



Project Britain

British Life and Culture

by Mandy Barrow

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What's happening this month? | [Jan](#) | [Feb](#) | [Mar](#) | [Apr](#) | [May](#) | [Jun](#) | [Jul](#) | [Aug](#) | [Sept](#) | [Oct](#) | [Nov](#) | [Dec](#)

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British life and culture - England, Scotland and Wales

Superstitions in Britain

Superstitions can be defined as, "irrational beliefs, especially with regard to the unknown"
(Collins English Dictionary)

General Superstitions

Good Luck

Lucky to meet a **black cat**. Black Cats are featured on many good luck greetings cards and birthday cards in England.



Lucky to **touch wood**. We touch; knock on wood, to make something come true.

Lucky to find a **clover plant with four leaves**.

White heather is lucky.

A **horseshoe** over the door brings good luck. But the horseshoe needs to be the right way up. The luck runs out of

Search our Site

Project Britain

Calendars

Facts and figures

London

Great Britain

Union Flag

A-Z of Britain

Customs & traditions

Britain today

Daily Life

Money

Etiquette

Monarchy

Government

Education

Tourist Information

[Food and drink](#)
[Sports and leisure](#)
[History](#)
[Kings and Queens](#)
[Superstitions](#)
[Glossary](#)
[AdChoices](#)
[► Four Leaf Clover](#)
[► Traditions](#)
[► Lucky Number](#)


the horseshoe if it is upside down.

Horseshoes are generally a sign of good luck and feature on many good luck cards.

On the first day of the month it is lucky to say "white rabbits, white rabbits white rabbits," before uttering your first word of the day.

Catch falling leaves in Autumn and you will have good luck. Every leaf means a lucky month next year.

Cut your **hair** when the moon is waxing and you will have good luck.

Putting money in the pocket of new clothes brings good luck.

Bad Luck

Unlucky to walk underneath a **ladder**.

Seven years bad luck to **break a mirror**. The superstition is supposed to have originated in ancient times, when mirrors were considered to be tools of the gods.



Unlucky to **see one magpie**, lucky to see two, etc..

Unlucky to **spill salt**. If you do, you must throw it over your shoulder to counteract the bad luck.

Unlucky to **open an umbrella in doors**.

The number thirteen is unlucky. Friday the thirteenth is a very unlucky day. Friday is considered to be an unlucky day



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because Jesus was crucified on a Friday.

Unlucky to put **new shoes on the table**.

Unlucky to **pass someone on the stairs**.

Food Superstitions

When finished eating a **boiled egg**, push the spoon through the bottom of the empty shell to let the devil out



In Yorkshire, housewives used to believe that **bread** would not rise if there was a corpse (dead body) in the vicinity, and to cut off both ends of the loaf would make the Devil fly over the house!

Table Superstitions

If you drop a table knife expect a male visitor, if you drop a fork a female visitor.

Crossed cutlery on your plate and expect a quarrel.

Leave a white tablecloth on a table overnight and expect a death.

Animal Superstitions

Animals feature a lot in our superstitions as they do in superstitions around the world.



One ancient British superstition holds that if a child rides on a **bear**'s back it will be protected from whooping-cough. (Bears used to roam Britain but now they are not seen on our shores)

In some parts of the UK meeting two or three **Ravens** together is considered really bad. One very English superstition concerns the tame Ravens at the [Tower of London](#). It is believed if they leave then the crown of England will be lost.



It is said to be bad luck if you see **bats** flying and hear their cries. In the middle ages it was believed that witches were closely associated with bats.

If a **Sparrow** enters a house it is an omen of death to one of the people who live there. In some areas it is believed that to avoid bad luck, any Sparrow caught must be immediately killed otherwise the person who caught it will die.



In some areas black Rabbits are thought to host the souls of human beings. **White Rabbits** are said to be really witches and some believe that saying 'White Rabbit' on the first day of each month brings luck. A common lucky charm is a Rabbit's foot, but not for the Rabbit.



It is thought very unlucky to have the feathers of a **Peacock** within the home or handle anything made with them. This is possibly because of the eye shape present upon these feathers i.e. the Evil-Eye associated with wickedness.

Wedding Superstitions

Bride and groom must not meet on the day of the wedding except at the altar.

The bride should never wear her complete wedding clothes before the day.

For good luck the bride should wear "something borrowed, something blue, something old and something new".

The husband should carry his new wife over the threshold of their home.

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Questions to think about for Students

1. Which British superstitions are similar to those in your country?
2. Which are different?
3. Do you know anything about the origins of some of the superstitions in your country?

4. Can you give the definition of "superstition"?

5. Do you believe that they can influence our lives and still live on in the age of science?

FROM: Svetlana Chernobayefl

[Follow this link to answer questions on British Superstitions](#)



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Mandy is the creator of the Woodlands Resources section of the Woodlands Junior website.
The two websites projectbritain.com and primaryhomeworkhelp.co.uk are the new homes for the Woodlands Resources.

Mandy left Woodlands in 2003 to work in Kent schools as an ICT Consultant.
She now teaches computers at [The Granville School](#) and [St. John's Primary School](#) in Sevenoaks Kent.

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