

Emma Page, an English teacher, writer, Bournemouth, UK

Chocolate day Easter

Mmm, chocolate day, sorry, I mean Easter, of course, although even the non-religious British majority take part in the Easter tradition of giving and receiving chocolate eggs. One of my earliest memories is of arriving at my grandparents' house, our car crunching onto their gravel driveway, the three of us squashed into the backseat. I look up to see Grandma on the front step and she is holding ceramic cups for each of us. They seemed enormous and were decorated with beautiful animal designs and the most enormous shiny-paper wrapped eggs were sticking out of the top. I still have my cup but the egg went within minutes; I was never one of those children who could stretch out a hoard of chocolate. My sister, on the other hand, would often pull out an Easter egg at the start of the summer holidays just to torture me. As you can see from my tongue-in-cheek title the UK has become very commercial in regards to Easter since my childhood. For most people, it is about the chocolate and not the religious event but what are the Easter traditions in the UK?

Children's activities

Palm Sunday, a week before Easter, involves making crosses out of palm leaves to decorate the classroom or church hall; Easter bonnets, or hats, are also made and covered with daffodils and other flowers of the season; and finally, Easter bunnies are drawn onto coloured card and their fluffy cotton wool tails stuck on with copious amounts of white PVA glue. Most of these activities are for those under 10 but happily the chocolate eggs are even exchanged among adults in the UK. A treat I haven't had to give up for the sake of 'being a grown-up'.

Food

Other traditions include special food for Easter Sunday to break the Lenten fast, especially the luxurious yellow marzipan-covered simnel cake. Not something my family ever really did but I know it was a big thing for friends. See a recipe and picture here http://www.bbc.co.uk/food/recipes/simnelcake_792.

Then there is the delicious hot cross bun. This is so popular with my family that we still ship them to my brother in Japan every year. Here is a picture and recipe http://www.bbc.co.uk/food/recipes/hotcross-buns_397

The hot cross bun was accompanied by a rhyme that I certainly remember singing as a child.

Hot cross buns,
hot cross buns,
one a penny, two a penny,
hot cross buns.

If you do not like them,
give them to your sons,
one a penny, two a penny,
hot cross buns.

Additionally, the traditional Easter dinner is a roast because it is on a Sunday. In the UK it is very common



Easter eggs

In the UK, or in my family anyway, Easter means chocolate and lots of it. From friends and relatives, we receive chocolate eggs presented in colourful cardboard boxes and wrapped in beautifully shiny foil. Often the eggs contain yet more sweet treats in the form of jelly sweets or chocolate buttons. As a child, I would settle down between the sofa and radiator with my stash and a good book and I wouldn't leave until one or the other was finished. Ah, Easter. What a great time. Indulgence is indulged. Parents do not scold you to save some for later. This is the one time of the year you can give in to your sweet-toothed weakness and dig in. These days children can enjoy not only chocolate eggs but chocolate bunnies too and the treats are often decorated with their favourite film or TV characters.

to eat a roast on a Sunday. This usually means roast chicken, pork or beef. The meat is always accompanied by roast potatoes but the other accompaniments vary according to which meat you are using. However, because Easter is in the spring it has become traditional to eat roast lamb on Easter Sunday. With this you have roast potatoes, a green vegetable of some kind, maybe green beans or courgette, probably some carrots too, and mint sauce. In my family we also had stuffing but not everyone has that with lamb.

Clothes

There used to be a big tradition of buying and wearing a special Easter outfit. In the past, most people couldn't afford to buy new clothes whenever they felt like it. As a result, special occasions also meant a new outfit. People would wear their fine new clothes to the church service on Easter Sunday and there was a real sense of celebration. These days the church is a far smaller part of society and people buy new clothes whenever they feel like it so this tradition has slipped. But in church-going communities people still dress up for Easter Sunday and wear their finest clothes to the service. I still remember the blue satin dress with white collar that my sister and I got when I was about eight years old. I wore it to every party that year.



Maundy Thursday

A tradition that I believe is unique to the UK is Royal Maundy. The Queen gives a red and white purse to one man and one woman for each year of the monarch's life. These are elderly people who have been chosen for their contribution to society through the Church of England. The purses contain special silver coins made just for this occasion as well as real money. In the past, the monarch used to give gifts of clothes and food. Until the nineteenth century, the monarch would wash the feet of the poor in a gesture symbolising the humility of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples on the day before Good Friday (Maundy Thursday).

History

Many of the traditions we have in the UK for Easter can be traced back to pagan times and the rites of spring. Even the name comes from the Anglo-Saxon name for the month in which Easter is usually celebrated 'Eostre-monarth', which is now known as April. The Anglo-Saxons named the month after a goddess who symbolised fertility 'Eostre'. Thus pagan traditions were incorporated into the Christian celebration. Wearing spring flowers on an Easter bonnet, images of bunnies, lambs and eggs as well as the period of fasting (Lent) before a day of abundance all lead back to pagan traditions around the spring equinox when the short dark days and bare cupboards of winter are cast aside and a new season of light and plenty is entered when nature decides it's time for the new little animals to be born and the plants to grow.

Is the USA the same or different?

While the basic traditions are broadly the same, our American cousins of course do things differently.



Easter Bunny

With a strong Germanic influence in its early Protestant years, the American traditions focus more strongly on the Easter bunny, which hides eggs for children to find in great big community-based hunts. In the UK some people hunt for eggs but it is a smaller family affair and far less common.



Easter Basket

Uniquely American is the Easter basket. In the past, this would have been a simple wicker basket but modern designs include baskets made to look like footballs or chicks. They are filled with candies and small presents and the Easter bunny leaves them for good children in a similar way to Father Christmas and the stocking. Jelly beans and Peeps are the most popular Easter candy <http://www.marshmallowpeeps.com/products/easter>. Peeps are a soft gooey yellow marshmallow shaped like a chick. The baskets also contain small chocolate eggs. Once the candies have been taken out the Easter baskets are used in the egg hunts.

Dyed Eggs

The eggs in the hunts are usually chicken eggs dyed different colours rather than chocolate ones. This can be a fun activity to do with your class. Author BeaDaNurse on YouTube has a short video showing you how with a simple description below the screen. Again, some people in the UK dye Easter eggs and it is becoming more popular as we are influenced by American culture on our screens.



Easter Parades

The New York Easter Parade has a long history and may be linked to the tradition of well-off New Yorkers buying a new outfit for Easter to wear to church and then to show off while walking along Fifth Avenue. Back in those days, a new hat or bonnet was a significant part of the outfit. These days, the tradition continues and part of Fifth Avenue is closed to traffic while participants parade up and down often wearing extravagant hats for the entertainment of the watching public.

When is Easter?

You're probably thinking May 5th but here in the UK that would be impossible. In the West, Easter is always on a Sunday. In 2013 it is 31st March. It can vary between 22nd March and 25th April based on some complex calculations.

Researching this article I've learned that the Eastern Orthodox Church uses a calendar going back to Julius Caesar while the West dropped that in the 16th century and have a different calendar decreed by the Pope at the end of the 1500s. His name was Gregory hence the western Gregorian calendar. This explains why key Christian events do not always happen on the same date in the different churches and why the Russian Easter is usually a week after the UK and US one although this year they will be just about as far apart as is possible. Have a look at this great article in the Independent newspaper for a detailed explanation of how the date for Easter is calculated.

As the UK is historically a Christian country (our Queen is the head of the national church), we get two public holidays for Easter. Public holidays in the UK are known as Bank Holidays as they are working days on which the banks are closed. The Easter Bank Holidays are Good Friday and Easter Monday. British schools are also closed for two weeks between the spring and summer terms at the end of March or beginning of April. This holiday is always aligned with Easter. So, as the parents have a long weekend and the children are off school, many families go away for a break.

Table of dates of Easter 2001–2021
(In Gregorian dates)

Year	Spring Full moon	Astronomical Easter	Gregorian Easter	Julian Easter	Jewish Passover
2001	8 April	15 April	15 April	15 April	8 April
2002	28 March	31 March	31 March	5 May	28 March
2003	16 April	20 April	20 April	27 April	17 April
2004	5 April	11 April	11 April	11 April	6 April
2005	25 March	27 March	27 March	1 May	24 April
2006	13 April	16 April	16 April	23 April	13 April
2007	2 April	8 April	8 April	8 April	3 April
2008	21 March	23 March	23 March	27 April	20 April
2009	9 April	12 April	12 April	19 April	9 April
2010	30 March	4 April	4 April	4 April	30 March
2011	18 April	24 April	24 April	24 April	19 April
2012	6 April	8 April	8 April	15 April	7 April
2013	27 March	31 March	31 March	5 May	26 March
2014	15 April	20 April	20 April	20 April	15 April
2015	4 April	5 April	5 April	12 April	4 April
2016	23 March	27 March	27 March	1 May	23 April
2017	11 April	16 April	16 April	16 April	11 April
2018	31 March	1 April	1 April	8 April	31 March
2019	21 March	24 March	21 April	28 April	20 April
2020	8 April	12 April	12 April	19 April	9 April
2021	28 March	4 April	4 April	2 May	28 March