

Harvest Home

The Harvest Home, is a traditional English harvest festival, celebrated from antiquity and surviving to modern times in isolated regions. Participants celebrate the last day of harvest in late September by singing, shouting, and decorating the village with boughs.

In ancient times harvest customs were connected with bringing in corn or other cereal crops. The bringing in of the harvest derives from the Anglo-Saxon word for autumn, “haerfest”. ‘Hollaing Largesse’ is one of the traditions of the field. If a stranger passed a field in East Anglia where people were harvesting, the reapers would form a circle and shout ‘Holla Lar! Holla Lar! Holla Lar-Jess!’ The hapless stranger would then be expected to make a donation to them to help pay for their harvest supper.



Reapers resting – John Singer Sargent



The last sheaf of corn had a particular significance in the field. In Cornwall, one of the reapers cuts this with a scythe and holds it aloft, shouting ‘I have ‘un! I have ‘un! I have ‘un!’ The other farmworkers reply ‘what ‘ave ‘ee? What ‘ave ‘ee? What ‘ave ‘ee?’ The reply is ‘A neck! A neck! A neck!’ Then everyone joins in shouting ‘Hurrah! Hurrah for the neck!’ In some other parts of the country, this differs slightly with the ceremony being called ‘Crying the Mare’.

A final handful of corn stalks might then have been woven into a ‘corn dolly’. This represented the spirit of the corn and was kept until the following spring to ensure a good harvest next year. In Hampshire, this is a “Kern Baby” and in Devon a “Kirn Babby”.

It is widely held that one of the first recorded formal Harvest Home celebrations was held nearby in East Brent in 1857. It was inaugurated by archdeacon George Denison, who decided the working people needed an official holiday and knees-up. The idea obviously caught on and by 1861 the Church of England recognised the Harvest Home in the Church calendar. Like many rural communities around the country, villages including Lympsham, began to follow the lead and held their own celebrations. In areas like Somerset harvest time involved a whole array of other crops too, including apples, cherries, hops and potatoes. Apples being picked a little later in the year, usually in October.

Photo of Victorian farmers in 1901





The celebration of the harvesting of food often involves special feasts or dishes. Bread is often featured. A loaf might be baked into the shape of a wheat sheaf, and on Lammas Day, the first of August, bread baked with freshly picked corn was taken into the local church to be blessed.

The popularity of the East Brent Harvest Home led to huge gatherings of crowds of up to 6,000 merrymakers who joined in and the festival lasted for several days. Even by the time of the Second World War in 1938, 1,400 people were expected.

It was by no means a small celebration with the consumption of huge quantities of meat. The East Brent event would require up to 150 quarterns (a quartern = 4lbs) of bread, a giant cheese, so heavy that four men carried it on a trencher, 120 gallons of beer and 60 gallons of cider. In 1957, there was 120lb cheddar cheese to be consumed and a 6' x 2' harvest loaf, which was borne aloft on the shoulders of six men.

Photo - September 1934: A farmer at Stoke Orchard, near Tewkesbury, bringing in a sheaf of corn.

To support the event local residents would have to prepare well in advance. A certain Mrs Elizabeth Evans made over a 100 "Christmas puddings" annually for 33 years during her life in the village. The ingredients for this alone included 65lbs of suet and 60lbs of flour, not to mention all the fruit.



Photo - Villagers from Bridgewater, Somerset participating in the traditional Harvest Home festival, which involves carrying plum puddings in a procession, in 1938.



Whether these traditions will continue into the remainder of the 21st Century, will depend on the willingness of the new generations that are born in or move into rural areas to collaborate in the work that goes into organising the festivities. The culture of a Nation changes over time, yet many will continue to respect and value what has gone before, which helps to define us as a people in these islands.