

NOTABLE DAYS IN ENGLISH-SPEAKING COUNTRIES

A. UNITED KINGDOM

St. Valentine's Day (14th February)

Since the Middle Ages this day has been celebrated by lovers. People give gifts (e.g. flowers, heart-shaped boxes of chocolates and other kinds of sweets, sometimes even more expensive things) or send greeting cards called Valentines to people they like. Couples often have a romantic dinner in a restaurant. The day is called after St Valentine who was killed by Romans (because he was a Christian). According to a legend he helped some Christian lovers to get married.

Easter (in March or April)

Originally it was a pagan festival of the coming spring. Christians remember Christ's death and his return to life.

Saturday is traditionally spent decorating Easter eggs (symbol of new life); on Sunday morning they are hunted for by children in a lot of families (parents have hidden them all over the house and garden). In other families parents tell children that their Easter basket (waiting for them when they wake up) full of painted and chocolate eggs, chocolate rabbits and marshmallow chicks has been delivered by the Easter Bunny. There are also traditional meals, e.g. roast lamb or hot cross buns.

Halloween (31st October)

Among the old Celts it was the last day of the year that is why people tried to scare witches and evil spirits away.

These days it is usual to light pumpkin lanterns. It is a night of especially children's parties, of fun and games. Children go to see their relatives and their friends' families dressed in masks and costumes. (The most common costumes are witches, ghosts, skeletons and popular characters.) They say "Trick or treat" and people give them sweets, fruit or money. Horror movies and ghost stories are narrated and shown on TV on this day.

Guy Fawkes Night (Bonfire Night) (5th November)

Originally, people in Britain celebrated the unsuccessful plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament in 1605 (Guy Fawkes was the leader of a group of conspirators who wanted to kill the king but were discovered and executed.)

Nowadays, it is just a festival when families and friends come together to watch fireworks. Sometimes they light bonfires and burn paper figurines of "Guy" on the fire. Cooking potatoes in the fire and drinking soup are other typical activities.

Remembrance Day (Poppy Day) (11th November)

It is the day when people remember the soldiers who died in WWI and all other wars since. The first Poppy Day was in 1921. Some ex-soldiers made and sold paper poppies to get money for disabled ex-soldiers or for families of dead soldiers.

Even these days a lot of people buy and wear small poppies. At 11 a.m. there is a two-minute silence. And there are ceremonies at war memorials all over the country. The most important one takes place at the Cenotaph in London where the King and the Prime Minister are present.

Christmas

24th December: Unlike the Continentals, the English have no traditional celebration on Christmas Eve. Before English children go to bed on this day, they hang up Christmas stockings and believe that Father Christmas (or Santa Claus) comes down the chimney and fills up the stockings with presents. Larger things are put under the Christmas tree.

25th December: Christmas Day is the most festive day of British Christmas. In the morning children unwrap their presents, then some people attend a Christmas mass. At noon Christmas dinner is a great occasion: It consists of roast turkey, roast potatoes and vegetables; Christmas pudding is served as a dessert. There are a lot of carols on the radio and TV and the monarch addresses the nation.

26th December: It is called Boxing Day from the custom in earlier times when postmen, milkmen, dustmen, newspaper boys were given money which they collected in their Christmas boxes. Lots of people go to see their friends; parties are given in the evening, people also enjoy watching various sports (especially football) matches.

New Year's Eve (31st December)

It is not as important as Christmas for the English. People usually stay up till midnight and drink a toast to the new year. In London some people gather in Trafalgar Square and celebrate the coming of the new year with singing and dancing.

The Scottish name for New Year's Eve is Hogmanay – they traditionally celebrate it much more than Christmas. Families often have guests, before midnight a lot of people gather in the squares, they sing and dance in the Scottish style. (Auld Lang Syne)

B: UNITED STATES

In the U.S.A. there are no national holidays because each state has the right to decide about its own holidays. However, many holidays are observed by most states.

Some of them are the same as in the UK – e.g. **Easter, Christmas, St. Valentine's Day or Halloween**. 11th November is called **Veterans' Day** but it also honours people who fought for their country in wars.

The two best-known holidays typical for the USA are:

Independence Day (4th July)

It celebrates "the birthday" of the USA because on 4/7/1776 American Congress formally adopted the Declaration of Independence.

Thanksgiving Day (4th Thursday in November)

Its history started in 1620 when Pilgrims (a group of Protestants from England) arrived in America. They believed their lives in America would be free, better than in their native country. However, their first winter on the American continent was very difficult for them. They starved and a lot of them died of hunger and disease.

In 1621 Native Americans helped them a lot. They taught them how to grow plants, how to hunt and fish. In the autumn Pilgrims had a rich harvest, so they celebrated the first Thanksgiving. They wanted to thank to God and Indians for their food and wealth.

At present Thanksgiving is a very important family holiday. A lot of people have a 4 to 5 - day long weekend, at schools there are holidays. People often travel long distances to meet their families. They have a huge Thanksgiving dinner which usually consists of roasted turkey with stuffing, mashed potatoes with gravy, cranberry sauce and vegetables. Typical desserts are pumpkin (or apple) pies.

On Black Friday a lot of people start their Christmas shopping. Many big cities organize parades (military, fancy-dress etc.). The Thanksgiving weekend is also a time for sport – you can watch American football matches at stadiums or on TV.

QUESTIONS

- 1) Characterize Christmas in **Britain**. Compare them to Christmas in the Czech Republic (date, meals, traditions and activities, symbols). You and Christmas.
- 2) What happens on St. Valentine's Day?
- 3) What do you know about Easter in Britain?
- 4) What is Halloween?
- 5) What happens on Guy Fawkes Night and Remembrance Day?
- 6) In what way do people spend 31st December in Britain?
- 7) Are there any national holidays in the **U.S.A.**?
- 8) Which holidays popular in the U.S.A. are the same (or similar) as in the UK?
- 9) Characterize the two best-known holidays which are typical for the USA.