

ST PATRICK'S DAY

St Patrick's Day on 17 March is the most important Irish festival. Because of terrible conditions in Ireland during the 1800s many Irish went to America, so the Irish community in the United States is very big. They went to live all over the country and took their traditions with them. There are also many Irish in Britain, and all over the world.

WHO WAS ST PATRICK?

St Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland. He was probably born in Wales, in about AD 389: his father was a Christian. When Patrick was sixteen years old some pirates took him to Ireland, where he became a slave. After six years he escaped to France. He became a priest there.

He returned to Ireland as a bishop in about 432. He converted a lot of Irish people to Christianity, and he introduced the Roman alphabet to Ireland. He wrote his autobiography in Latin about his life and work in Ireland. He died in about 461.

There are legends about St Patrick. One legend says he took all the snakes in Ireland to the top of a mountain and pushed them into the sea. Another legend says he used the shamrock to teach the Irish about Christianity: he used the three leaves of this plant to explain that for Christians God is three beings at the same time.

CELEBRATING ST PATRICK'S DAY

In Ireland St Patrick's Day is an important religious holiday. Businesses are closed and people go to church. In 1995 the Irish government started the St Patrick's Day Festival, a four-day festival in the capital city, Dublin. On St Patrick's Day there are a lot of tricolour flags in the streets. Irish people created this flag in 1848 with a special meaning. The green represents Irish Catholics (mostly from the south of Ireland) and the orange represents Irish Protestants (mostly from the north of Ireland). The white rectangle in the middle represents the hope for peace between Catholics and Protestants.

In the United States, the first celebration of St Patrick's Day was in Boston in 1737. Today on 17 March the Irish community in America organizes parades with marching bands and Irish music in many towns and cities. The parade in New York City is the biggest in the world: more than 150,000 people take part in the marching. And in the city of Chicago, the Chicago River is coloured green on St Patrick's Day!

The Irish believe that green is a lucky colour, and a lot of people wear green clothes on St Patrick's Day. The green shamrock is a symbol of Ireland, and another symbol is a leprechaun, a kind of Irish fairy. This little old man usually wears green.