pastures.

As these restless herders settled down and made fields and grew crops, the detailing of the calendar needed to be more exact. Settlers wanted to know more about the seasons which regulate the planting and harvesting of crops: when to plough, when to sow, when to reap. Although this seems agricultural commonsense, it became important for the organisation of these societies that correct dates



of planting or harvesting should not be obscured by unseasonal events or out of season weather. Since early societies utterly depended on a successful harvest, it is not surprising that all manner of customs, prohibitions and superstitions evolved around these central events, and the sooth-sayers, witch-doctors, shamans and eventually priests began to increase in power and influence.

### **Moon & Sun**

For us it is obvious that the sun is more important than the moon. The sun gives life and heat, whereas the moon is simply a pale reflection of the sun, but early societies did not see that way at all. The sun regulated the working day, but the moon became a nightly spiritual guide-post and a much more useful clock.

As agricultural communities began to trade with each other, some sort of shared calendar became crucial. For example, how were you to arrange a meeting to trade with someone if no one had any sort of notion of a date? Planting times varied from community to community, a summer season in one village might be earlier than a village in the hill regions.

The moon was one of the most effective visual clocks, because it changed its shape as it worked its

way across the heavens. From new moon, slender (finger nail), half (dichotomous), two-thirds (gibbous) to full moon. From the moon derived the expression for month, based upon the 28 day lunar cycle, and also incidentally our 'moon day' or Monday.

(Whilst we are on the naming of days: Tuesday is derived from 'Tiu's Day', or 'Tiw' or 'Tyr' the Germanic god of war and sky. Wednesday is derived from 'Woden's Day' Teutonic leader of the wild hunt. Thursday from 'Thors Day', Norse god of thunder. Friday is 'Freyas Day' or 'Frigg', Teutonic goddess of love and fecundity. Saturday is derived from 'Saturns Day' the Roman God of agriculture. Sunday is 'day of the sun').

It is curious to realise that many agricultural peoples started the day with the night. In other words, the day did not begin with the sunrise, but the sunset. We currently start the day at midnight, which when you come to think of it, is also rather odd. Why would you start the day from the darkest, coldest part of it? Who is going to get up in the middle of the night to check that the day has started anyway? Such a measurement can only really be done with the development of accurate clocks.

The Celts or Ancient Britons traditionally started their day at sunset,

and Se'nnight means a week or seven nights, and fort'night fourteen nights. They were in excellent company, for the ancient Greeks, Babylonians, Persians and Jews all began the day at sunset — 'the evening and the morning were the first day...'

This makes perfect sense when you consider how important the moon was as a natural calendar. The sun's path is difficult to measure, and seems relatively unchanging to an uneducated eye, whereas the moon goes through obvious phases that anyone can understand. A celtic man could say to his neighbour 'we will trade with you on the next full moon', 'or my daughter will marry your son in two full moons time', and both would know when to meet. The regular phases of the moon meant that there was plenty of opportunity to prepare the goods, or the feast, or the bride and groom for the great event.

But the moon is a troublesome regulator. It's passage of 28 and a half day each lunar month means that each year will be different from the next, and it will go drastically out of synchronisation with the seasons. If you persisted with a moon calendar after 16 years the moon calendar would be showing summer when it would be the winter! Although cultures tried to get around this by regularly inserting extra days, it was clear that you

could never solely regulate your crop planting by the moon.

The sun was the next obvious 'clock', and the importance of the sun still dominates our calendar, hence 'Sun day' or the 'Day of the Sun', but it's passage is difficult to measure accurately. There are four crucial guideposts: the longest day, the shortest day, and the two equinoxes, where day and night are equal.

However, to measure the difference of one day to the next is only a measurement of a minute or so, which was for a long time far beyond the capacities of sundials or water clocks. For instance to get a measurement of the equinox day, from the previous day, or the day after, you need to be able to detect a thirty second difference. But there is plenty of evidence that such was the importance of measuring the solar year that many cultures went to enormous efforts to do this, and got surprisingly accurate results.

Stonehenge sits on the edge of the Salisbury Plain in England, and no one is quite sure what the main purpose of it was. Perhaps a sacred meeting place, or healing centre, but the monument does demonstrates just how far so-called primitive cultures were prepared to go to get an accurate and sacred clock. The midwinter

(not midsummer as often believed) sun still sets more or less over the Heel Stone, some three thousand years after the stone was first manouevered in place. When you consider that cloudy days can be the norm in an English winter (or summer for that matter), then you can appreciate the work and faith involved in establishing a stone clock of such vast size.

### **Seconds, Minutes, Days, Weeks, Months**

The Eygptians first developed the 24 equal hour day, though it is not clear why they had need of so refined a measurement. The sixty minutes and sixty seconds of the hour and minute may be a lingering reminder of Babylonian influence, to whom '60' was a magic number, plus it had the convenience of being divisible by many other numbers.

The week dates back to the Babylonians, who originally kept a seven day week, each named after the five known planets, plus the sun and moon. The Jews had a seven day week, and the Biblical declaration of how the world was made in six days, and that God rested on the seventh, has set our week permanently on seven days.

The Romans originally had a ten month year, but Julius Caesar re-organised the year into twelve

months, one of which he modestly named after himself, Julius or July. Most of our months are now named after Roman events, personalities and gods, though our days are largely nordic or Saxon in description.

In any event, the titles of both the days and the months are thoroughly pagan in origin, which, when you consider that the Christian church had virtual control of the calendar for 2000 years, seems something of a public relations oversight on their part.

### **Middle Ages, Feasting and Feast Days**

The Middle Ages has always been presented as a grim time for the average human being. In Thomas Hobbes famous quotation the life of the medieval peasant was 'short, hard, nasty and brutish'.

Yet when you consider the medieval calendar year in detail, it is quite astonishing how much time was given over to Holy Days, Feast Days, and all sorts of celebratory occasions. For example, Christmas was a twelve day period of jollification, running from the late December right through to Twelfth Night, one of the major festival days.

Easter is another striking example, for it involved a continuous drama of spiritual days and fast days interrupted by feasting and mer-

rymaking, that ran for a staggering 100 day cycle. After Shrovetide and Shrove Tuesday on the 27 February (Pancake Day, cock-fighting day) came Lent, but it's forty days of observance was broken by Lady Day and Mothering Sunday, and April Fool's Day, where the Lord of Misrule reigned over a wild festival day.

The holy Palm Sunday was also a celebration known as Fig Sunday or Flowering Sunday, Easter had egg-rolling amidst the serious stuff, Good Friday had hot cross buns (made right through Lent) and Easter Monday was also considered Heaving Day (pranks were played on passers-by), followed by Hock Tuesday or Binding Day (licensed kidnapping for fun), with more jollity on St George's Day and May Day. The Easter cycle finally draws to a close after Ascension Day (26 May) marked with religious services and special foods, and Trinity Sunday in early June.

Clearly the passion the peasants felt for the Holy Church was equalled by the passion they had for the old ways. Dancing, feasting, pleasure were as important as prayer, fasting and penance, and when you look at the calendar of the Middle Ages it is hard to decide whether the Christian calendar manipulated the pagan calendar or vice versa.

## **Civil Calendars**

With the decline of the Christian church, and the emergence of independent nations, the politics of calendar construction effectively passed into the hands of the state. A whole new set of days became important: independence days, union days, days of civil celebration, that occupy a space both political and spiritual.

America has Thanksgiving Day and Independence Day as celebration of a country's birth, France has Bastille Day but Britain has no obvious equivalent, unless it is Armistice Day. New Zealand once had Dominion Day, and Empire Day, but it has no specific independence day as such, but uses both Waitangi Day and Anzac Day as a kind of nationhood statement.

Invariably dictators like to take control of calendars and stamp their own mark. The former leader of Turkmenistan re-named two months of the year, one after himself, and the other after his mother! Saddam Hussein was an absolute dictator, so he had a Saddam Hussein Day; well why not?

Other organisations were not slow to see the significance of establishing a presence on the calendar. Unions around the world have been particularly successful here, with Labour Day or May Day

widely acknowledged in many parts of the world.

Some influential world bodies have attempted to have a day that everyone in the world can celebrate, such as the United Nations Day, but this has not been popular. Hiroshima Day is another of the days which attempts a world-wide significance.

### **The Consumer Calendar**

The process of manipulating calendars continues into the 21st century. The Christian calendar of feast and saints, which had survived for 1500 years in its basic form, has become something of a victim of the new consumer calendar.

In New Zealand large retail stores and malls, supported by the even larger multi-national companies, are continually developing a consumer calendar, so that the habit of purchasing does not get forgotten. Many old traditional days have been foisted with commercial clutter and embellished with obsessive advertising.

After Christmas, which is largely a frenzied shopping festival, and New Years Day Sales, there is Valentines Day, once strictly for lovers, but now broadened to include husband and wifely love, where the advertisements exhort you to show your love with tokens of

flowers and cards. St Patricks Day in March is a 'big' Irish festival whether you are Irish or not, and people drink green beer and other absurdities. Easter is large on chocolate and hot cross buns basically, and it is followed by commercial inventions and blandishments of Mothers Day, Fathers Day, Secretary's Day etc. All Saints Day has been overtaken by Halloween on one side and Guy Fawkes Day on the other. Few months do not have at least one blatantly consumer day, and no doubt those empty months will soon be occupied.

Perhaps it is only a matter of time before vast multi-national companies, larger in wealth than many countries, may also want a presence on the calendar. For example could we soon be celebrating a Coca-Cola Day or a Toyota Day? Before you throw up your hands in horror, would this be any stranger than Valentines Day or Guy Fawkes Day? Oddly enough, this busy consumer calendar bears a striking resemblance to the equally pre-occupied medieval calendar. It seems that the modern technological human needs as much of a justification for a knees-up as the poor peasant did.

It could be argued that the success of Christmas and Easter as 'consumption' festivals have kept them fresh in people's minds, and

maintained their importance. For instance the union movement has always made it an issue that workers who work on days such as Christmas Day and Good Friday should get extra pay as a consequence. These days are in some senses 'sacred', and we feel suitably sorry for people who have to work on Christmas Day.

When Pope Gregory advised his missionaries to assimilate the pagan festivals into the Christian year, he would never have imagined that the pagans would be one day helping out the Christians. In our modern celebration of Christmas, both pagan and Christian elements seem oddly inseparable from each other, and so preserved the millenium-old synchronistic link between food, spirituality and the calendar.

### **Summary**

We started with sowing and reaping, and the people who could predict the seasons were amply rewarded with food and alms. These priests grew powerful, and their calendar became a spiritual guide rather than an agricultural one. Feast and fast days emerge from natural food shortages and food excesses at certain times of the year, but once the threat of starvation receded with the agricultural and industrial revolutions, the priests

role declined and the state began to control the calendar.

It then became a political calendar, a statement of empire and nation building. Dominion Day, Empire Day, Independence Day, but with the decline of empires has seen the rise of an unofficial consumer calendar, driven by modern businesses and advertising.

Technological improvements in our lives have actually begun to make calendars curiously unimportant. Seasonal food can be purchased any time of the year, air-conditioning and central heating have made the extremes of summer and winter negligible. The farmer who complains of drought or floods seems odd to city dwellers, who are essentially unaffected — the food will come from another part of the world.

Of course there are many different calendars apart from the Gregorian calendar. Different cultures have evolved in differing ways, so there is a Hebrew calendar, an Islamic calendar, an Eastern Orthodox calendar, a Hindu calendar, and many more besides. Each has its own quirks and resonances.

Who knows what new calendar ideas will be suggested in the future? Decimal calendars, based on a ten day week, or to reduce the months to numbers rather than names. July would be the

‘seventh month’. In this logical age wouldn’t it be more sensible to have 100 seconds to a minute? And a 100 minutes to the hour? All these suggestions have been made, but not yet enacted.

Our current calendar is a rich muddle of ideas, customs and quirks, and it is an extraordinary cultural treasure. I hope this little booklet reveals not only how pervasive is both the Christian calendar in our lives, but also the pagan festivals, and the still evolving consumer calendar. Humans have the desire to celebrate the good times, and to pray against the bad, and the evidence of that is still written in the year of days.

## **BC & AD**

BC means before Christ. AD means Anno Domini, or 'in the year of Our Lord', or the year after the birth of Jesus (the nativity). This peculiar system of dating was introduced by the monk Dionysius Exiguus, who lived in the first half of the 6th century.

## **A Note on Structure and Sources**

This booklet is based around a traditional English year with New Zealand additions. The booklet is intended to be entertaining, not comprehensive. Most of the customs and rituals described are English orientated, but there is an enormous wealth of different folk customs and different Christian traditions across Europe. Some of the more significant have been referred to in the text, however the bulk of Eastern Orthodox religious customs have not been mentioned here, that’s another whole book in itself.

There is also often widespread disagreement over where some customs originated, and even what they mean. There is constant change in the calendar: new customs are being formed, like Patriot Day in America to remember the September 11 twin towers tragedy, and old customs revived, such as St George’s Day in England.

See the bibliography for some of the book sources used, but the internet has become a very powerful research tool indeed. Every entry was checked on the internet sites such as Wikipedia, but there is considerable variance of opinion and scholarship.

# January

*This was the month that the Romans dedicated to Janus, the two faced god, who could look back to the previous year and forward to the coming year. The more pragmatic Dutch called it Lauwmaand or frost-month, and the Saxons must have had a great horror of the time for they called it Wulf-monath or wolf month. The French Republican calendar accurately referred to Nivose or snow month.*

## 1 New Years Day

This day has been on the move for nearly two thousand years. The Romans began their year in March, hence the 7th month from March is September, the eight month is October, the ninth month is November etc. For a long time the Romans never bothered with a calendar for the months of January or February, because (in their opinion) nothing of agricultural importance happened then. This curious calendar gap was plugged by Julius Caesar who added two more months. Janus is the god of gates, doors and beginnings, so January had two faces, one looking back

and the other looking forward.

As the Roman empire declined, and as the Christian empire grew in influence, then New Years Day began to reflect a Christian orientation, being at various times, dated from Christmas Day, Lady Day (25 March), and Easter.

With the introduction of the Gregorian Year by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582, to replace the Julian Year, then some order was established, and the 1 January was decided upon as New Years Day by most catholic countries. However the Protestant countries of Scotland and England were reluctant to accept this catholic *fait accompli* and changed slowly, Scotland adopted the new calendar or 'style' in 1600, but England not until 1752.

It was customary to give gifts on the turning of the year, by both the Romans and Greeks, and even in England into the Middle Ages. But this gift-giving has now been transferred to Christmas Day or Boxing Day.

All over the world there are New Years Eve and Day celebrations involving fireworks, 'polar bear' plunges into icy seas, countdowns, music and often a public holiday. Many countries have specific cultural events, for example in Greece, families and relatives switch off the lights at midnight, then celebrate by cutting the 'vassilopita' (Basil's



pie) which usually contains one coin or equivalent, whoever wins expects luck for the whole year. After the pie, a traditional game of cards called 'triantaena' (31) follows, similar to black jack.

### 3-8 Perihelion

In early January the earth is closest to the sun (ie peri = near, helion = sun), which is about two weeks after the summer solstice, which is the longest day. I know this doesn't make any sense but that's not my fault. In 1300 AD the two events were virtually on the same day, and by 6000 AD the perihelion will fall on the March equinox.

### 5 Twelfth Night or Epiphany

Twelfth Night is the eve of the Twelfth Day after Christmas, or the **Feast of Epiphany**. Formely this was a time of great revels, probably related to the Roman festival of **Saturnalia** that was held in the same season. By the Julian calendar reckoning, the Twelfth Day is the Old Christmas Day.

The epiphany 'to manifest or to show' is the moment of Christ's manifestation to the Wise Men of the East, or the Magi. This was probably a further attempt by the Christian church to control the somewhat inappropriate revelries

that were associated with this time of the year. It was the custom to hide a bean in a cake on Twelfth Night, and whoever found it became the bean-king for the period of the festival. Usually the 'king' was allowed liberties not normally permitted on any other day. This is probably the origin of the old expressions of a 'bean-feast' or a 'beano'.

The French make a special cake for the occasion called a *Galette des Rois*, as do the Spanish and Mexicans called *Rosca de Reyes* 'Three Kings Cake'. This cake is usually constructed in a ring with a hidden porcelain or plastic doll inside, representing the baby Jesus. Whoever gets the baby gets good luck, and has to host the party next year.

The Sunday closest to the Epiphany was known as **Plough Sunday**, because it marked the beginning of the ploughing season. The plough would be blessed in the church, and boys with blackened faces, decorated with ribbons, wearing masks and cowhides went from house to house, cracking whips and singing and dancing. Clearly vestigial pagan rites, now circumscribed by the church, that had once been intended to drive away evil spirits.

There seems to be an unusually complex series of events that has

eliminated Twelfth Night from the party calendar. That the shortest days of the year always had some sort of pagan revelry attached to it, is not surprising. Such celebrations would date back to pre-history, when people desired to bring some jollity to the long winter months.

That the church did not agree with these celebrations, is also hardly surprising, and the original Roman Saturnalia was overlain arbitrarily by Christ's birth. Various stories became attached to the birth, including the Wise Men, in an attempt to occupy the period with sacred rather than profane rites.

Twelfth Night must still have been important in Shakespeare's time, for his play was specifically written for acting at the Twelfth Night festivities. But it would seem that the celebrations of Christmas Day, the visiting on Boxing Day and the revelry of New Years Eve have by now exhausted the population, and largely eliminated the need for *another* party on the Twelfth Night. Although surely, it will not be long before someone gets the notion again.

Epiphany is still an important festival in Catholic countries such as Spain, Mexico, France and the Phillipines, and in Eastern Orthodox countries like Greece and Russia, where it is called Theophany.

## **6 Nollaig Bheag or Little Christmas or Women's Christmas**

An unusual Irish celebration of Epiphany, still strong in Cork and Kerry, where the men take on the household duties for the day and the women go out to celebrate. It's only for a day chaps, bear up.

## **25 Burns Night**

The birthday of Robert 'Robbie' Burns (1759-1796) has become a sort of national day for Scotsmen around the world, celebrated with more gusto than St Andrews Day.

Burns was a handsome devil, and had a heroic manner with both words and women. Haggis is eaten, whisky drunk, bagpipes played, the famous haggis poem recited 'Great Chieftain o' the puddin-race!', and of course 'Auld Lang Syne' is wailed, warbled and wept into the empty whiskey glasses.

Burns 'song' was actually a traditional poem, dating back at least to 1568. One version from 1711 begins 'Should auld acquaintance be forgot...' Burns rewrote some of the words in 1790, and the tune resembles an old Scottish country dance.

This day is also **St Paul's Day**, a day of little real interest (aside

from the fact it commemorates the most remarkable proselytiser and greatest marketing genius who ever lived) except that according to folklore it was possible to predict the weather for the coming year. If the sun shone on the day, it would be a good year; if rain or snow, then indifferent; if mist, then there would be a shortage of food during because the weather would destroy the crops; if thunder or wind, then many people would die.

## **26 Australia Day**

This commemorates the landing of the British Fleet at Sydney Cove in 1788. Formerly known as Anniversary Day or Foundation Day.

# February

*For the Romans February meant sacrifices and purification, februo 'I purify from sacrifice'. The Anglo-Saxons called this month sprout kale from the sprouting of the cabbage or kale.*

## 2 Candlemas Day

As is suggested by its name, candles were blessed on this day, on the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin. This is a clear Christian attempt to snuff out the earlier Roman ceremony to **Ceres**, or Mother Earth, the protectress of agriculture, where torches were carried to encourage the fruitfulness of the earth. In Scotland Candlemas is one of the traditional quarter days and in England it was a day when agricultural workers would be hired at the fair. An old English rural poem tried to predict the weather:

*If Candlemas be fair and bright*

*Come winter, have another flight*

*If Candlemas bring clouds and rain*

*Go winter, and come not again*

Of course unsettled days brought rain which usually melted the snow,

and clear settled weather meant harsh frosts and ice. Much of this is just wishful peasant thinking for an early spring.

February 2 is also the traditional day that hibernating animals woke up to see if it was still winter, and Americans call this **Groundhog Day** for that reason. If the animal sees its shadow, then it's back to bed for another six weeks.

Since spring does not really start on today's Candlemas Day, some scholars suspect a collision between two calendar systems. The earlier Julian calendar had drifted and placed the spring equinox on 16 March (six weeks after 6 February) but the later Gregorian calendar has accurately shifted the date backwards.

Feast days occur so often in the Christian calendar that it is worth pointing out that 'feast', like 'fete' and 'fiesta', are derived from the latin 'festus' meaning holiday. It was a important occasion, and did not exclusively mean a banquet till much later.

## 6 Waitangi Day

An important but controversial day in New Zealand, celebrating the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840. It originated very late, perhaps indicating some of the problems that would bedevil it. It was originally declared a day of national thanksgiving in 1960, and formally a public holiday in 1973. Under the Norman Kirk Labour Government of 1974, Waitangi Days name was changed to New Zealand Day. The subsequent National government under the leadership of Robert Muldoon, then changed it back to Waitangi Day again, in spite of having supported the name change three years earlier. The reason for the alternating title was because race issues made it a natural focus for public expression of Maori grievances.

Waitangi Day, the 1970's politicians stressed, was not to be 'Monday-ised', a nasty expression, which essentially means that if the day falls on a weekend then there is no automatic public holiday, a fate Waitangi Day shares with Anzac Day. It was considered that both these days were too important to turn them into just an excuse for a holiday, a curious attitude, when you consider that both Christ's birthday, and his death day, were happily 'trivialised' into public holidays.

## 14 Valentines Day

The Roman festival of **Lupercalia** was a peculiar spring and fertility festival held about the 14 February. It was held in honour of Lupa the she-wolf, who suckled the infant Romulus and Remus.

This thoroughly animalistic festival included whippings, by which girls and young women would line up to receive lashes to ensure fertility and ease the pains of child-birth. The giving of love tokens seems to have been an afterthought.

What happened next is not precisely clear, but there seems to have an association with the mating season of birds, all of which proves that people will do anything for a decent shindig. Both Shakespeare and Chaucer refer to the Valentines tradition in the avian sense, *ie* the start of bird mating.

St Valentine was a bishop of Rome who supported persecuted Christians until he was clubbed to death for his various kindnesses, close to the fertility festival of Lupercalia.

His day is the 14th February, as is another Valentine, the bishop of Terni, who was also martyred a few years later. Either the church got confused between the two Valentines, or else they were of necessity being economical with the days given to martyrs, because of the

too greater supply of martyrs and too little supply of days.

None of this has anything to do with the modern tradition of young lovers, except for the Roman notion that spring is supposed to be in the air, which in the case of southern hemisphere countries like New Zealand, is irrelevant since spring departed some six months previously. Actually, in England, spring is most definitely *not* in the air in mid-February, as any hot-blooded English man or woman can tell you.

Paper and sentimental valentines were popular with the Victorians and by the 1840's the 'tradition' of anonymous valentines was firmly established. The concentrated effect of 100 years of marketing has left us with a day that is bereft of its original murky meaning (if it ever actually had one in the first place), costs us considerable sums of money, and isn't even a public holiday. Ditto mothers day, fathers day etc — we are born, we consume, we die.

## 24 Shrovetide

This period is three or four days before Lent, a moveable feast, in that its position depends on Lent, which itself depends on Easter. Generally it is a time for high merry-making and carnival

before the fasting season of Lent. Shrovetide originally meant 'to shrive' or confess.

It was the traditional season of cock-fighting, and English children went 'lent-crocking', demanding gifts of meat and whimsically hurling broken crockery at the doors of those who refused them. In Cornwall small boys celebrated **Nick-anan Night**, or Shrove Monday, by hiding gates and running off with portable property, or on the next day, **Sharp Tuesday**, where they had the charming habit of throwing stones at people's doors.

Cornish folk also sometimes went 'trigging' or gathering shellfish, and a 'Jack o'Lent' straw figure was paraded through villages and burnt. Thursdays in Shrovetide week might be called **Carnival Thursday** or **Mad Thursday**, which gives some indication of the licence that was allowed.

All this mischief and technically unpunishable behaviour has echoes in the ancient idea of the **Lord of Misrule**, when adults were allowed to be naughty. Throughout Europe this short period before Lent was celebrated as let-your-hair-down time and masquerades, practical jokes, ridicule and tricks were common, and frequently employed as a back-handed way of settling old scores. Often violent games were played, with styles of

football with few rules and much head-breaking, some dating back to the 12th century.

‘Every Saturday during the winter months I played football for the village team. We ex-soldiers reintroduced the game at Islip after a lapse of some eighty years. The village nonagenarian complained that football was not so manly now as in his boyhood. He pointed across the fields to a couple of aged willow trees: ‘Them used to be our home goals’ he said. ‘T’other pair stood half a mile upstream. Constable stopped our play in the end. Three men were killed in the last game — one kicked to death, t’other two drowned each other in a scrimmage. H’er was a grand game’. *Goodbye To All That* Robert Graves.

Some other names for the days were Egg Saturday, Quinquagesima Sunday, **Collop Monday** and Shrove Tuesday. ‘Collop’ was used in the 14th century to describe a meal of an egg fried on bacon. However other sources suggest a collop was any sort of sliced of meat, and since pancakes were eaten on Tuesday, the whole festival was a literal clearing of the cupboard. However this sudden feasting may simply reflect the necessities of the time, since by the end of February most stored food from last year would be eaten, or going off, and so should be eaten.

## 27 Shrove Tuesday

Universally known in England as **Pancake Day**, but in some parts also as **Guttit Day** or **Goodish Day** because of the good things to be eaten. In Scotland it is **Fasten’s E’en** or the Eve of the Feast, or **Bannock Tuesday**, Bannock Day or even Brose and Bannock Day. The Scottish ‘bannock’ is a flat oatmeal or pease meal cake baked on a griddle, sometimes sweet with currants. It’s a type of damper. ‘Brose’ is made by pouring boiling milk onto oatmeal and adding seasoning of butter and salt, which seems to be a quick version of porridge. The addition of whisky might have been the main point.

In Louisiana this day is called **Mardis Gras**, in French literally ‘fat Tuesday’, implying a feast. The famous **Carnival** of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil is essentially a pre-lenten bash. The word ‘carnival’ seems to derive from the Latin ‘carne levare’ or ‘taking away of flesh’.

Poor people dress in fantastic glittering costumes, often imitating royalty in an echo of the ‘Lord of Misrule’, and so gain status for a few days before Lent, the period of repentance that lasts till Easter.

Why pancakes? The Roman **Fornacalia** or Feast of the Ovens fell also in February, and small wheaten cakes were eaten then. So

once again this may be a Roman celebration adopted by Christianity for its own purposes. At this rather lean time of the year, some flour and fat were probably all easily procurable, so pancakes could be made.

The Olney pancake race is said to date back to 1445, and ends with a blessing of the frying pans. But these festivities abruptly end with the start of Lent and Ash Wednesday.

Games were popular on Shrove Tuesday, probably because they would be frowned on during Lent. In Leicester and Yorkshire it was called **Shuttlecock Day** because the game of battledore was traditionally played on the streets. Cockfighting was also particularly popular on Shrove Tuesday.

‘Cock’ words or expressions are very common in the English language, and have nothing to do with the sexual organ, but reflect the enormous popularity of what was once a royal entertainment. Usually the words denote assertiveness or swaggering: cock of the walk, cock-a-hoop, cock-sure, and to cock your hat.

## 28 Lent

Lent begins approximately at this time, approximately 40 days before Easter. It is the preparation of the believer through prayer and penitence for the death and resurrection of Jesus. As this is a fasting period it became known as *lencten-faesten* (long fast) hence ‘lent’. Thirty-six days was the original fasting period until the 7th century when it was lengthened to 40 days to match Jesus’s time in the wilderness.

The rural concern behind the Christian festival of Lent is that it was for many people at this time of year a period of food shortages. Food stored up from last year to last through winter was now mostly eaten, and the early spring crops had not yet arrived. Eggs were one of the few reliable sources of protein for peasants at that time of year (see Easter note). Since fasting was almost an occupational hazard at that time of the year, the church’s calendar of abstinence made an excellent rationale for it.

### **Ash Wednesday**

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, derived from the Catholic



tradition of sprinkling on the heads of penitents the consecrated ashes of palms remaining from last years Palm Sunday.

Sometimes nicknamed **Cussing Day**, because church sermons reminded sinners of God's anger.

In Yorkshire **Kissing Day** occurs two days later and is believed to be a corruption of Cussing Day, or perhaps the lovers just made up?

## **29 Leap Year**

The earth takes about 365 and a quarter days to go around the sun, so every fourth year the quarter days are added up and combined into an extra day.

In what is certainly a 19th century 'tradition', some cultures believe a girl can propose to a man only on this day, and receive a silk gown if they are thwarted. Whilst others believe she can propose throughout the year, making the entire year hazardous for unmarried men.

This day is sometimes called (ironically I believe) **Bachelors Day**.

# March

*The name derives from Mars, the Roman God of war, and the Anglo-Saxons called it both hreth-monath rough month, hlyd-monath boisterous month, or lencten monath, lengthen month, because the days noticeably lengthen. Lencten is the Old English word for spring, hence 'lent'.*

*The French revolutionary calendar called it Ventose or windy month, 20 February-20 March.*

## 1 St David's Day

The patron saint of the Welsh was called 'Dewi Sant', an abbot of the sixth century in Dyfed who died in 588. Celebrated by the Welsh world-wide as their national day, wearing leeks and daffodils, marches and poetry recitals.

## Ramadan

The ninth month of the Muslim year, during which no food or drink may be taken between sunrise and sunset.

## 10 Commonwealth Day

This was formerly Empire Day (24 May) and held on the second Monday in March. Now largely ignored, except in Gibraltar where it is a public holiday.

## 15 The Ides of March

The Romans divided each month into three parts: kalends, nones and ides, originally based on the phases of the moon.

Kalends is the first day of any month and is the derivation of our word calendar. **Nones** mean ninth and so start on the 9th day of the month. In the ancient Roman calendar **Ides** fall on the 15 March, May, July and October, and the 13 of all other months. The Romans had a peculiar dating system, for example March 11 would be called the fifth of Ides, or five days *before* Ides.

The most famous ide is the reference to Julius Caesar in Shakespeare's play, when a soothsayer calls out to him 'beware the ides of March.' Caesar refuses to be impressed and on the 15 day of March walks to the Colosseum and sees the soothsayer in the crowd, and reproves him 'The ides have come', 'Aye Caesar, but have not gone' replied the soothsayer. Caesar was murdered by Brutus and Cassius a few hours later.

## 17 St Patricks Day

St Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland, an historical figure who, distressingly for the Irish, turns out to be born from an English land-owning family.

Patrick was captured at sixteen by pirates, and made to work as a herdsman in Ireland before escaping. Undaunted by these travails, he studied for the priesthood and returned to Ireland in 431 and managed in ten years what previous missionaries had been unable to do in a hundred — Christianise Ireland. The shamrock is worn to commemorate the Trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

St Patricks Day is a public holiday in Ireland (also Newfoundland and Montserrat) celebrating everything Irish in lavish festivals lasting as long as five days. The largest St Patricks Day parade in the world is held in New York, which is also the world's oldest civilian parade, dating from 1737.

## 21 Vernal or Spring Equinox

When day and night are approximately equal length it is called an 'equilux', whereas an 'equinox' measures the exact moment of time where the sun can be observed from the equator to be exactly overhead. Usually about

the 20/21 March or the 22/23 September in the southern hemisphere. The equinox is traditionally associated with turbulent weather — cold winter winds mixing with the new summer warm winds — however there's little statistical evidence to back this up.

Easter is set by this day: the first full moon (the Jewish Paschal moon) on or after the spring equinox. The earliest date for Easter is the 21 March, the latest date the 25th April.

## 25 Lady Day

This commemorates the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary. Also known as the **Feast of the Annunciation**, or **St Mary's Day** in Lent. The Annunciation (or announcement) was the day that Mary was told by the angel Gabriel that she would be the mother of Jesus. Curiously, Jesus's conception occurs on the same day as his crucifixion, a deliberate link which reflects ancient and medieval concepts of salvation. Although there are also pagan echoes of rebirth here.

Until 1752 Lady Day was the legal beginning of the year and an important day in agricultural Britain for tenant farmers transferring onto new lands. See Thomas Hardy and his novel *Far From the Madding Crowd*.

## **Mothering Sunday**

Mothering Sunday is traditionally celebrated on the fourth Sunday in Lent, also known as **Laetare Sunday** or **Refreshment Sunday** or **Simmel Sunday** or **Rose Sunday**.

This is supposed to be the day when Christians remember the ‘mother church’ and to return to the church they were baptised in. However, it became something of a family day when working children were allowed the day off to return to their families.

In the north of England, particularly Lancashire, the day was known as **Braget Sunday** (or braggot, braggat, bracket, bragwort), after a spiced drink made of honey and ale fermented together. It’s not altogether clear why it was customary to drink braget at this time, though the word is Celtic in origin and the custom is probably old: ‘Her mouth was sweet as braget’ from the *Millers Tale* by Chaucer.

**Mothering Sunday** dates back at least to the sixteenth century. One suggestion is that girls in service were given the day off on Mothering Sunday to visit their families, and usually baked a special treat or cake to show off their new skills. Whether the occasion has an underlying pagan element is not clear, however the Christian lesson of the

day is the feeding of the five-thousand, which certainly looks like an additional element to a much older community custom.

Certain traditions relate to Mothering Sunday, including the giving of small presents by children to their mothers and the eating of simnel cake. The original simnels were small biscuit-cakes which date back as least as far as 1042, but by the sixteenth century the cakes had evolved into today’s rich fruit cake. The main point of simnel cake might be the ornamentation, decorated with scallop shapes or 11 round balls of marzipan to represent the apostles (Judas being left out). Flowers could also be added.

The Bury simnel is a ‘flat spiced cake, thickest in the centre and containing currants, candied peel and almonds’, and the Shrewsbury simnel is a ‘rich dark cake with a thick, hard crown of almond paste and garnishing of candied fruits and marzipan flowers’.

These cakes might also be eaten on Christmas Day and other significant Christian days. Simnel derives from ‘simila’ or ‘fine flour’, hence a special cake.



# April

*The word April comes from the latin aperire to open, suggesting the time that blossoms bloom.*

## 1 April Fools Day

Also known as All Fools' Day, April Noddy Day, **Gowkie Day**, etc. An April Fool is someone who has been tricked on the first day of April, though only up to mid-day. Why this day is considered a day for pranks is elusive, though there are similar traditions in both France ('un poisson d'avril' literally 'April fish'), in Scotland (gowk, cuckoo) and in India, the Holi festival on the 31 March.

Suggestions have been made to explain April Fools Day on the basis that it is a reminder of the mockery and insults given to Christ at the trial and on the Cross.

There is also the suggestion that it is a relic of the Cerealia, an old Roman festival held at the beginning of April. Prosperina was stolen by Pluto into the underworld and despite her mother Cere's frantic search all she heard was an echo of her daughter's screams, so her search was a 'fools errand'.

The first possible mention in literature of April Fools Day was in Chaucers *Canterbury Tales* of 1392. In 1686 John Aubrey mentioned a 'Fooles holy day'.

Since the 25 March was the traditional end of the year (it used to be New Years Day), then the festivities would culminate seven or eight days later, usually in a welter of tricks and trick-playing.

The role of a 'fool', a sort of droll foil who often turns out to be smarter than his master, is a very ancient one, and can be found in medieval mystery plays and in Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

In many medieval festivals a 'king' was elected for the period, who was allowed certain liberties in that time, including the playing of tricks. In *Twelfth Night* a Bean King was elected on a similar principle. It seems likely that April Fools Day was a sort of 'renewal festival', celebrating the end of winter and the start of spring with licenced mischief.

## Passion Sunday

This is the fifth Sunday in Lent, also known as **Carling Sunday** in Scotland, or **Care Sunday**, and it was the traditional time in that region to celebrate mothers. It marked the start of Care Week, a period of great religious anxiety before the crucifixion of Christ. Care-cakes were a type of highly flavoured pancakes, and carlings are a brown dried pulse (like chick peas) soaked in water, made into cakes, fried in butter and served hot with bacon, brown sugar and a dash of rum. This tempting repast also occurs in some part of the north of England on Passion Sunday.

The old rhyme about peas pudding is probably a reference to this ‘careful’ week, where the carlings or peas pedding might be eaten by devout believers throughout Care Week as part of their religious observances.

*Pease pudding hot, pease pudding cold*

*Pease pudding in the pot, nine days old.*

## Passover

Passover is the important Jewish festival to commemorate the deliverance of the Israelites from the angel of death, who passed over them and spared all who did as Moses commanded. The Israel-

ites then fled from slavery out of Egypt.

Originally the Passover combined elements of a springtime lambing season festival, with the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, and Jews still eat ‘matzo’, a flat unleavened bread, which is the symbol of this holiday.

## 8 Palm Sunday

The first Sunday before Easter (the sixth Sunday in Lent), commemorating Jesus triumphant entry into Jerusalem where his path was strewn with palms. This is also the start of Holy Week, where the fourth day is called Spy Wednesday, the fifth Maunday Thursday, the sixth Good Friday and the last Holy Saturday or Great Sabbath, a indication that Saturday was always considered the most sacred day for a long time by Christians, and is still considered so by Jews.

In Wales Palm Sunday was called **Flowering Sunday**, where the custom is to spread flowers on family graves. An older English name for the day was **Fig Sunday**, where figs and fig-pudding were eaten at the midday meal. The ‘great blue fig’ was cultivated in England from Henry the Eighth’s time (there were fig orchards near Worthing), but the fruit needs a warm summer to ripen them.

Apparently in Wiltshire and Hertfordshire it was once the ‘cheerful custom’ to gather on a hill and eat figs and toast each others health in cider or ale. Another traditional name was **Spanish Sunday**, where children would place Spanish liquorice in a bottle, and then making a special journey to a local holy well and adding water, and drinking the result.

‘This odd little ceremony has no obvious connection with the Christian Palm Sunday, and variant of the rite suggests that it may be a fragmentary relic of ancient well-worship’.

## 12 Maundy Thursday

This day has a plethora of names: **Holy Thursday, Covenant Thursday, Great and Holy Thursday, Sheer Thursday** (where ‘sheer’ meant ‘bright’) and **Thursday of Mysteries**. It became the custom on this day for popes, prelates, sovereigns and priests to show their humbleness before God to wash the feet of poor people, just as Jesus had washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper.

At some stage this menial task became disagreeable to the sovereigns, and instead of actually washing poor peoples feet, or lesser

bishops feet, the English King or Queen dispensed special Maundy money, which until the present time, is still specially minted for the occasion. The word ‘maund’ might have originated from ‘mendicare’ to beg, or from ‘maundisor’ a basket (it had been an earlier custom of distributing food to the poor in maunds), or from ‘mandatam’ or ‘commandment’. You pays your money and you takes your choice.

## Easter

Easter is the pinnacle of the Christian year, and represents the convergence of three distinct traditions: the pagan celebrations of spring, the Jewish celebration of the Passover, and the Christian crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A pagan festival was usually held near the vernal equinox in honour of the goddess of dawn, called Eostre by Bede (also called Eastre) perhaps from the Scandanavian ‘Ostra’. This festival had themes of fertility and celebration of the new spring, a time of promise.

The Jewish festival of the Passover, or Pesach, is also celebrated around this time, and commemorates the flight and freedom of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. It is not entirely co-incidental that



this Christian festival overlays the Jewish celebration of Passover.

‘The early Christians, many of whom were of Jewish origin, were brought up in the Hebrew tradition and regarded Easter as a new feature of the Passover festival, a commemoration of the advent of the Messiah as foretold by the prophets’.

From Pesach is derived Pasch, another name used by Europeans for Easter. The relationship between Jew and Christian was originally strong, but has become increasingly bitter. Inevitably, new religions have to find converts from existing cults, and Easter became the unresolved battleground between Jews and Christians. Over the centuries they have learned to live with each other — more or less.

The Christians adopted the approximate position of these Spring or Passover festivals, and maintain the curiously pagan link with the position of the full moon. For example, Easter Sunday occurs whenever the full moon fulls on the 21 March (or vernal equinox) or on any of the next 28 days. Thus Easter Sunday cannot be earlier than 22 March or later than the 25th April, as laid down by the Council of Nicaea in 325. The equinox is when both day and night are of approximately equal length, and there are two equinox-

es every year, spring and vernal.

The egg has always been a symbol of renewal and fertility from ancient times, and colouring of eggs, egg-rolling competitions and eating eggs at spring festivals was a widespread practice, well before Christianity. The painted bright colours on the eggs were meant to represent the sunlight of spring.

However, there may be a pragmatic agricultural reason for the significance of eggs at this time. Many villagers were reliant on eggs for important protein through the lean months of February and March, where nearly all of the meat and vegetables stored up through winter had been eaten. Many areas had a customary ban on eating eggs, or at least the eating of *all* of the eggs around the Easter period, otherwise there would be no chickens for the coming year!

The Easter bunny is the result of a mix-up between the rabbit and the hare, for the latter has always been a favourite fertility animal and hare-hunting was popular at Easter. The rabbit is still an excellent symbol of fertility, and may have become popularised as an Easter symbol in Germany in the 1500’s. It is worth pointing out that both the rabbit and the hare would have been a readily accessible food source at this time of year for rural dwellers, and in those days virtually *everyone* was a rural dweller.

### 13 Good Friday

This may be a corruption of ‘God’s Friday’, the day when Christ was crucified on the cross. Also known as **Holy Friday**, **Black Friday** and **Great Friday**.

Hot cross buns are generally made from the beginning of Lent and during the Lenten period of forty days or six weeks that follow. The expression ‘hot cross buns’ (‘one a penny, two a penny, hot cross buns’) only dates back to 1733, but the tradition seems to be very old. The cross was not necessarily a Christian monopoly and pre-Christian Roman loaves have been found with crosses on them.

Sacramental cakes at spring festivals may have been eaten by Roman and pagan cults long before Christianity. One explanation (probably fanciful) is that the buns were made in honour of Diana, the goddess of the moon and hunting, where the bun represented the earth and the ‘cross’ represented the four quarters of the moon. The Christians then imposed their own symbolism to the cross.

### 14 Easter Saturday

### 15 Easter Sunday

### 16 Easter Monday

Once also referred to as **Heaving Day** or **Lifting Day**, from the widespread practice of men trapping women in a specially decorated chair (or their arms) and demanding the payment of a kiss. On Tuesday, or Tuesday week, the women got their turn. Apparently even Edward I of England was ‘heaved’ by the ladies of the court, lucky devil.

### Hock Tuesday

The second Tuesday after Easter, once an important day in rural England for paying rents and marking the start of summer.

**Hocktide** was an important medieval festival in England, now only celebrated in Hungerford Berkshire where it is called **Tutti Day**.

Sometimes this day was known as **Binding Tuesday** from the light-hearted custom of tying passers-by up with ropes and demanding a ransom for their release. Men and women alternated days, and funds raised were donated to the parish. It is not known what happened if someone refused to pay after being tied up. Certainly, this activity is no longer common, except in certain South American countries.

## **23 St George's Day**

This day remembers St. George the patron saint of England, who depending on your source, may either be a Roman officer martyred near Lydda during the Diocletian persecution, or George of Capadocia, the bishop of Alexandria. In other words, either an Italian or a Turk. St George's Cross is a red cross on a white background, which is now part of the Union Jack.

St George is a busy patron saint for at least ten other countries celebrate him, including Bulgaria, Romania, Portugal, Greece and the province of Aragon in Spain. Cities include Moscow, Genova and Beirut. In England St George's Day used to be a major feast day, on par with Christmas, and is only now regaining its popularity. In Catalonia in Spain this is an important feast day associated with gifts between sweethearts and respected ones 'a rose for love and a book forever'.

## **25 Anzac Day**

Anzac Day is observed in Australia and New Zealand, and is a contraction of 'Australian and New Zealand Army Corps'. On this day in 1915 the Anzac troops came ashore at Gallipoli on the Turkish peninsula during the First World

War. The military campaign lasted barely four months and was an historic failure, with a great loss of life of Australian, English and New Zealand servicemen. 2701 New Zealanders died in the campaign.

For many years Anzac Day was a semi-military ritual, with large contingents of servicemen and returned servicemen, with sermons on being prepared and pep talks on keeping the army modern and combative. However by the 1960's the generations had changed, the young were no longer interested in standing by old fuddy-duddies with medals, it was 'make peace man, not war', and Anzac Day was in danger of meeting the same fate as Commonwealth Day and Armistice Day. Sometime in the late 1980's however, Anzac Day resurrected itself as a peace day, and slowly the crowds have returned to the dawn ceremonies.

In both the First and the Second World Wars, New Zealand had the largest proportion of war dead to head of population of any country. About 16,000 kiwis were killed in the First World War, and 28,000 servicemen and women in the Second. War memorials are still a feature of the New Zealand landscape, to be found everywhere throughout the towns and countryside, and sometimes these lonely sites have no settlements around them any more, adding poignancy

to the loss of men. Every locality was touched with loss, and perhaps as a consequence, war memorials never seem to get vandalised, or tagged with graffiti.

Early Anzac services were dominated by returned servicemen who largely created the sort of service we see today. Simple, somewhat non-religious, with both military and male mateship overtones. The Dawn Parade was added in 1939. The word Anzac itself was protected by an Order in Council in 1916, and cannot be used for commercial purposes, although it is used to describe a type of biscuit.

The red poppy emblem has become attached to Anzac Day although it was once a wider symbol, and the Anzac ceremony has several distinctive and memorable rituals which seem to unite young and old. The dawn parade, the last post, the game of seven-up (Australia only), reading of sayings and quoting certain poems such as 'On Flanders Field':

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

Indeed such is the modern popularity of Anzac Day that it is fast becoming New Zealand's *de facto*

national day. It is unique to two countries, for the English do not celebrate it, despite having lost more men at Gallipoli than either Australia or New Zealand.

It is disturbing to realise that Gallipoli was not the greatest loss of life by New Zealander soldiers in the First World War. On just one day at Passchendaele, 12 October 1917, 1179 New Zealand soldiers died.

## **25 St Mark's Day**

April 25th is also St Mark's Day, and was an important fair day in the west of England. Young unmarried women believed that if they left a flower at the church porch during the day and returned for it at midnight, they would see a wedding procession as they walked home, which would include the ghostly form of their future husband.

## **30 Walpurgis Night**

This is the eve of May, when the witch-world was supposed to hold high revelry overseen by their lord the Devil. Certain high places were favoured for this once a year outing, particularly the Brocken, the highest point of the Hartz Mountains in Germany. Since this mountain is especially associated with a phenomenon known

as the Spectre of the Brocken (or called by the Scottish expression ‘a Glory’) where the sun casts peoples shadows into gigantic forms on the clouds below, it can be well imagined that imaginative people would link the natural occurrence with unnatural occurrences.

In Finland Walpurgis Night or **Vappu** is a major celebration, particularly with students. In the Czech Republic bonfires usher in the spring, and in Sweden it is a *de facto* national holiday with bonfires, drinking and singing. Again students play a large part.

‘Walburga’ was incidentally an English nun who became an abbess in Germany, and for various unlikely, absurd and complicated reasons her shrine became a popular pilgrimage site.

## **Moveable Feasts**

Moveable feasts like Easter, should more accurately be called ‘moveable feast days’. These are days which have no fixed date in the Christian calendar but vary according to astronomical criteria from year to year.

Feast days do not necessarily imply great consumption, but rather celebration, or even pious observation.

# May

*The origin of the name may derive from Maia, the goddess of growth and increase. The practical Anglo-Saxons called it thrimilce because their cows could be milked three times a day.*

## 1 May Day

This day has become mainly associated with socialism and unionism in England, and communism in Russia, where the famous May Day military parades take place. Both America and New Zealand have a Labour Day, yet neither have any connection with 1 May. New Zealand Labour Day is the 25 October, whilst in America it is the first Monday of September. May Day is a public holiday in Sweden.

The month of May has been a period of celebration since Roman times, mostly around the fruits of nature. Virgil said that there was dancing and singing in May to celebrate Flora, the goddess of fruits and flowers. The celtic people divided their year twice, summer and winter, so **Beltane** on 1 May, marked the beginning of summer, when the herds were put out to pasture, and **Samhain** or

**Hallowe'en** marked the beginning of the celtic year at winter, when much of the herd was culled.

In England May Day was a time for games and sports, particularly archery and morris dancing. Morris dancing is now considered a type of fertility dance. Padstow's 'Obby 'Oss' festival is also a very old fertility festival. Cornwall also has a traditional flower boat ritual at Kingsand and Cawsand, where a model of a ship covered in flowers is launched into the sea.

For centuries, archery competition was officially encouraged on May Day by the State, as a means of readiness in times of war. There was a Lord and Lady of the May, which somehow got entangled with the legendary Robin Hood and Maid Marian, perhaps partly through association with archery, or through a similar sounding name. Indeed so great did this cult grow, that by the 16th century May Day was called **Robin Hood's Day** and Robin Hood plays became an important part of the festivities.

Dancing around the maypole, electing a May Queen, going 'a-maying' to collect fresh flowers and branches of hawthorn to decorate houses, are all vestiges of nature-worship and fertility cults. In Dorset on 'Garland Day' (another local term for May Day) it was the

custom to cast the garlands on the waves to ensure good luck in the mackerel fishing.

There is a remarkable chapter on a traditional village May Day in the autobiographical book by Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford*. May Day, at the junction of the nineteenth and twentieth century, was now mostly for the children and the use of a doll at the top of the garland poll, which was called 'the lady', may have been a reference to the Virgin Mary, which in turn was a reference to a much earlier fertility goddess.

### **Mother's Day**

The second Sunday in May, the commercial variation on Mothering Sunday, adopted in the United States and now spreading world-wide. Other days have been invented as well: Fathers Day, Secretaries Day, Dead Writers Day, Every Dog Has His Day, etc.

### **24 Empire Day**

Empire Day was held on Queen Victoria's birthday, but in 1959 it was renamed Commonwealth Day (second Monday in March). This has not saved it from virtual oblivion, a fate already marked out for Dominion Day (26 September).

### **26 Ascension Day**

Or Holy Thursday is the fortieth day after Easter, and it commemorates the ascension of Jesus into heaven.

It was also a traditional day in some country parishes to 'beat the bounds', where groups of school boys accompanied by parish officers and clergy would walk the boundaries of the parish which the boys struck with willow-wands in an apparent attempt to make the boys 'remember' the boundaries

The connection with Ascension Day is not obvious, nor why the beating of the bounds should happen in May. Country parishes were hardly large and no doubt the adults and boys knew the boundaries of their land very well. It appears on the face of it to be another vestigial nature cult, perhaps related to tribal territories, or agricultural demands. There is one suggestion that the ritual was in part to remind the boys that sexual misbehaviour with women ought to take place outside the parish.

The church formalised these agrarian rituals and called them **Rogation Days**, on the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday preceding Ascension Day. Rogation Sunday is held on the first Sunday before Ascension Day, derived from *rogare* to ask, or beseech. The ancient

Roman festival of 'Robigalia' was held on April 25th to give prayers and sacrifices to help the harvest.

## 27 **Whit Sunday or Pentecost**

Whit Sunday in Scotland, or the seventh Sunday after Easter in England. 'Whit' means white, and the day was to commemorate the descent of the Holy Ghost on the disciples of Christ after the Resurrection. It is an important day for baptisms, and the candidates wear white garments, hence the name. For families a cake with white icing might be made for tea, or white coconut macaroons, and the house decorated with the white flowers of the season.

**Whitsuntide** is the whole week following Whit Sunday. The 'tide' is Saxon in origin since the Saxons divided their day into three parts, or tides: morningtide, noontide and eveningtide. As the Christian Easter corresponds to the Jewish Passover so Whitsuntide corresponds with the Jewish festival of Weeks.

Whit Sunday is also one of the four **Ember Weeks**, of which three **Ember Days** in each week are given to fasting. Usually each Ember Week is in a different season. Traditionally in the Catholic faith, priests are ordained

on Ember Saturday, whilst Church of England ordinations occur the following day. 'Ember' is derived from an Old English word for 'revolution of time' and the traditional may date back to the Celtic custom of having festivals at three-monthly intervals.

In England during the Middle Ages, Whitsun was a traditional time to contribute towards the upkeep of church buildings. Everyone in a house with a chimney was considered well-to-do, and therefore made an offering called Whitsun Farthings or Smoke Farthings. A farthing was a quarter of a penny. Malt was brewed into a strong ale (Whitsun ale) and often sold in the church itself, where the parish girls (no doubt also strong) stood at the door to collect the contributions.

Whit Monday is a public holiday in England and Wales (as it is in over 15 other European countries), and was formerly a great time for weddings (see Philip Larkin's poem *The Whitsun Weddings*) and various festivities happened on this day. In Devon, a decorated sheep carcass is escorted through the town on Whit Monday and roasted in the open air. In St Braivels, Gloucestershire, bread and cheese are hurled from the castle walls, in a custom dating back to the 13th century. It's also a busy day (or week) for cheese rolling, which oc-



curs in numerous places in England, for example in Kent, at Ide Hill, an Edam cheese, in Stilton Cambridgeshire, a stilton cheese (of course), and double-Gloucestershire cheeses are rolled in Randwick, Gloucestershire.

## **29 Royal Oak Day**

The day remembers that Charles II hid in an oak tree to escape his pursuers in September 1651, and was later restored to the throne in 1660. He was a popular monarch after the dour days of Cromwell's Commonwealth. Formally established in 1660 the day was discontinued by 1859.

Also known as Restoration Day, Oak Apple Day, Oak Ball Day, Nettle Day, Yak Bob Day ('yak' means oak, 'bob' means apple), Bobby Ack Day, Shick Skack Day and Shit Shack Day. The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests the last usage may be the authentic form as an insult to non-conformists who did not wear an oak leaf on their clothing. People not wearing oak leaves on this day could be pinched, abused or beaten with nettles. There has been some suggestion that the rituals on Royal Oak Day were a continuation of pre-Christian nature worship, such as the Garland King in Derbyshire.

# June

*A name derived from the Roman God Juno, or a clan name juvenis.*

*The Dutch called it zomer-maand summer month, the Saxons Sere-monath dry month, and rather revealingly, Lida aerra joy time.*

*The French revolutionary calendar suggested it be called Prairial, meadow month (20 May-18 June).*

## 2 Trinity Sunday

Trinity Sunday is the first Sunday after Whit Sunday, widely observed as a feast in honour of the Trinity from the Middle Ages. Catholic and Protestant estimates of when to hold the day vary, but it generally marks the end of the Easter cycle.

Corpus Christi is held on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday in honour of the Blessed Sacrament, and it was the regular time for religious dramas and performances held by the trade guilds. Several of the original Corpus Christi plates are still in existence.

## 6 Queens Birthday

A peculiarly Australian and New Zealand public holiday, first observed in Australia in 1788. Australians celebrate it on June 3rd. The English do not have a chance to celebrate their monarch's birthday, and of course it goes without saying that this is not her actual birthday.

## 11 St Barnabas Day

Also known as Barnaby Day, which by the Old Style reckoning of the calendar was the longest day of the year, hence the saying:

*Barnaby bright, Branaby bright,*

*The longest day and the shortest night*

## 23 St Johns Eve

Although it now commemorates John the Baptists's birth, the celebrations on this day are a relic of much older celtic and agrarian customs. The lighting of bonfires was (and is) common in Ireland, with music and dancing. Men used to jump through the flames to show off their bravery, or cleanse their sins, and apparently it was helpful for girls to do the same in order to find a suitable husband.

Festivities occur on St John's Eve around the world, notably in Brazil

‘Festas Junias’, in Spain (Catalonia and Galicia), and Puerto Rico where the celebrations last a week.

In Poland it is known as ‘sobotki’ with bonfires and bonfire jumping, in the Shetland Islands it is called ‘Johnsmas Foy’, and modern day practitioners of Voodoo also celebrate this day. It is still a religious feast day in countries such as Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland and many countries in eastern Europe.

## 24 Midsummer Day

The longest day of the year, the summer solstice, though the medieval ceremonies celebrated it as the *start* of summer, with surprisingly little notice taken of it these days by English speaking countries. In Scandinavia it is a very important festival. This day is also **St John the Baptist Day** and eating of St John’s bread, which was not a bread but a sweet dried fruit, was often a part of midsummers ceremonies.

Midsummer was also a Quarter Day, so it was important in the rural calendar, and traditionally regarded as a ‘magick night’ when all kinds of goblins and fairies were abroad to cause mischief. Humans usually oblidged with bonfires and merry-making, even

if the spirits did not. Riddles were popular on this day including this famous one:

*Green is Gold.*

*Fire is Wet.*

*Future’s Told.*

*Dragon’s Met.*

The answers (supposedly): early green growth looks ‘gold’; candles were customarily floated across water to grant a wish; the plant St John’s wort (pronounced ‘wert’) was used for fortune telling; and a popular mummer play was that of St George and the dragon.

**Matariki** (‘tiny eyes’ or ‘eyes of God’) is the start of the Maori new year, which occurs when the Pleiades are observed above the horizon. In some versions it is the first new moon after the Pleiades have risen, occurring sometime in early to late June. Like many peoples around the world, Maori traditionally used the moon cycle as a guide to planting crops. Matariki is becoming more popular as a celebration in New Zealand.

# July

*Named in honour of Julius Caesar, the Old Dutch called it Hooy-maand or hay month. Until recently poets such as Wordsworth could quite happily rhyme truly, with July.*

## 4 Independence Day

An important American public holiday, commemorating the adoption of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 by the delegates of the thirteen colonies.

## 15 St Swithuns Day

The old story is that if it rains on St Swithuns (this is not a misspelling) Day it will rain for forty days. St Swithun was Bishop of Winchester and died in 862, and asked to be buried in the minsters churchyard 'so that the sweet rain of heaven might fall upon his grave'. However upon canonisation the monks removed his bones to the cathedral and God punished the monks by allowing rain to fall for 40 days, thus delaying proceedings. Bizarrely, in medieval times, it was the practice to split a saint's body up, so St Swithuns' head went

to Canterbury Cathedral, and Peterborough Abbey got an arm, etc etc.

It may well be that the St Swithuns superstition relates to well-known phenomena in the English climate, *ie* it can rain a good deal during the so-called summer months, and perhaps a deep-seated and genuine peasant fear of excessive rain in July spoiling the crops, and risking hunger and even starvation for the winter to come. The fact that other countries have similar stories may support this explanation. In Flanders there is St Godelieve (6 July), Scotland has a St Swithun Day (4 July), named after St Martin of Bullions, with a similarly damp metaphor.

## 24 Bastille Day

The French national day or independence day, commemorates the storming of the Bastille prison (mainly to gain arms and gunpowder that were thought to be held in the castle) in Paris on the 14 July 1789. This was one of the trigger events of the French Revolution, though the prison itself held only seven actual prisoners. The Marquis de Sade made great play of the fact that he was one of the prisoners 'freed', though he had in fact been transferred to an insane asylum only two days before the Bastille was stormed. Bad luck sir!

# August

*Named in the eighth year before Christ after Augustus, the notable Roman emperor who lived from 63 BC to 14 AD. The old dutch name was Oostmaand harvest mont' whilst the Saxons called it Weodmonath weed month, weed meaning vegetation in general. The term august means distinguished, and obviously emanates from the same emperor.*

## 1 Lammas Day

Lammas Day or 'Gule of August' was one of the regular quarter-days in Scotland and a half-quarter or cross-quarter day in England. Originally Lammas Day was observed as a harvest festival, and in Anglo-Saxon tradition the 1 August was a day in which the first-fruits were offered, or in Old English *hlafmaesse* the loaf mass, from which the word lammas derives. Loaves of bread made from the first corn to ripen were consecrated at the mass. This time of year was obviously the beginning of a period of plenty, and typically (as in many cultures) offerings were made to the gods of the first results of the harvest. The area of time

around Lammas Day was known as Lammastide, and it was also the feast of St Peter.

The Christian year was the essential clock and calendar of the medieval period. Quarter days were a way of dividing the year into roughly equal sections for both religious and administrative purposes. For example rents were due on the quarter days, and magistrates were chosen. A whole year was organised around these important days, and this was also a way of ensuring that people in communities with little connection with each other, could fix certain dates and times. Weddings were frequently organised on the summer quarter day as this traditional English song suggests:

*Sweet, sweet Robinette all do declare,*

*Oh, there never was a maid so fair,*

*She is summer in winter I say,*

*And she will be mine come this Lammas Day.*

There are two styles (or types) of quarter days in England, and one for Scotland. The old style is based on the Julian calendar, and the new style on the Gregorian calendar introduced in 1582, but only adopted tardily by the English in 1752. The difference was 10-11 days.

*England, old style*

- Lady Day, 6 April
- Old Midsummer Day, 6 July
- Old Michaelmas Day, 11 October
- Old Christmas Day, 6 January

*England, new style*

- Lady Day, 25 March
- Midsummer Day, 24 June
- Michaelmas Day, 29 September
- Christmas Day, 25 December

*Scotland*

- Candlemas Day, 2 February
- Whitsunday, 15 May
- Lammas Day, 1 August
- Martinmas Day, 11 November

## **6 Hiroshima Day**

Not widely observed, commemorating the detonation of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on the 6 August. Largely observed as a peace day, with tree plantings and candlelight vigils.

## **12 The Glorious Twelfth**

The official start of Red Grouse shooting in England. The ‘glorious’ refers to the pleasure of the gentlemen, not the grouse.

## **15 The Assumption**

A feast day in the Catholic Church, honouring the reception into heaven of the body of the Virgin Mary, and one of the Holy Days or ‘holidays’.

The Holy Days of Obligation were not intended to be days of rest, but rather days dedicated to church and spiritual duties and to abstain from ‘servile work’. Roman Catholics are bound to hear masses on these days, but they do vary from country to country. In England traditionally all Sundays, Christmas Day, the Epiphany (6 January), Ascension Day (40th day after Easter Sunday), Corpus Christi (Thursday after Trinity Sunday), the Assumption (15 August), and All Saints (1 November) are observed.

Many countries observe this day as a public holiday, including Lebanon, Malta, Belgium, Italy, France, Poland, Greece, Spain and Chile. The capital city of Paraguay is called Asuncion in honour of the Assumption of Mary.

## 20 **St Philibert's Day**

Nuts that ripened about this day became known in French as *noix de filbert*, and the filbert is an old-fashioned name for the hazelnut.

## 24 **Bartholomew Day**

An obscure Apostle who came to a nasty end, one version stating he was 'skinned alive'. Some scholars believe Bartholomew was also known as Nathanael, who reputedly remarked 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Apparently an arm of the martyred apostle still resides in Canterbury Cathedral. This is also the date of a famous London Fair held for over seven hundred years.

## 25 **Grotto Day**

St James Day was when children made grottos traditionally out of sea shells, and the decoration was then carried around for contributions singing this curious ditty:

*Please remember the Grotto*

*It's only once a year*

*Father's gone to sea*

*Mother's gone to bring him back*

*So please remember me.*

Whitstable in Kent has an **Oyster Day** on the 25th.

# September

*September means the seventh month from March, when that was the traditional start of the year. In Holland it was known as Herstmaand autumn month, in old Saxon Gerst-monath barley month, and once Christianity was introduced Halig-monath or holy month.*

*In the French republican calendar it was called Fructidor fruit month, 18 August to 16 September.*

## **8 Horsmonden Horse Fair & Hop Picking Sunday**

The second Sunday in September has usually been the date of the horse fair at Horsmonden in the Weald of Kent. Fairs of this nature were once common throughout England, and Horsmonden Fair was once a venue for Romany (Gypsy) music and dance.

To the local people, this was 'Hop Picking Sunday' and remembers the time when local hop and fruit harvests was done by hand rather than machines. My grandmother was one of these pickers, and as a young girl came down with her family from East London for a

'busmans holiday' in the hop fields. The hops and cherry orchards were ripped out in the seventies for housing estates.

## **11 Patriot Day**

An American memorial day to commemorate the 2977 people killed in the twin towers attack in New York in 2001.

## **14 Holy Cross Day**

Also known as the Feast of the Exhaltation of the Cross, which commemorates the discovery of the 'true cross of Christ' by St Helena, who was the mother of the Emperor Constantine. Also known as **Holy Rood Day** where 'rood' means a crucifix.

## **21 Autumnal Equinox**

Day and night are approximately equal length. The full moon nearest to this equinox is called a 'harvest moon', and the next full moon after that is called a 'hunters moon' (also known as Blood Moon and Sanguine Moon). In the northern hemisphere these two moon rises (Harvest and Hunters) come up more quickly than usual, so reducing, and almost eliminating, the usual period of darkness between sunset and moonrise. This was useful for late harvesting and for



hunters shooting migrating birds or other prey. Two full moons occurring in any one calendar month are now known as 'blue moons'.

However in the Farmers Almanac a blue moon was the third moon in a season which normally had only three full moons. In a sense it was an extra or unaccounted full moon.

The spring equinox is traditionally associated with changeable, even violent weather, but autumn in England frequently has some of the most settled weather of the year, hence 'indian summer', 'St Lukes little summer', and 'St Martins summer' (*see entries*).

## **26 Dominion Day**

Probably still on the legal calendar but not celebrated as a public holiday since 1923. Dominion Day commemorated New Zealand as a self-governing colony in 1907, and by 1959, for some unexplained reason, only the Stock Exchange held it as a public holiday.

Surprisingly, New Zealand was still technically a self-governing colony until the Statue of Westminster was passed in 1949, when New Zealand became legally and officially independent.

## **29 Michaelmas Day**

This is the festival of St Michel and All Angels, and is important because it was one of the quarter days. It was traditional to eat a goose on Michaelmas Day, perhaps because geese were plump and plentiful at that time of year. Usually tenants would present a goose to their landlord to keep in their good graces.

The master printer gave a wayzgoose for his workmen about this time, to mark the end of summer and the beginning of working by candlelight. Some believe the wayzgoose was originally celebrated on St Bartholomew's day, as he was the patron saint of book-binders, and it is a striking coincidence that the Gutenberg Bible was also completed on that date, perhaps initiating the first wayzgoose. The origin of the name is obscure.

In France, St Martins Day on 11 November was traditionally a great goose feast. Michaelmas was important for Celtic Christians, particularly for the dedication of churches.

# October

*'Octo' is the latin word for eight, when the year began in March. The Old Dutch name was Wynmaand or wine-month, an idea persued by the Republican French calendar as Vende-maire or 'time of vintage'.*

## 15 Calendar Wars

Since calendars are constructed by humans, they are fallible to error. An actual astronomical year is 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes and 46 seconds long, far too accurate for the Babylonians or Eygyptians to accommodate in their calendars, though they had a good shot at it.

Julius Caesar came to realise the deficiencies of the Roman Empire calendar, and as dictator of the known world, he had the power to do something about it. In 46 BC, he organised each year into 365 days with every fourth year adding an extra day, a leap year. He added two extra months, January and February, and started the year on the 1st of January.

However even the efficient 'Julian Year' began to get creaky after a few hundred years, and by 1582

Pope Gregory the XIII had to re-jig the year again. From the time of Julius Caesar to the Middle Ages the year had gained almost ten days, because each year was 11 minutes and 14 seconds too long.

Gregory, equally as powerful as Caesar in his day, had the authority to do something about the matter, and he suppressed ten days so that the 4 October was immediately followed by the 15 October. This alteration was soon adopted in Catholic countries, but was not accepted in many Protestant countries for obvious reasons. In fact the 'calendar war' continued for some time, and England and Scotland did not adopt the Gregorian Year till 1752.

In the three hundred years that the Protestant countries had dithered about accepting the Gregorian calendar, the correction needed was now eleven days. The English 'new style' of calendar as it was called, was done not without protest from some, who believed that Parliament was stealing eleven days of their miserable lives from them. This new 'style' was considered a popish plot, and even as late as 1754 in an Oxfordshire by-election, people were still clamouring for the return of their 'lost days'.

The modern calendar is now accurate to within one day every 3323 years, a trifling matter of error for me, or even you.

## 18 **St Lukes Day**

‘St Lukes little summer’ in mid-October, was the name for a period of mild weather, often called an ‘Indian summer’ in England to describe the balmy, calm clear days of autumn. As an ex-Englishman I can confirm this is not as unusual as might be thought, though frustrating after another wet summer. A ‘St Martins Summer’ was another late spell of settled fine weather, usually around St Martins Day on the 11 November.

## 24 **United Nations Day**

The anniversary of the adoption of the Charter of the United Nations organisation in 1947, a day universally ignored, if not derided, by almost everyone.

## 27 **Labour Day**

This day is celebrated throughout the English speaking world on differing days, in the USA it is the first Monday in September, in England it is May 1st, though this is not a public holiday. In America ‘Labor Day’ was a national holiday from 1894, and in New Zealand it dates from 1900, when it was ‘Mondayised’ (that brutal word again) in 1910. In New Zealand Labour Day originated with the promulgation of an eight hour working day by the carpenter

George Parnell in 1840, and its subsequent adoption by all the trade unions.

## 31 **Hallowe’en**

This is also known as **Nutcrack Night** or **All Hallows’ Eve**. This day was originally a pagan festival called Hallowe’en, subsequently adopted by Christianity and adapted into a more Christian friendly festival called All Hallows or All Saints Day on the 1 November.

The celebration of Hallowe’en (pronounced ‘hal-o-een’) around the end of October and beginning of November was one of the most important dates in the pagan calendar. The 31 October was the end of the old Celtic year, and the celts called the day **Samhuin** (or Samhain pronounced ‘sow-in’) which was a Cult of the Dead. Samhuin had both a spiritual significance, for traditionally it was the time when the dead visited their families, and a festival significance, for it was at the end of bountiful harvest and the beginning of dread winter. The best animals were kept inside for the coming winter, whilst the rest were slaughtered for a last great feast.

‘On this day the spirits of the dead were thought to visit their living relatives, in search of warmth and cheer for the approaching winter.

Also on this day fortunes were told, magical predictions made for the year ahead, and witches and goblins played pranks on the living’.

The sinister and superstitious aspects of this festival have, over the centuries, more or less turned into an excuse for a party, and in medieval times hallowe’en became blurred with traditional and Christian harvest festivals. Naturally harvest time was always an occasion for a celebration, and landowners would hold feasts, where for perhaps the only time of the year, the agricultural labourers could eat and drink as much as they pleased.

Literature shows numerous mentions of goings-on at Hallowe’en, with nut-cracking and bobbing for apples in England. In Scotland according to legend, people born on Hallowe’en have the gift of second sight or ‘spae’, the ability to see the future. The American pre-occupation with Halloween is largely modern, deriving from the Irish immigration to America in the 1840’s and 1860’s. In the nineteenth century intense practical joking at Hallowe’en seemed to be a popular way to ‘get back’ at an enemy or rival, and authorities became concerned at the excess of larrikin behaviour.

The present day ‘trick or treat’ seems to come from several source-

es. The fancy dress has its origins in ‘guising’, the Scottish tradition of dressing up to resemble fantastic creatures as might once have roamed about on Hallowe’en — bogles, ghaisties, witches, warlocks, kelpies and urisks.

The idea may be a folk memory of the Druids dressing up as the spirits of the dead, although it is also suggested that the idea of dressing grotesquely on this night was to resemble the creatures of the dead themselves, so they would not notice you. It was also an ancient Irish practice for groups of peasants to go door to door, demanding food and gifts for the evenings festivities, and probably such practices were common throughout Europe.

Most of this spookiness has become sanitised. Popular American television shows and comedies show the occasion has become an enormous fancy-dress parade, where adults can dress up as monsters and play rotten practical jokes on each other, that at any other time of the year they would be sued against. Candle-lit pumpkins seem to be a modern American habit, although the idea originally seems to be much older.

‘In Somerset, in the little village of St George the last Thursday in October was called Punkie Night, because scooped out mangolds were

cut in intricate designs to show houses, trees and scenes in general. Candles were lit and placed inside them, then everyone with a 'punkie' joined a procession through the village after dark singing:

*It's Punkie Night tonight,*

*It's Punkie Night tonight,*

*Give us a candle, give us a light,*

*It's Punkie Night tonight'.*

Punkies were representations of the dead souls held in purgatory, returned to visit their families. In Scotland turnips were used to the same effect.

The day of Halloween reveals a classic struggle between the Christian church and deep-rooted pagan traditions. Neither has absolutely triumphed, indeed they have melded somewhat. Lately the pagans seem to be winning however, the Church has not been entirely routed. It positioned All Saints Day after the Hallowe'en debauch, so that a remorseful conscience could have some justification for penance.

# November

*November means nine when the year held ten months, but the old Dutch name was slaght-maand slaugheer month, and the Saxon name was wind-monath for wind month, usually understood to mean that the fishermen pull their boats ashore at the end of the season and wait till spring.*

*In the French Republican calendar it was known as Brumaire or fog-month 23 October or 21 November.*

## 1 All Saints Day

Also known as **All Hallows' Day**, 'hallows' being derived from the Old English halig, a holy man or saint. On this day the saints get due recognition. Originally this festival was held on the 1 May, but changed to the 1 November in 834. Christianity paid the pagans a compliment, as it had done before with both Christmas and Easter, by recognising Hallowe'ens importance and trying to tame it's influence by the creation of All Saints Day. In many European countries (Germany, France, Italy, Spain) it is a public holiday.

'Pope Boniface IV converted the Pantheon at Rome into a Christian church, dedicated to all the martyrs, in 610. The festival of All Saints, originally held on 1 May, was changed to 1 November in 834' (Brewster).

## Holy Day or Holidays

The **Holy Days of Obligation** were not intended to be days of rest, but rather days dedicated to church and spiritual duties and to abstain from 'servile work'.

Roman Catholics are bound to hear masses on these days, but they do vary from country to country. In England traditionally all Sundays, Christmas Day, the Epiphany (6 January), Ascension Day (40th day after Easter Sunday), Corpus Christi (Thursday after Trinity Sunday), the Assumption (15 August), and All Saints (1 November) are observed.

## 2 All Souls' Day

Also known as **Souling Day**, the day when prayers are offered for all the pious dead, this day is clearly another attempt to 'Christianise' the powerful pagan festival of Hallowe'en. 'Souling' or 'Soul cake' is again a fusion of pagan and Christian ritual. In Cheshire and Shropshire on All Souls' Day children may still sing this 'souling song', which begs for a 'soul cake' to be given to the dead:

*A soul cake, a soul cake,  
Please good mistress a soul cake;  
One for Peter and one for Paul  
And one for the Lord who made us all'.*

An alternative rhyme:

*'Soul! Soul! for a Soul Cake!  
I pray you good missis, a Soul Cake  
An apple, a plum, a pear or cherry  
Or any good thing to make us all merry  
One for Peter and two for Paul  
Three for Him that made us all'*

The 'cakes' are really a sort of flat hard biscuit, lightly spiced with cinnamon.

## 5 Guy Fawkes Night

This popular festival (**Fireworks Night** or **Bonfire Night**) dates from when Guy Fawkes was arrested in 1605 for trying to blow up the old Houses of Parliament.

Once children would construct a 'guy' out of straw and old clothes, and put it on show, or trundle it around house to house, and ask for a 'penny for the guy' to solicit money for fireworks. Then fireworks would be exploded whilst the 'guy' burnt on a splendid bonfire. Good clean pyromanic fun.

*Remember, Remember,*

*The fifth of November,*

*Gunpowder, treason and plot'.*

However the practice of lighting fires early in November is a great deal older than Guy Fawkes. This ritual dates from pagan times, when the month of November was considered the month of the dead, when evil spirits roamed the land spreading death and misery. Bonfires were lit on 1 November to rid the neighbourhood of these dreaded happenings'. [Harrovwen]

Bonfires were originally known as bone-fires, because of the practice of burning bones. This dates back at least to the Middle Ages:

'The *Festivall* of 1493 printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1515, says 'in the worship of St John the people made three manner of fires: one was of clean bones and no wood, and that is called a bone fire. Another of clean wood and no bones, and is called a wood fire. And the third is made of wood and bones, and is called St Johns fire'

Since extensive forests still covered England in the Middle Ages, it hardly seems likely that villagers burnt bones because of a shortage of wood, so perhaps the bone fires were related to some significant fertility or cleansing cult around animals. It might even have been an early ecological mechanism, burning the slaughtered carcasses in autumn so as not to infect herds next year. November was known as the slaughter month.

Since large fires were often lit on the 1 November in pre-Christian times, it takes no leap of the imagination to see how the practice of bonfires was linked to poor Guy Fawkes in 1605. Guy Fawkes prepared 36 barrels of gunpowder in a cellar under the House of Lords and was found with a 'slow match' on the evening of the 5 November. It has been estimated that if successful the explosion would have devastated all the buildings within a 500 m radius, including the old Houses of Parliament and Westminster Hall where the King James I was due next day. Guy Fawkes was tortured to death in the customary way for his failings, and ever since has been tortured *in absentia* with a 'guy' stuck on top of the fire.

Interestingly enough Guy Fawkes does not seem to be in danger of being extinguished by Hallowe'en. Despite the glamourised pres-

entation of the Hallowe'en festival on American television, in Christchurch in November 2001, Hallowe'en was a low-key affair, whereas on the 5 November there was a huge participation in Guy Fawkes Day. Both in parks, in private gardens and with a public display on the New Brighton Pier. Fireworks were erupting well up to 11 pm over the whole city, and from the Port Hills you could see large bonfires lit all over the Canterbury plains. People were out enjoying fire.

(Since 2001 however, the Christchurch City Council has banned backyard bonfires, and the government has restricted the purchase of fireworks (no bangers or sky rockets thank you very much!) to three days before Guy Fawkes. So perhaps the love of fire, unfortunately, is about to be extinguished).

## 11 Martinmas

Also the Feast of St Martin or **St Martins Day**, celebrated in a number of European countries including Germany, Portugal and Spain. In Portugal the day celebrates the maturation of the years winer and is associated with calm stable weather, as in England. In France St Martins Day was traditional time for a great goose feast, and there was often a festival of lanterns. For Anglo-Saxons it was



the traditional and important time for the hiring of servants in hiring fairs.

November was also the usual time for slaughtering animals, since by then the pasture had stopped growing, and fodder was hard to obtain. The animals would only decline in condition from hereon, so the oxen, pigs (hogs), and sheep were killed and salted to provide food through the winter months.

### **Remembrance Sunday**

This is held on the Sunday closest to November 11, which commemorates the signing of the armistice of the First World War on the 11th hour, 11th day of the 11th month, 11 November 1918. This curious assemblage of elevens was a direct link to St Martins Feast of the Soldier. Originally it was known as **Armistice Day** but it was changed in 1946 to include all those who gave their lives in war. This day is observed in England, though less so in Australia and New Zealand, where its place has been overtaken in stature by Anzac Day.

In the United States and Canada it is a legal holiday, held on the 11 November and called **Veterans Day** since 1954.

## **22 Thanksgiving Day**

This is the most important public holiday in the American calendar, celebrated on the fourth or last Thursday in the month. In 1621 the settlers in the Plymouth colony held a special service and meal to acknowledge the divine favours that had enabled them to establish themselves in the new land. The same native American Indians that they had wanted to exterminate, gave them food to stave off winter food shortages, and of course this kindness was amply repaid by later legalising the extermination process.

These days it is a traditional time for families to re-unite, particularly for returning children, and eat traditional fare of turkey and pumpkin pie. It is also, incidentally, a terrible time to travel in the United States. This day is also **St Cecilia's Day**, patron saint of musicians and harried air passengers (sorry, I made that last bit up).

## **25 Cathern Day**

Also known as **St Catherine's Day**, where in eighteenth century it was reported that young women made merry, referring to their revels as 'catherning'. St Catherine is the patron saint (among other male professions such as ropemakers, carpenters and lawyers) (although

it is difficult to believe that the latter need a patron) particularly of lace makers, spinners, unmarried women and female students, so this day is important to women.

In France unmarried women over 25 are called Catherinettes, and are supposed to wear an outrageous hat for the day. French milliners have adopted this day to show off their wares. The French say that before a girl reaches 25 she prays:

*'Lord, give me a well-situated husband, let him be gentle, rich, generous and pleasant'.*

After 25 she prays:

*'Lord, one who's bearable, or who can at least pass as bearable in this world'.*

And when she's pushing thirty:

*'Send whoever you want Lord, I'll take it'.*

Catherine of Alexandria was reputed to be both learned and beautiful, but there seems to be some doubt whether she actually existed. No matter, the story of how she rejected the advances of the Emperor Maximilian, outwitted the pagan philosophers in learned dispute, was then tortured on a wheel and flogged naked before her eventual beheading, is suitably erotic and gruesome.

This strictly Christian day has however been subverted from a spiritual purpose to an entertaining one. Fireworks were often exploded at Cathernings, most tactlessly of course, 'catherine wheels'.

'At Worcester a rich brew of wine and spices was prepared in a Cathern bowl for the inhabitants of the College precincts'.

This is likely to have been Lambs Wool, a popular drink of the Middle Ages, a cider laden with spices and apples that were cooked till the white insides fluffed up like wool.

'Kattern Cake' is associated with St Catherine and Catherine of Aragon, who was born on Old St Catherine's Day, 6 December. It is a yeast-made bread rather than a cake, flavoured with caraway seeds, and, as is usual with many traditional English-style cakes, it is a solid little beast.

More edible are 'St Catherine's Cakes', said to be personally popular with Catherine of Aragon, who once exiled from the court of Henry VII, taught lace-making in a Bedfordshire village and solaced herself with these dainties.

### **30 St Andrews Day**

St Andrew was supposedly the younger brother of Simon Peter (Saint Paul) who became the patron saint of Scotland. A doubtful legend suggests that the saints bones, or relics, were brought to Scotland by a Saint Rule from Constantinople or Istanbul about the tenth century. Since St Andrew was crucified by the Romans on a saltire (a diagonal cross like an 'x') this design has become part of the Scottish national flag. The day is celebrated by Scots communities more outside of the country than in.

Rabbits and hares were traditionally chased on this day and eaten at the subsequent feast. Tandra Cake was also traditionally eaten on this day, and is a richer and more flavoursome version of Kattern Cake with added currants and candied peel.

# December

*The word is derived from the latin for ten, which has been rendered awkward because two new months were later inserted, January and February. Originally the year began in March.*

## 2 **Advent**

This Christian celebration is begun four Sundays before Christmas, with one candle lit each Sunday, until the light of four candles heralded the birth of Christ. *Adventus* means 'arrival' and Advent Sunday marks the beginning of the Church Year. In some European countries decorative biscuits were made, as well as Advent wreaths and Advent calendars, with 'windows' to open for each day leading up to Christmas.

## 6 **St Nicholas**

The feast of St Nicholas is celebrated widely in Europe rather than Christmas, particularly in Holland. St Nicholas was originally Greek, and is important in Greece, Turkey, Russia, Netherlands and Italy. He is the patron saint of sailors and became one of the earlier manifestations of Santa Claus

## 17-19 **Saturnalia**

The Romans celebrated the mid-winter period with the **Saturnalia** on the 17, 18 and 19 December, which later included the solstice festival of the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun on the 25th December. Saturnalia meant 'plenty' or 'bounty' and was in honour of Saturn, the god of agriculture, and a time when the crops were sown (this is Italy remember).

No public business could be transacted, the law courts were closed, the schools took a holiday, and no criminal could be punished. Slaves might be served by their masters, and there was a freedom from restraint in the festival which resulted in revelry, role-swapping, exchange of presents, gambling, licentiousness and any other normally forbidden activity that imaginative people could devise.

Festivals where the peasants were allowed to play the 'fool', with pranks, mischief and mayhem were once frequent throughout the European calendar, and it curious that the licentiousness and disorder were permitted, though widely frowned upon by the authorities. Perhaps it was too politically difficult to stop these goings-on, or they were seen as a necessary 'release valve' for people imprisoned in a feudal and servile system.

It is little wonder that the Christian church attempted to make the time of Saturnalia more seemly by superimposing the event of Jesus's birth (for which there was no fixed date) on these calendar dates, a move that was surprisingly effective until recent times.

## 21 Summer Solstice

The shortest night of the year and the longest day. Because of the contingency of Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Years Day, this traditionally important day is now over-shadowed in New Zealand, which is a pity.

It seems apparent to some people that the seasons have 'shifted', and that in England the worst of winter does not occur on the shortest day in December, but some 40 days past it in February. In New Zealand, summer seems to get going after the summer solstice and New Year, and temperatures often peak in February and March.

## 25 Christmas Day

This day is designated as the day of Christ's birth, or **Nativity**, although the actual date is unknown. It was fixed by the church in 440, and designed like other Christian commemorations, to overlay a popular pagan festival, in this case the winter solstice, or shortest day.

This had long been a celebration time for many Anglo-Saxons, indeed their year began on the 25 December. In Rome this day was the notable as the feast of the Birth of the Unconquered Sun.

Pope Gregory the Great was too intelligent to relieve the pagans of their favourite festivities at a stroke. He encouraged local missionaries such as St Augustine in England to assist conversion by giving the pagan celebration of solstice a Christian twist. The heathens have to be deprived of their old customs by 'steps, not leaps' he advised. The 'mas' of Christmas is not a reference to the Catholic Mass, but to the Old English expression of 'mass' as a feast day.

Many of the traditions of Christmas are still fundamentally pagan. In Scandinavia the great mid-winter festival of this time was the 12 day celebration of the **Yule-feast**. Log fires were burnt to assist the revival of the sun, shrines were decorated with evergreens such as holly and ivy, and the Druids in Celtic England used mistletoe.

The custom of a decorated tree dates back at least as far as the Romans, and Martin Luther is said to have originated the lighting of the Christmas tree with candles. This pleasant (if risky) idea was introduced into England by Queen Victoria's German husband,

Albert. Christmas cards are an English invention, partly brought about by the introduction of penny postage in 1840. The first card was designed in 1843 by H. C. Horsley, and the first commercial cards were produced in 1846.

Many Christmas carols such as *I saw Three Ships Come Sailing By* and *The Holly and the Ivy* date back to the Middle Ages, but *Silent Night* was composed in 1818 by Franz Gruber and Joseph Mohr.

Santa Claus is a curious amalgam of Dutch, English and American traditions. Dutch immigrant children in New York put out their shoes on St Nicholas's Eve (6 December) hoping 'Sinte Klaas' would fill them. In 1823 Professor Clement Moore published anonymously a poem *A Visit from St Nicholas (The Night Before Christmas)* which gave a visual description of the gentleman as 'broad face and a little round belly', 'chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf'. By the 1860's the illustrator Thomas Nast evolved Santa Claus into his present fatter shape, red suited and jovial, and with the adopted English title of Father Christmas.

The notion that the Coca-Cola Company invented the Christmas image of Santa Claus seems to be an urban myth, though undoubtedly their advertising campaigns

made Santa Claus a widely recognisable symbol.

## 26 **Boxing Day**

Boxing Day has traditionally been the 'visiting day' for near relatives, after the intense family celebration of Christmas Day. Usually small gifts are exchanged, which is appropriate to this day, which has nothing to do with the sport of boxing.

'Christmas Box. A gratuity given on Boxing Day. Boxes placed in churches for casual offerings used to be opened on Christmas Day, and the contents, called the 'dole of the Christmas box', or the 'box money', were distributed next day by the priests. Apprentices also used to carry a box round to their masters' customers for small gratuities. Postmen received such gifts until after World War II, and some dustmen and errand boys still call to collect them' (Brewster).

The original boxes were made of earthenware, so money put into them could only be retrieved by breaking the containers. Piggy boxes or piggy banks were originally money boxes given to apprentices as 'Christmas boxes' a sort of bonus.

### 31     **New Years Eve**

A widely celebrated evening, with different customs throughout the world, nearly all involving staying up to midnight and over-indulging the norm. The singing of Auld Langs Aine', re-written by Robbie Burns, has become a New year 'hymn' amongst English-speaking countries, even if few understand the words.

Today's customs are watered-down versions of various celebrations, which include an amalgam of Christmas, winter solstice and Saturnalia festivals. **Hogmanay** is the Scottish name for this end of year celebration, usually associated with revelry. The origin of the word is obscure with derivations derived from French, Flemish and Scandinavian traditions. The tradition of gaining good luck by having a well appointed 'first footer' through the household front door after midnight, is still popular in Scotland.

Of course the date of New Year's eve is entirely arbitrary, and the first day of the year has been on the move for nearly two thousand years. The Romans began their year in March... whoops, I've said this before.

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