

TRADITIONS AND HOLIDAYS IN THE UK AND THE USA

JANUARY

UP-HELLY-AA (UK)

The Shetlands are islands near Scotland. In the ninth century men from Norway came to the Shetlands. These were the Vikings. They came to Britain in ships and carried away animals, gold, and sometimes women and children, too. Now, 1,000 years later, people in the Shetlands remember the Vikings with a festival. They call the festival "Up-Helly-Aa". Every winter the people of Lerwick, a town in the Shetlands, make a model of a ship. It's a Viking "longship", with the head of a dragon at the front. Then, on Up-Helly-Aa night in January, the Shetlanders dress in Viking clothes. They carry the ship through the town to the sea. There they burn it. They do this because the Vikings put their dead men in ships and burned them. But there aren't any men in the modern ships. Now the festival is a party for the people of the Shetland Islands.

THE THIRD MONDAY OF JANUARY MARTIN LUTHER KING'S BIRTHDAY (USA)

Martin Luther King was an important black leader who wanted equality for black people and fought for their civil rights. Preaching non-violence as Gandhi he tried not to consider the blacks as second-class citizens. He was murdered in 1968. Because of his work, Congress made his birthday a public holiday in 1986.

FEBRUARY

FEBRUARY 14TH – ST. VALENTINE'S DAY (UK, USA)

Nobody knows very much about St. Valentine. One story is that he was murdered by Roman soldiers in the third century AD because he was a Christian. He gave a poor girl some money before he died, and so other Christians called him the saint of love.

St. Valentine is the saint of people in love, and St. Valentine's Day is February 14th. On this day people send Valentine cards and presents to their husbands, wives, boyfriends and girlfriends. You can also send a card to a person you don't know. But traditionally you must never write your name on it. Some British newspapers have a page for Valentine's Day messages on February 14th.



THIRD MONDAY OF FEBRUARY – PRESIDENTS' DAY (USA) FEBRUARY 29TH

Every four years February has an extra day. Tradition says that on this day girls ask boys to go to the movies or out to dinner. A girl can even ask a boy to marry her! Life is changing nowadays, however. Girls often invite boys to parties or dinners any day of the year. So this tradition may be dying.



MARCH

MARCH 1ST – ST. DAVID'S DAY (UK)

This day is very important for Welsh people. St. David is the "patron", or national saint of Wales. The Welsh celebrate this day and wear daffodils in the button holes of their coats or jackets.

MARCH 17TH – ST. PATRICK'S DAY (UK, USA)

St. Patrick was an Irish saint and his day is very important for Irish people all over the world. It is very popular in cities where there are many Irish Americans. Green is the Irish colour and some bars sell green beer. People often wear something green on this day. In New York the Irish people always have a big St. Patrick's Day parade.



APRIL

APRIL 1ST – APRIL FOOLS' DAY (UK, USA)

April 1st is April Fool's Day in Britain. This is a very old tradition from the Middle Ages (between the fifth and fifteenth centuries). At that time the servants were masters for one day of the year. They gave orders to their masters, and their masters had to obey.

Another story is that it began in France in the sixteenth century. In 1564, the king of France changed the first day of the new year from April 1st to January 1st. Some people did not accept this, and on April 1st the other people made fun of them. Nowadays, people play tricks on each other, so you have to watch and listen very carefully on this day.

EASTER (UK, USA)

The Easter weekend is in late March or early April, but the exact date changes every year. Easter is a Christian holiday which celebrates the day when Jesus Christ came back from the dead. It is an ancient symbol of spring and new life. On Easter Sunday people give coloured and chocolate eggs to each other and send cards. Some cities have Easter parades with games and sports and a big Easter egg hunt. In the U.S.A. many homes organise Easter egg hunt. Children look for dyed hard-boiled eggs hidden around the house. The President himself has an annual Easter egg hunt on the lawn around the white House.



MAY

MAY 1ST – MAY DAY (UK)

May 1st was an important day in the Middle Ages. In the very early morning, young girls went to the fields and washed their faces with dew. They believed that this made them very beautiful for a year after that. Also on May Day the young men of each village tried to win prizes with their bows and arrows, and people danced round the maypole. Many English villages still have a maypole, and on May 1st the villagers dance around it.

LAST MONDAY OF MAY – MEMORIAL DAY (USA)

This special day is for people to remember those who died in wars. Many people remember their dead friends and relatives on this day, too.

MOTHER'S DAY AND FATHER'S DAY (USA)

One Sunday in May is Mother's Day and one Sunday in June is Father's Day. Children usually spend the day with their parents. They give them cards, flowers or presents. Many businesses give presents to parents on these days.

JUNE

JUNE 14TH – FLAG DAY (USA)

In 1777 the "Stars and Stripes" became the official flag of the U.S.A. Flag Day was first celebrated in 1877 on the flag's hundredth birthday. Many people display a flag on this day, but it is not a major holiday and businesses stay open.

JUNE 24TH – MIDSUMMER'S DAY (UK)

Midsummer's Day, June 24th, is the longest day of the year. On that day you can see a very old custom at Stonehenge, in Wiltshire, England. Stonehenge is one of Europe's biggest stone circles. A lot of the stones are ten or twelve metres high. It's also very old. The earliest part of Stonehenge is nearly 5,000 years old. But what was Stonehenge? A holy place? A market? Or was it a kind of calendar? We think the Druids used it for a calendar. The Druids were the priests in Britain 2,000 years ago. They used the sun and the stones at Stonehenge to know the start of months and seasons. There are Druids in Britain today, too. And every June 24th a lot of them go to Stonehenge and the sunrise ceremony is held here. On that morning the sun shines on the famous stone - the Heel stone. For the Druids this is a very important moment in the year. But for a lot of British people it's just a strange old custom. In some parts of Cornwall, Northumbria and Scotland mid-summer fires are lit as in pre-Christian times when this ritual was performed to give strength to the sun and drive out evil.

JULY

JULY 4TH – INDEPENDENCE DAY (USA)

On this day in 1776 the United States declared its independence from England. It was the beginning of a new nation. On the Fourth of July families and friends celebrate, and every town and city has parades, games and sports with prizes. There are picnics and barbecues and in the evening there are big fireworks displays.



SEPTEMBER

THE FIRST MONDAY OF SEPTEMBER – LABOUR DAY (USA)

It is a holiday to honour of the nation's working people. This is a day of rest for the workers. It is celebrated by labour union parades. It also marks the end of summer and the beginning of the school year. Public schools below the college level open just after this day.

OCTOBER

THE SECOND MONDAY OF OCTOBER – COLUMBUS DAY (USA)

"In fourteen hundred and ninety-two Columbus sailed the ocean blue ...". This is a song that many children learn about Christopher Columbus and his journey to America. Columbus crossed the Atlantic Ocean in the Santa Maria and landed in the Bahamas in 1492. On Columbus Day people display a flag to honour the man who discovered their country.

OCTOBER 26TH 1886 – THE STATUE OF LIBERTY (USA)

On this day America received a gift from the people of France - The Statue of Liberty, which became a symbol of the New world. It is standing on Liberty Island in New York.

OCTOBER 31ST – HALLOWEEN (UK, USA)

October 31st is Halloween, and you can expect to meet witches and ghosts that night. Halloween is an old word for "Hallows Evening", the night before "All Hallows" or "All Saints' Day".

On that one night of the year, ghosts and witches are free. Well, that's national story. A long time ago people were afraid and stayed at home on Halloween. But now in Britain it is a time for fun. There are always a lot of parties on October 31st. At these parties people wear masks and they dress as ghosts and witches, or as Dracula or Frankenstein's monster.

Some people make special Halloween lamps from a large fruit - pumpkin. First they take out the middle of the pumpkin. Then they cut holes for the eyes, nose and mouth. Finally they put a candle inside the pumpkin.

Children in America have a special custom of "Trick or Treat". They knock on the people's door dressed as ghosts and witches and holding a big bag. They shout "Trick or Treat!". If you give them money or sweets, they will go away. If not they will play a "trick" on you, such as drawing pictures or writing something on the house or car windows with soap.



NOVEMBER

NOVEMBER 5TH – GUY FAWKES' DAY (UK)

Bonfire Night on 5th November, is one of Britain's most popular festivals. People have fireworks parties where they build big wood fires (bonfires) in their gardens and burn "Guys" on the top of them. A "guy" is a model of Guy Fawkes.

Guy Fawkes was a leader of a group of men who hated King James I. They decided to blow up the Houses of Parliament in London, with the king and his noblemen inside it on 5th November, 1605. But the plot was not successful. Guy Fawkes and his followers were arrested and later executed.

People in Britain want to remember this piece of their history called "The Gunpowder Plot" and so they celebrate "Bonfire Night" or "Guy Fawkes' Night" every year.

Children usually make "Guys" with straw, old clothes and newspapers before November 5th and they use them to collect money for fireworks. Children stand with their "Guys" in busy streets or outside shops and ask people for "a penny for the guy". The best "Guys" get the most money. On November 5th the "Guys" are placed on the top of a large pile of wood (a bonfire) and burned.

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN NOVEMBER – VETERAN CAR RALLY (UK)

Every first Sunday in November, a famous Veteran Car Rally takes place in England. About three hundred veteran cars from all over the world are driven from Hyde Park in London to Brighton, a town on the south coast of England. That's a distance of seventy kilometres.

The Veteran or "Vintage" cars have to be more than fifty years old and in a very good condition. Before 1896 a man with a red flag had to walk in front of cars. In 1896 it changed. A group of merry drivers broke their flags and drove to Brighton. There they had a party. Now, the rally is a sporting tradition. A lot of people in the rally wear "vintage" clothes, too.

NOVEMBER 11TH – VETERANS' DAY (USA) NOVEMBER 11TH – REMEMBRANCE DAY (UK)

This is a special day to remember all the people who fought in the wars - the living as well as the dead. There are memorial services, special dinners and speeches.

In London, in the middle of Whitehall, there is Sir Edwin Lutyens' Cenotaph, which commemorates the dead of the two world wars. In a ceremony held here every November in the presence of the Queen, wreaths of poppies are laid at the foot of the Cenotaph.

THE FOURTH THURSDAY IN NOVEMBER – THANKSGIVING DAY (USA)

On the fourth Thursday of November a national holiday with big dinners and parties is held in the U.S.A. It is called Thanksgiving day.

In 1621, the Pilgrim Fathers who were among the first European settlers in North America, celebrated their first harvest and thanked God. It was a difficult year but people still had food to eat. William Bradford, the Governor of Massachusetts, decided to have a thanksgiving dinner for all the people. He wanted a way to share this good fortune with the American Indians who helped them. The meal lasted three days.

Today the traditional Thanksgiving meal is similar to the first. Usually there is a turkey, sweet potatoes, corn, and pumpkin pie. Thanksgiving is a special day for families to get together.



NOVEMBER 30TH – ST. ANDREW'S DAY (UK)

This day is the national holiday of Scotland. St. Andrew was martyred on an X-shaped cross and became the Scottish patron saint.

Nowadays St. Andrew's cross is the national flag of Scotland (white diagonals in the blue oblong) and is also a part of the British national flag. The Scottish national symbol is a wild plant - a thistle.

DECEMBER - CHRISTMAS

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

Christmas, or Christ Mass, is when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. It was originally celebrated on January 6th, the date still observed by the Armenian Church, but in the fourth century A.D. the date of Christmas Day was changed to December 25th. This was a good time for the newly converted pagans to celebrate Christ's birth, for the date marked the winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year, and was a day on which many pagan gods were honoured.

There are several possible reasons why we give presents at Christmas: before Christianity came, offerings were made to pagan gods on December 25th. In the Bible story of nativity, the three kings brought gifts to the infant Christ and there is our old friend St. Nicholas, whose date of present-giving - December 6th - was later transferred to the 25th, especially in some English speaking countries.

HAPPY CHRISTMAS

So this is Christmas
And what have you done?
Another year over
And a new one just begun.
And so this is Christmas
I hope you have fun
The near and the dear ones
The old and the young.
A very great Christmas
and a Happy New Year
Let's hope it's a good one
without any tears.

And so this is Christmas
For weak and for strong
For rich and the poor ones
The world is so large.

And so happy Christmas
For black and for white
For yellow and red ones
Let's stop all the fights.

(John Lennon)



CHRISTMAS IN THE UK

London's Christmas decorations

Every year the people of Norway give the city of London a present. They want to say "Thank you" for British help in the World War II. It is a big Christmas tree and it stands in Trafalgar Square. Also in central London, Oxford Street and Regent Street always have beautiful decorations at Christmas. Thousands of people come to look at them.

Cards, trees and mistletoe

In 1846 the first Christmas cards began in Britain. That was five years after the first Christmas tree. Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, brought this German tradition (he was German) to Britain. He and the Queen had a Christmas tree at Windsor Castle in 1841. A few years after, nearly every house in Britain had one. Traditionally people decorate their trees on Christmas Eve - that is December 24th. They take down the decorations twelve days later, on Twelfth Night (January 5th). An older tradition is Christmas mistletoe. People put a piece of this green plant with its white berries over a door. Mistletoe brings a good luck, people say. Also, at Christmas British people kiss their friends and family under the mistletoe.



Carols

Before Christmas, groups of singers go from house to house. They collect money and sing traditional Christmas songs or carols. There are a lot of very popular British Christmas carols. Three famous ones are: "Good King Wenceslas", "The Holly and The Ivy" and "We Three Kings".

Christmas Eve

British children do not open their presents on December 24th. Some children hang a stocking at the end of their bed. Father Christmas brings their presents at night. Then they open them in the morning of the 25th. The presents are put into stockings or the larger ones are arranged around the Christmas tree. There is another name for Father Christmas in Britain - Santa Claus. That comes from the European name Saint Nicholas. In the traditional story he lives at the North Pole. But now he lives in big shops in towns and cities all over Britain. Then on Christmas Eve he visits every house with his reindeer. He climbs down the chimney and leaves lots of presents. Some people leave something for him, too. A glass of wine and some biscuits, for example.

Christmas Day

In Britain the most important meal on December 25th is Christmas dinner. Nearly all Christmas food is traditional, but a lot of traditions are not very old. For example, there were no turkeys in Britain before 1800. And even in the nineteenth century, goose was the traditional meal at Christmas. But not now. A twentieth-century British Christmas dinner is roast turkey with carrots, potatoes, peas and Brussels sprouts. There are sausages and bacon, too. After the turkey, there is Christmas pudding. Crackers are also usual at Christmas dinner. These came to Britain from China in the nineteenth century. Two people pull a cracker. Usually there is a small toy in the middle. Often there is a joke on a piece of paper, too. Most of the jokes in the Christmas crackers are not good.

For British children Christmas means pantomimes, too. The pantomime is a traditional Christmas show at the theatre - for example: "Puss in Boots", "The Sleeping Beauty", "Cinderella" and "Little Red Riding Hood".

On Christmas Day at three o'clock in the afternoon, the Queen makes a speech on radio and TV. It is ten minutes long. In this speech she talks to people of the United Kingdom and Commonwealth about the past year. This speech is filmed a few weeks before Christmas and the Queen spends Christmas with her family at Windsor Castle near London.

Boxing day

December 26th is Boxing Day. Traditionally boys from the shops in each town asked for money at Christmas. They went from house to house on December 26th and took boxes made of wood with them. At each house people gave him money. This was a Christmas present. So the name of December 26th comes from the boys' wooden boxes. Now, Boxing Day is the real day for Christmas parties and visiting friends. All the men like to watch their favourite sports on TV.

New Year's Eve

At midnight nearly everybody in Britain wants to hear the chimes of Big Ben. At many parties people join hands and sing "Auld Lang Syne" (The good old days), a poem by the Scottish poet Robert Burns.



First Footing

In Scotland the name for New Year's Eve is Hogmanay. After midnight people visit their friends. And they take a present - a piece of coal. Why? Because traditionally the first visitor of the year must carry coal into the house. This is "first footing". It brings good luck. It also helps to make a fire in the middle of winter. People wish one another "LANG MAY YOUR LUM REEK" (hope your chimney will smoke for a long time).

CHRISTMAS AND CUSTOMS ALL AROUND EUROPE

- In Luxembourg, Holland and Belgium presents are opened on December 6th.
- In Denmark children put rice pudding and nuts under the Christmas tree.
- In Holland people like to eat rabbit and venison at Christmas.
- In Denmark they eat duck, goose and rice pudding.
- In Portugal they eat fish and drink sweet port wine.
- In Belgium Christmas dinner consists of sausages, cakes and hot wine.

CHRISTMAS IN THE USA

This is the biggest holiday of the year and the one that many people – especially children – enjoy very much. Soon after Thanksgiving people start sending Christmas cards and decorate their houses. Almost every home has a Christmas tree. German soldiers started this tradition in the U.S. during the Revolutionary War of 1776.

Christmas is a very nice time in the U.S.A. The stores are beautiful and full of toys and gifts. The streets are decorated with coloured lights, balls, stars and bells.

December 24th – Christmas Eve

The evening before Christmas Day is called Christmas Eve. On Christmas Eve many people go to church and sing Christmas carols. The President gives his message on TV. Parents tell children that Santa Claus will come to their house at night and leave presents for them. Santa Claus is pictured as a cheerful fat man with a long white beard, dressed in a red suit. He is a mystical man who lives at the North Pole where he makes toys during the year. Sometimes children leave some milk and chocolate cakes for Santa Claus and his youngest reindeer Rudolph. When children sleep, Santa comes down the chimney with a big bag of presents and he leaves something for each child.

December 25th – Christmas Day

On Christmas Day people open their presents and they prepare a traditional dinner of turkey or ham with vegetables, salads and desserts. There are also special cookies, candies, nuts and fruit. Christmas dinner is eaten late in the afternoon. During the day many families watch special Christmas TV and children play with their new toys. Some people go ice-skating, drive around town to look at the decorations or go to see their relatives.

December 31st – New Year's Eve

On New Year's Eve people celebrate the end of the old year and the beginning of the new one. Many people go to private parties, but some go to large public celebrations. Thousands of people gather in Times Square in New York, for example. At midnight exactly, everyone sings the old Scottish song "Auld Lang Syne".

AULD LANG SYNE

Should old acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to mind?
Should old acquaintance be forgot
And days of Auld Lang Syne?
For Auld Lang Syne, my dear,
For Auld Lang Syne,
We'll take a cup of kindness yet'
For the sake of Auld Lang Syne.

