

# Halloween

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*Alternate meanings:*

- Halloween (movie)
- Halloween documents (a series of confidential Microsoft memoranda on its strategies related to Open source software)

*The factual accuracy of this article is disputed.*

**Halloween** or **Hallowe'en** is a holiday on the night of October 31 that is celebrated in much of the Western world, nowhere more enthusiastically than in the US, although most Western countries recognise it as an official date. The eve is that before All Saints' Day, November 1— hence its alternative name: *All Saints' Eve* or *All Hallows' Eve*. In Catholic tradition All Saints' Day is a time of holy obligation. If this day, originally simply honoring all the departed faithful, now also helps the faithful to recall to mind the reality of Hell, it is only through its association with Hallowe'en.

Various traditions, and indeed even to this day people of different religious persuasions, celebrate "Halloween" in quite different ways. Certain customs long surviving in Ireland, were brought to the United States by Irish emigrants in the 19th century.

A variation on Halloween is "Punkie Night" which is observed the last Thursday in October in the village of Hinton St. George in the county of Somerset in England (see under "Jack o'Lantern' below).

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## Symbols

Halloween is a holiday that is based around embracing scary things, particularly those

involving death, the undead, "evil" magic, and mythical monsters. It is a *liminal* or threshold occasion, when the distinctions between the daylight world of reason and the spectral nightworld are blurred.

Commonly-associated Halloween "characters" include ghosts, witches, black cats, goblins, banshees, zombies, and demons, as well as certain literary figures such as Dracula and Frankenstein's monster.

Black and orange are the traditional colors of Halloween. There are also elements of the autumn season reflected in symbols of Halloween, such as pumpkins and scarecrows.

## Jack O'Lantern

The jack o'lantern is one of Halloween's most prominent symbols. In Britain and Ireland, a turnip was, and sometimes still is, used but emigrants to America quickly adopted the pumpkin since it is much easier to carve. Families that celebrate Halloween will carve a pumpkin into a scary or comical face, and place a candle inside the hollowed out shell, creating a crude lantern. This is then placed on the home's doorstep on Halloween night in order to scare evil spirits away.

A variant of a Jack o'Lantern carried on a string is a feature of Punkie Night, celebrated the fourth Thursday of October in the village of Hinton St.

George, Somerset. (In England, Celtic customs and language have lingered longest in the southwest.) For Punkie Night, children carry lanterns made from hollowed-out mangel-wurzels (these days pumpkins are used) with faces cut out of them around the village boundary, collecting money and singing the punkie song. *Punkie* is derived from pumpkin or punk, meaning tinder. Though the custom is only attested over the last century, and the mangel wurzel itself was introduced into English agriculture in the later 18th century, "Punkie Night" appears to be much older, older even than the fable that now accounts for it, in which the wives of Hinton St. George went looking for their wayward husbands at the fair held nearby at Chiselborough, the last Thursday in October, but first hollowed out mangel wurzels in order to make lanterns to light their way. The laboriously improvised lanterns are not so easily explained, but the reaction of drunken husbands to the eerie lights is perhaps more telling: they immediately identified the lights as "goolies," the restless spirits of children who had died before they were baptized — and fled in terror! Children carry the punkies now. The event has spread since *ca* 1960 to the neighboring village of Chiselborough.

*Sources:* on-line report from the *Western Gazette* and a *National Geographic* radio segment. Chiselborough Fair is memorialized by Fair Place in the village. *The National Gazetteer of Great Britain and Ireland* (1868) reported that there was "a fair for horses and cattle on the last Thursday in October."



Jack o'Lantern

## Trick or Treating

The main event of Halloween is trick-or-treating, or *guising*, in which children dress up in costume *disguises*, and go door-to-door in their neighbourhood, ringing the bell and yelling "trick or treat!" or "Halloween apples!" The occupant of the house may then ask the child to do a party trick before giving some small candies, miniature chocolate bars or other individually wrapped treats as a reward. However the party trick is often dispensed with. Children can often accumulate quite a lot of treats on Halloween night, filling up entire pillow cases or shopping bags.



Candy apples

Typical Halloween costumes have traditionally been monsters such as vampires, ghosts, witches, and devil. In 19th century Ireland the reason for wearing such fearsome costumes was the belief that since the spirits that were abroad that night were essentially intent on doing harm, the best way to avoid this was to fool the spirits into believing that you were one of them. In recent years however, more contemporary costume ideas have also become popular, such as dressing up as a character from a popular TV show or movie. It's not uncommon for Halloween participants to celebrate by wearing costumes related to a specific theme or

time. In 2001, after the September 11 Attacks, for example, costumes of firefighters, police officers, and United States military personnel became popular amongst children.

Trick or Treating usually ends when a child enters his or her teenage years. Teenagers and adults instead often celebrate Halloween with costume parties or other social get-togethers.

## Decorations

A related aspect of the Trick or Treating event is that people often decorate their house in the Halloween spirit. Jack O'Lanterns are, of course, quite popular and the theme tends to be spooky including ghosts, goblins, witches, etc. These may be quite elaborate such as sound effects and fog machines. The occupants of the house may dress up and answer the door in spooky attire which can sometimes scare young Trick or Treaters.

## Parties

There are several traditional games associated with Halloween parties. The most common is bobbing for apples, in which a tub or a large basin is filled with water in which apples float. The participants must remove an apple from the basin using only their mouths. Naturally everyone gets wet. Another common game involves hanging up treacle or syrup-coated scones by strings. These must be eaten without using hands while they remain attached to the string, an activity which inevitably leads to a very sticky face.

## Divination rituals

A number of the games traditionally played at Halloween are forms of divination. Another game, Púicíní (pronounced "pook-eeny"), a form of "Blindfold", is played in Ireland. A blindfolded person was seated in front of a table on which are placed several saucers. The

saucers are shuffled and the seated person then chooses one by touch. The contents of the saucer determine the person's life for the following year. A saucer containing earth means someone known to the player will die during the next year. A saucer containing water foretells travel, a coin means new wealth, a bean means poverty, etc. In 19th century Ireland young women placed slugs in saucers sprinkled with flour. The wriggling of the slugs and the patterns subsequently left behind on the saucers were believed to portray the faces of the women's future spouses.

In North America, unmarried women were frequently told that if they sat in a darkened room and gazed into a mirror on Halloween night, the face of their future husband would appear in the mirror - or a skull if they were destined to die before they married. The custom was widespread enough to be commemorated on greeting cards from the late nineteenth century.

## Baking

A Halloween custom which has survived unchanged to this day in Ireland is the baking, or more often nowadays the purchase, of a barmbrack (Ir. "báirín breac"). This is a light fruit cake into which a plain ring is placed before baking. It is said that whoever finds this ring will find his or her true love over the following year.

## Cultural History

### Celtic observation of Samhain

The Celtic festival celebrating the arrival of the season of Samhain was the Druidic holiday of the new year, which took place each year the night of October 31, Celtic days beginning with sundown. After the crops were harvested, Druids in Ireland and Britain would light fires and offer sacrifices of crops and animals. As they danced around the fires, the season of the sun passed and the season of darkness began. When the morning of November 1 arrived, the Druids would give an ember from their fires to each family who would then take them home to start new cooking fires. These fires were believed to keep the homes warm and free from evil spirits, as it was considered a time of year when the veils were thin between worlds. A three-day festival called Samhain (pronounced "sow-inn") followed. In Ireland it was believed to be the night on which the invisible "gates" between this world and the Other World were opened and free movement between both worlds was possible. In the Other World lived the immortal "Sidhe" (pronounced "shee"), the female members of whom were called *beán sidhe* or banshees. (It should be noted that the form of these words are actually modern Gaelic.)

Bonfires played a large part in the festivities and hundreds of fires are lit each year in Ireland on Halloween night. Villagers cast the bones of the slaughtered cattle upon the flames. The word "bonfire" is thought to derive from these "bone fires." With the bonfire ablaze, the villagers extinguished all other fires. Each family then solemnly lit their hearth from the common flame, thus bonding the families of the village together.

Like most Celtic festivals, Samhain was celebrated on a number of levels. Materially speaking it was the time for gathering in food for the long winter months ahead, bringing people and their livestock in to their winter quarters. To be alone and missing at this

dangerous time was to expose yourself and your spirit to the perils of imminent winter. In present times the importance of this part of the festival has diminished for most people. From the point of view of a tribal people for whom a bad season meant facing a long winter of famine in which many would not survive to the spring, it was paramount.

From an astrological perspective, the setting of Pleiades, the winter stars, heralds the supremacy of night over day, the dark half ruled by the realms of the moon.

In the three days preceding the Samhain month the Sun God, Lugh, maimed at Lughnassadh (August 1), dies by the hand of his *Tánaiste* (counterpart or heir), the Lord of Misrule. Lugh traverses the boundaries of the worlds on the first day of Samhain. His Tanist is a miser and though he shines brightly in the winter skies he gives no warmth and does not temper the breath of the Crone, Cailleach Bheare, the north wind. In this may be discerned the ageless battle between the light and dark and the cyclic nature of life and the seasons.

## Christian views

The majority of Christians have no doctrinal view of Halloween, treating it as a purely secular entity devoted to celebrating imaginary spooks and handing out candy. "Halloween", the *profane* celebration, may loom larger in contemporary imagination than All Saints Day. The profane holiday actually has no doctrinal significance.

A few modern Christian writers have conjured up an alleged Druidical belief that on the eve of this festival a "Samhain, lord of death" (a modern invention), called together the wicked spirits that within the past 12 months had been condemned to inhabit the bodies of animals (a most un-Celtic transmigration of souls). During the night the great shield of Skathach was lowered, allowing the barriers between the worlds to fade and the forces of evil to invade the realms of order, the material world conjoining with the world of the dead. At this time ghosts, witches, hobgoblins, black cats, fairies and demons of all kinds roamed amongst the living. The dead could return to the places where they had lived and food and entertainment were provided to exorcize them. If food and shelter were not provided, these spirits would cast spells and cause havoc towards those failing to fulfill their requests.

It was the time to placate the supernatural powers controlling the processes of nature. In addition, Halloween was thought to be the most favorable time for divinations concerning marriage, luck, health and death. It was supposedly the only day on which Christians imagined that the help of the devil was invoked for such purposes.

## Alleged Christianizing of the Celtic Samhain

Ireland never dominated the Catholic Church. It was never the center of that Church. It never held more than a small minority of all adherents to Catholicism at any time in its history. Therefore, any and all claims that the entire Roman Catholic Church refitted its calendar and created a major feast exclusively around the practices of Ireland should be evaluated in this light.

When Christianity reached Ireland and the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in England, conversion began among the local people. Christianization of many Celtic traditions, from Flanders to the north of Spain, included the veneration of innumerable local saints. Catholics deny

that this could include co-optation of "samhain" as the earlier All Saints celebration took place on the 20th of April, not in November, according to earliest Irish sources, like the *Martyrology of Tallacht* and the *Felire of Oengus*. The Catholic Church avers that there was no attempt on the part of missionaries in Ireland to "Christianize" a "Samhain" festival, and no documentation of any such claims has ever been discovered.

Pope Gregory III (731-741) consecrated a chapel in the Basilica of St. Peter to all the saints and refixed the anniversary for 1 November, in accordance with German practices. In 835, Pope Gregory IV extended the celebration for all the martyrs (later all saints) on November 1 to include all the churches. The Christian establishment allegedly co-opted the Samhain season (or so it is claimed, although this presumes a truly absurd amount of power and influence on the part of Ireland over the entirety of the Church at this time). Allegedly, when November 1 became the new date for the feast of All Saints, all the Saints and Martyrs being called upon to sanctify the season, the pagan Celtic Samhain became merely 'Hallows Eve'. This claim ignores that the Irish celebration of All Saints was in the spring, as can be verified by consulting the *Martyrology of Tallacht* and the *Felire of Oengus*, two original sources from before the time of Pope Gregory's proclamation, while the November celebration was a custom of *German* Christians. It turned into a vigil of preparation for the morrow, which was made a day of obligation, when Christians were obliged to attend mass.

In the 11th century, the church would make November 2 All Souls' Day, a day to honor *all the dead*: all the Christian souls in the half-world of Purgatory. Catholic doctrine most clearly reveals the liminal or threshold connection between the two worlds: "that the souls which, on departing from the body, are not perfectly cleansed from venial sins, or have not fully atoned for past transgressions, are debarred from the Beatific Vision, and that the faithful on earth can help them by prayers, almsdeeds and especially by the sacrifice of the Mass." (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1910: 'All Soul's Day').

All Soul's Day was invented or adopted and "Christianized" by Odilo (died 1048) in the Cluniac monasteries, and its observance spread through the so-called "Celtic" north (actually France, England, and Germany) before it was introduced into Italy. The claim of "Christianization", of course, requires that one suspend disbelief and accept that the ancient Irish religion somehow managed to survive intact and very strong into the 11th century, not only survive but expand and spread so that it held great enough sway in High Medieval France (where the Cluniac monasteries were headquartered) to be necessary to "co-opt" yet another early November holiday.

In the 19th century, James Frazer and John Rhys claimed that the Christian establishment had successfully "co-opted" (not their word) the Samhain season, although neither of them presented any direct evidence, whatsoever, of any such "Samhain" festival, beyond the existence of a month in the old Irish calendar with that name. In short, they made it up out of whole cloth. The truth of the matter is that in the very lands where Samhain might have been celebrated, there was no "co-optation" until it coincidentally occurred due to a regularization of a feast that had been celebrated at several different dates-- including the month of April, not November, in Ireland.

## Halloween customs pre 1900

Observance of Halloween faded in the South of England from the 17th century onwards, being replaced by the commemoration of the Gunpowder Plot on November 5. However it

remained popular in Scotland and the North of England. It is only in the last decade that it has become popular in the South of England again, although in an entirely Americanised version.

The custom survives most accurately in Ireland, where the last Monday of October is a public holiday. All schools close for the following week for mid-term, commonly called the Halloween Break. As a result Ireland is the only country where children never have school on Halloween and are therefore free to celebrate it in the ancient and time-honoured fashion.

The custom of trick-or-treating is thought to have evolved from the European custom called souling, similar to the wassailing customs associated with Yuletide. On November 2, All Souls Day, Christians would walk from village to village begging for "soul cakes" - square pieces of bread with currants. Beggars would promise to say prayers on behalf of dead relatives helping the soul's passage to heaven. The distribution of soul cakes was encouraged by the church as a way to replace the ancient practice of leaving food and wine for roaming spirits at the Samhain. See Puck (mythology).

In Celtic parts of western Brittany. Samhain is still heralded by the baking of *kornigou*. Kornigou are cakes baked in the shape of antlers to commemorate the god of winter shedding his "cuckold" horns as he returns to his kingdom in the Otherworld.

### Christianizing the *Lemuria*

May 13 was the culmination of the Roman Feast of the Lemures, in which the restless wandering spirits of the dead were propitiated with offerings and incantations. Pope Boniface IV at the Feast of the Lemures, 13 May, either in 609 or 610 (the day being considered more significant than the year), reconsecrated the Pantheon in Rome to the Blessed Virgin *and all the martyrs*, ordering an anniversary. The feast was to honor all the saints, 'known or unknown' and is taken as an early version of All Saints.

However, this still cannot explain away the celebration of the festival of All Saints as a mere "Christianization" of a pagan festival, since the holiday was celebrated in the spring previous to this date by Eastern Christians who were not subject to the Pope and who did not celebrate Latin festivals.

## Religious Viewpoints

The mingling of Christian and "pagan" traditions in the early centuries following the founding of the Christian Church have left many modern Christians uncertain of their responsibility towards this holiday. Some fundamentalist Christian groups consider Halloween a Pagan holiday and may refer to it as "The most evil day of the year", refusing to allow their children to participate. Among these groups it is believed to have developed Satanic influences, as have many other Pagan practices. It used to be that on Halloween, schools would give children boxes to collect pennies in for UNICEF, but after these fundamentalist Christians complained that the schools were endorsing a Pagan religion, most schools stopped distributing such boxes. Other Christians, however, continue to connect this holiday with All Saints Day. Some modern Christian churches commonly offer a "fall festival" or harvest-themed alternative to Halloween celebrations. Still other Christians hold the view that the holiday is "safe"; that is, that it is not Satanic in origin or

practice and that it holds no threat to the spiritual lives of children.

On this day, Neopagans celebrate the sabbat of Samhain. Many Neopagans also take part in secular Halloween activities.

See also: Day of the Dead

## External links

- All Hallows' Eve (<http://www.kensmen.com/catholic/customtimeafterpentecost12aa.html>)
- An example of Halloween Decorations (<http://www.komar.org/halloween/>)
- *Halloween: The Fantasy and Folklore of All Hallow* by Jack Santino (<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/halloween.html>)
- A Selected Bibliography on Halloween and Related Topics, American Folklife Center (<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/hallobib.html>)
- Halloween History and Information (<http://www.thespookies.com/halloween.htm>)

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Categories: Accuracy disputes

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