

## Halloween Traditions

The ancient Celtic festival of Samhain (pronounced “sow-in”) marked the end of Summer and the harvest before the onset of Winter. It probably dates back over 2000 years and was celebrated mainly in areas of Ireland, much of Britain and northern France. As temperatures fell, the frailer and elderly would be more likely to perish and Pagan beliefs around the boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead would merge. On the night of October 31<sup>st</sup>, it was held that the ghosts of the dead returned to Earth.



The unworldly spirits could influence the natural world and bring harm to crops and livestock. Druids dressed in animal skins and heads, would seek to reduce the harms by lighting fires and offering sacrifices with portions of the crops and animals to predict their fortunes. Domestic fire hearths were then rekindled the next morning from the embers of sacrificial fires.

During Roman times fusions of different belief systems, including early Christianity, was widespread. As with the Pagans, the imperial conquerors had their own traditions for commemorating the passing of their dead with Feralia in late October. They honoured Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruit and trees and may have influenced the tradition of “bobbing” for apples.



The mediaeval Catholic church in Rome was similarly flexible about incorporating the feast of All Martyrs Day, by moving it from the month of May to coincide with the Autumn Celtic festival of the dead and supplant it with their own religious ceremonies. By 1000 CE, the Pope had added All Souls’ Day on November the 2<sup>nd</sup>, which included the lighting of bonfires and parades with people dressed as saints and angels and devils.

The Pagan practice of Samhain was then further blurred by the evolution of All Saints’ Day, otherwise known as All-hallows, derived from early middle English “*Alholowmess*”, for All Saints. This church-sanctioned holiday was placed the night before the traditional night of Samhain and it began to be called All-Hallows Eve, then Halloween.

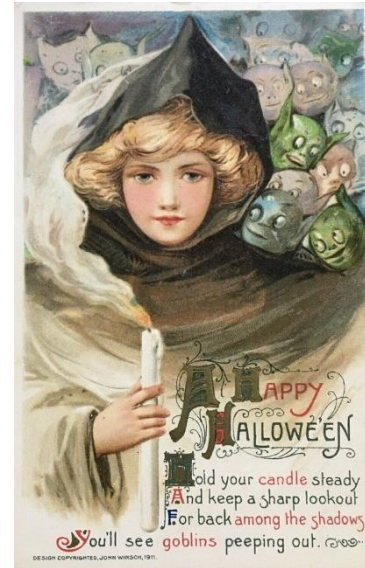
Samhain has been woven into folklore in different parts of the country. In the Summerlands (somerset) old wives tales concerned with “fairies” include Gwyn Ap Nudd, who would lead a wild hunt from his Tor at Glastonbury on All Hallows Eve. Even just a century ago, the “faerie” was a cause for concern and treated with respect. Farmers would leave offerings outside barns or mischief would follow.

Halloween has traditionally been celebrated through the communal telling of ghost stories, helped along by the use of candle-illuminated lanterns, carved out of swedes and turnips with faces to ward off the evil spirits. The now popular use of pumpkins began in the United States, after the customs were introduced to the colonies in Maryland and the South by European settlers.



The practice was greatly increased by the flood of Irish migrants in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fleeing the potato famines.

Halloween has gradually lost its superstitious and religious meaning, as it turned into an Autumn holiday celebration where young women sought to divine the name and appearance of their future husbands by using pieces of yarn or apple peelings and mirrors.



Neighbourhood get-togethers were helped along by parties with games and seasonal foods and festive costumes.

The more frightening and grotesque elements encouraged by newspapers and community leaders, leading to parades in the 1920's and 1930's and a revival of a centuries old practice of "trick-or-treating", which by the 1950's had become plagued by vandalism.

As with many cultural events in the Western world, the traditions are now exploited by commercialism and along with Christmas, the event generated billions in revenue each year.



Image Right: Farrington Gurney Pumpkins

Information from Historic-UK, History.com, and Great British Life

