



A long time ago the year was marked out with special days which marked the passing year. These were days of celebrations where people would do things, eat things or make things which they would not normally do. Some of these celebrations may seem strange, funny and even mad to visitors to England. Where else can you watch adults run down a steep hill chasing a ball of cheese? Below is a calendar of unusual customs, ceremonies and traditions in England and other parts of Britain.

May

The *first day* of the month of *May* is known as **May Day**. It is the time of year when warmer weather begins and flowers and trees start to blossom. It is said to be a time of love and romance. It is when people celebrate the coming of summer with lots of different customs that are expressions of joy and hope after a long winter.

Interesting Fact

Although May Day is now the first day of the month of May, before 1752, when the calendar was changed, it was 11 days earlier.

May Day Bank Holiday

The month of May has many traditions and celebrations. For the convenience of the general public many May Day activities have now been moved to the new May Day holiday (or the Saturday nearest) on the first Monday of the month. This May Day Monday is a bank holiday.

What are bank holidays?

British bank holidays have been recognized since 1871. The name Bank Holiday comes from the time when banks were shut and so no trading could take place. Even though banks are still closed on these days many shops now remain open.

How was May Day Celebrated?

May Day celebrations have their origins in the Roman festival of Flora, goddess of fruit and flowers, which marked the beginning of summer. People would decorate their houses and villages with fresh-cut foliage and flowers gathered at dawn in the belief that the vegetation spirits would bring good fortune.

May Eve was known as *Mischief Night* in some parts of Britain and all sorts of practical jokes were played and a general nuisance made.

May Day was an important day in the Middle Ages and was a favourite holiday of many English villages. People used to cut down young trees and stick them in the ground in the village to mark the arrival of summer. This is the origin of the maypole. People danced around them in celebration of the end of winter and the start of the fine weather that would allow planting to begin.

In the very early morning, young girls went into the fields and washed their faces with dew. They believed this made them very beautiful for the following year. *May Day*, was also the day when the young men of each village tried to win prizes with their bows and arrows.

In the North of England, the first of May was a kind of late "April Fooling" when all sorts of pranks would take place and "May Gosling" was the shout if you managed to trick someone. The response would be:

May Goslings past and gone. You're the fool for making me one!

May Day Celebrations today

In some places May Day celebrations begin at sunset on 30th April. They include lots of floral decorations and processions through towns and villages.

In Charlton-on-Otmoor, a village near Oxford a May Day festival is held involving all the children from the Primary School. It starts with a special May day song followed by a procession to the church. Everyone wears white and carries garlands of flowers. The girls wear straw bands and posies and ribbons in their hair.

In the church, the posies are laid in a great spread below the Rood Screen, which is specially decorated with a Rood-Cross completely wrapped in Yew leaves and branches.

After a very full special service, all the children process back to their school with all their families and friends. They dance a number of May Day dances and Maypole ones too before tucking into a great May Day feast.

Rochester Sweeps Festival

Rochester's annual Sweep Festival celebrates the traditional holiday that chimney sweeps used to enjoy on *1 May*. It was the one time of the year when the sweeps could put away their tools and have some fun.

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The Sweeps Festival is a colourful mix of music, dancing and entertainment. An opportunity to see some of the traditional dances and hear the songs which have been past down from generation to generation.



Rochester Cathedral. 1400 years of Christian worship, pilgrimage and prayer



Rochester Castle. The castle was one of the first to be built of stone and at 125 feet is the tallest keep in England. It was constructed by the Bishop of Rochester in around 1090

Padstow 'Obby 'Oss

The oldest *May Day* celebration still taking place today, is the Padstow '*Obby 'Oss* celebration in Cornwall. Its roots date back to the 14th century. Every *May Day* thousands of people come to see the two famous Hobby Horses, the Old *Oss* and the Blue Ribbon *Oss*.

Celebrations in Padstow officially start the night before at midnight, when a groups of "mayers" meet outside the Golden Lion Inn to serenade the owner with their *Night Song*:

*Rise up, Mr. Rickard, and joy to you betide,
For summer is a-come in today;
And bright is your bride, that lays down by your side
In the merry morning of May.*

The whole town is ablaze with bluebells, forget-me-nots, cowslips, and sycamore twigs. Dancing and other celebrations take place all day.

Maypole Dancing

Maypoles were once common all over England and were kept from one year to the next. The original maypoles were

freshly felled trees, stripped of their branches, brought into the community and adorned with garlands and ribbons and did not always resemble the maypoles of modern times. The Maypole was originally a pagan fertility symbol. The tallest maypole is said to have been erected in London on the Strand in 1661; it stood over 143 feet high. It was felled in 1717, when it was used by Isaac Newton to support Huygen's new reflecting telescope.

Many English villages still have a maypole, and on May 1st, the villagers dance around it.

Schools would practise skipping round the pole for weeks before the final show on the village greens. The end results would be either a beautiful plaited pattern of ribbons round the pole or a tangled cat's cradle, depending on how much rehearsing had been done.

By the movements of the dancers the ribbons are intertwined and plaited either on to the pole itself or into a web around the pole.



Morris Dancing

Another traditional dance seen throughout the month of May is *Morris Dancing*. The dancing is very lively and often accompanied by an accordion player.



Morris Dancing is a traditional English form of folkdancing, performed by groups of men or women. It has been danced for hundreds of years, and passed down through the generations in the villages of rural England. The

dances are usually performed at festivals such as *May Day*, *Whitsun* and *Christmas*.

Morris dancers wear different clothes depending on the part of the country in which they dance. They are often dressed in white with coloured baldrics (coloured belts) across their chests.

There are usually six or eight dancers arranged in two lines or in a circle facing each other. The dancers may carry white handkerchiefs that they shake, or short sticks that they bang against each other as they dance.

There are also single dancers who wear special costumes.

There are several thoughts to the origins of *Morris Dancing*. The name may refer to the possibility of the form of dancing coming to England from the Moors of North Africa; or it may have been called "Moor-ish" simply because the dancers sometimes painted their faces black, and people compared this to the dark-skinned Moors.

There are different forms of *Morris dancing*.

Border Morris



Border Morris dances are usually performed with heavy wooden sticks which are clashed together, often accompanied by shouts from the dancers.



Dancers generally wear "tatter jackets" and black their faces – probably originating as a form of disguise.

Cotswold Morris



The dancers wear dozens of bells on each leg, wield handkerchiefs and / or sticks and dance to lively folk tunes.

Sword Dancing



Dancers are linked in a ring holding blunt swords. The dance form is distinctive for its fast, elegant weaving movements created by the dancers passing over and under the swords whilst remaining linked. The dance usually ends with the final woven "star" being held aloft by one of the dancers.

Garland Dancing



The dances are performed to live music, traditionally played on instruments such as the accordion seen in the photograph below. The songs are mainly traditional in origin, and each dance goes with a particular tune.



Saturday 30th April – Monday 2nd May***Spalding Flower Festival***

Thousands of tulips adorn floats in this annual event in Lincolnshire. The parade was started by local growers using the flowers from tulips grown for bulb production.

Cheese Rolling

The first Sunday or Monday in May is a unique opportunity to witness the ancient custom of cheese rolling.

Gloucester Cheese Rolling. Randwick, Gloucestershire, England

After rolling three double Gloucester cheeses around the church, one is cut up and shared amongst bystanders and the other two are rolled down a steep hill.

Stilton Cheese Rolling. Stilton, Cambridgeshire

Teams of four, in bizarre costumes, roll stilton cheese along a 50-yard course. They must not kick or throw the cheeses. The prize is a whole Stilton Cheese, which weighs about 16 pounds, and bottles of port – the traditional accompaniment.

Edam Cheese Rolling. Ide Hill, Kent

Women chase a thrown edam cheese down the sloping village green during the annual Whit Monday Fair.

Cheese Rolling. Cooper's Hill, Brookworth in Gloucestershire.

Forty thousand spectators congregate at Coopers Hill in the Gloucester village of Brockworth to watch the traditional 7lb Double Gloucester cheese hurtle down a steep slope, pursued by dozens of running, rolling competitors, the fastest of whom wins the cheese.

Cheese rolling also takes place in other areas around England.

About May 8***Furry Dance***

The Floral Dance always takes place on the 8th of May, except when that falls on a Sunday or Monday, when the Dance is held on the previous Saturday. The Helston Floral Dance Cornwall is one of the oldest surviving customs in the Country, and is a festival to celebrate the coming of spring and the passing of winter. Its origins are thought to be in pagan times.

29 May***Oak Apple Day***

Many people used to wear oak-apple leaves in their lapels or hats and decorate their front doors on *Oak Apple Day*. At one time, if you didn't, you would risk being stung with nettles or kicked and pinched for being a Round-head. This is still celebrated by some children in Sussex as "Pinch-Bum-Day"

This is the day that traditionally people wear oak apples or oak leaves pinned to them to remember that on May 29th king Charles II returned triumphantly to London after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. The reason for the wearing of oak apples or oak leaves was to celebrate the King's narrow escape from capture by Cromwell's soldiers by hiding in an oak tree.

Until well into the twentieth century, anyone caught not wearing an oak leaf or oak apple on May 29th could be pinched, kicked, or otherwise abused. Whipping with nettles was a favourite punishment, hence it got the name "Nettle Day" in some areas.

Arbor Tree Day

In Aston on Clun in Shropshire, a large tree standing in the centre of the village is decorated with flags on the last Sunday in May. The flags stay on the tree until the following May. People say that in 1786 the local landowner John Marston married on May 29th and, when passing through the village, saw the villagers celebrating Arbor Day. The bride thought that the tree looked so beautiful covered in flags, that she gave money to the village to allow the custom to continue.

Ascension Day or Rogation Day

On *Good Friday*, Jesus died on the cross. On *Easter Sunday*, he came back to life. During the forty days which followed that first Easter, he kept appearing to his followers.

Ascension Day marks the last appearance of Jesus to the disciples after his resurrection at Easter. It is the 40th day after *Easter Sunday* and always falls on a Thursday (hence its other name Holy Thursday). Ten days later is *Pentecost*, which marks the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples.

The name "ascension" comes from the accounts in the Bible in Mark's Gospel and Luke's Gospel that tell of Jesus being taken up into heaven – he ascended.

Ascension Day marks the final meeting between the risen Jesus and his disciples. He told them that he would always be with them, and promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit (at *Pentecost*). At Ascension, Christians celebrate the kingship of Jesus.

Rogationtide

The three days before Ascension Thursday are sometimes referred to as the Rogation days (and the previous Sunday, the Fifth Sunday after Easter, as Rogation Sunday).

Rogationtide starts with Rogation Sunday and ends with Holy Thursday which is commonly called Ascension Day, the second Thursday before *Whitsuntide*.

Ascension Day is associated across Britain with various water festivals ranging from *Well Dressing* in Derbyshire to the Planting of the "Penny Hedge" or "Horngarth" in the harbour at Whitby, Yorkshire.

Well-Dressing

The custom of well-dressing is popular all over Derbyshire. The wells are dressed with large framed panels decorated with elaborate mosaic-like pictures made of flower petals, seeds, grasses, leaves, tree bark, berries and moss. Well-

dressings are beautiful and delicate and take a lot of work to make, and yet they only last for a few days.

The Well Dressing in the picture was created by Stretton Handley Primary School.

Many natural materials such as seeds, flowers, bark and wool are pressed into the clay to compose the picture.

Junior children from the School contribute to the Brackenfird Well Dressings every year.



Beating the Bounds

Ascension Day is also the day for *Beating the Bounds*, or Boundaries, of your church's parish. The custom was once found in almost every English parish but now is only carried out only in a few places.

The ceremony of Beating the Bounds custom has existed in Britain for well over 2000 years.

In simple terms it involves people in the locality walking around their farm, manorial, church or civil boundaries pausing as they pass certain trees, walls and hedges that denote the extent of the boundary to exclaim, pray and ritually "beat" particular landmarks with sticks. In some places it was quite normal to bump on the boundary marker a child so that locations would be "sorely remembered". In London, a school boy is held upside down by his feet from a boat in the river Thames where there is a boundary!

Beating the Bounds in Oxford

Shoppers at Oxford's Marks and Spencers on *Ascension Day* are surprised when a troop of choristers, academics and visitors enter the lingerie department and proceed to beat a spot on the carpet with long canes, yelling "Mark! Mark! Mark!" The store was built directly over the boundary of the parish of St Michael's. There are 31 other venues in the city and others include the Town Hall, Boots the Chemist, the inside of a bike shop and a pub! The day finishes with a drink of ivy beer, doughnuts and a scramble for hot pennies thrown from the roof of Lincoln College.

Why was the custom of Beating the Bounds Established?

One of the reasons was to establish one's actual boundaries and to check the land in general, as maps were scarce and many parishioners could not read or write.

Ascension Day Superstitions

Eggs laid on *Ascension day* are said to never go bad and will guarantee good luck for a household if placed in the roof.

In Devon, it was an ancient belief that the clouds always formed into the familiar Christian image of a lamb on *Ascension Day*.

If the weather is sunny on *Ascension Day*, the summer will be long and hot; but if it rains, crops will do badly and livestock, especially cattle, will suffer from disease.

According to Welsh superstition, it is unlucky to do any work on *Ascension Day*.

June

Whit Sunday Evening (Pentecost)

Pentecost is also known as Whitsunday and is a major festival in the Christian church. It is celebrated on the Sunday which falls on the 50th day after the *Easter festival*.

The name Pentecost comes from a Greek word which means "fiftieth".

Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit in the form of flames to the followers of Jesus, as recorded in the New Testament. Jesus had told them to wait until the Spirit came to them. Ten days after *Ascension*, 50 days after the resurrection, the Spirit came.

The festival is often called Pentecost because when the disciples received the Holy Spirit and began to go out and preach about Jesus it was the Jewish festival of Pentecost.

Pentecost is recognised as the birth of the Church. The Apostle Peter preached a sermon which resulted in 3,000 people becoming believers. Whit Sunday (Whitsunday) is a favourite day for baptism. It is thought that because people are often baptised dressed in white, Whit Sunday was probably originally known as "White Sunday".

Whitsuntide is the week following with Whitsunday, which is always the seventh Sunday after *Easter Sunday*.

Whit Walks

Christians in some towns and cities have traditionally taken part in Whit Walks. Whitsun was the time for walks and possessions. The traditional "Procession of Witness" has long been celebrated throughout the North West.

Bread and Cheese Throwing

In Gloucestershire, Whit Sunday is called "Bread and Cheese Day" because of a very strange custom.

In St Braivels, Gloucestershire, following evensong on Whit Monday, basketfuls of bread and cheese are thrown from a wall near the old castle, to be scrambled for in a lane below. The locals of St Braivels have been hurling bread and cheese since the 13th century, when the custom began probably as a payment for the villagers' right to cut timber from a nearby wood.

Wool Sack Race

Regulars of the Crown and Royal Oak pubs in Tetbury compete in the annual Wool Sack race. They run up Gumstool Hill with a 60lb sack of wool on their backs.

Dickens Festival

A festival is held in Rochester (Kent) to celebrate the life and work of the great novelist Charles Dickens.

Midsummer Bonfires

A chain of bonfires is lit one after another on hilltops from Lands End in the far South West to Kithill on the border with Devon in the East. They are a celebration of summer, lit on the eve of longest day (the evening being the start of the celtic day).

Longest Day of the Year

The longest day of the year is June 21st. On this day, the sun is at its most northerly point and this is why it is "the longest day".

Every June 21st hundreds of people go to Stonehenge to watch the sun rise. The sun shines on one famous stone – the Hell stone. For the Druids this is a very important moment of the year.

What is Stonehenge?

Stonehenge is one of Europe's biggest stone circles. A lot of stones are ten or twelve metres high. The earliest part of Stonehenge is nearly 5,000 years old. It is thought that the Druids used Stonehenge for a calendar.



Who are / were Druids?

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 the months and seasons. There are Druids in Britain today too.

18th June

Nettle Eating Contest

Thirty challengers attempt to out eat the current champion nettle-eater. The contest is held in Marsham (Dorset).

July

St Swithin's Day

St. Swithin's Day is 15th July, a day on which people watch the weather for tradition says that what ever the weather

is like on St Swithin's Day, it will continue so for the next forty days.

There is a weather-rhyme is well known throughout the British Isles since Elizabethan times.

*"St Swithin's Day, if it does rain
Full forty days, it will remain
St Swithin's Day, if it be fair
For forty days, t'will rain no more."*

St Swithin (or more properly, Swithun) was a Saxon Bishop of Winchester and legend says that as he lay on his deathbed, he asked to be buried out of doors, where he would be trodden on and rained on. For nine years, his wishes were followed, but then, the monks of Winchester attempted to remove his remains to a splendid shrine inside the cathedral on 15 July 971. According to the legend there was a heavy rain storm either during the ceremony or on its anniversary.

This led to the old wives' tale (folklore) that if it rains on St Swithin's Day (July 15th), it will rain for the next 40 days in succession, and a fine 15th July will be followed by 40 days of fine weather.

However, according to the Met Office, this old wives' tale is nothing other than a myth. It has been put to the test on many occasions, when it has been wet on St Swithin's Day and 40 days of rain did not follow.

Swan Upping

The Dyers and Vintner's Companies have the right, established in medieval times, to keep swans on the Thames River. Every year the Queen's Swan Keeper and Swan Markers from the two livery companies row in skiffs along the river to mark the cygnets (baby swans).

August

Scarecrow Festival

Life-size scarecrows are made and displayed around the village Kettlewell (Yorks) by local people in early to mid-August. A hugely popular event.

24 August

St Bartholomew's Bun Race

The Bartlemas Bun Race for children takes place around the chapel of St Bartholomew's Hospital at Sandwich on St Bartholomew's Day. Each participant receives a currant bun, while the attendant grown-ups are each given a St Bart's Biscuit, impressed with a copy of the hospital's ancient seal.

Faversham International Hop Festival

A celebration of the hop harvest when thousands of Londoners went to Kent for a working holiday.

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