



# ***British Folk Customs From Plough Monday to Hocktide***

***For Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2***

***By Malcolm Taylor, Doc Rowe  
and Carolyn Robson***



*Unlocking hidden treasures of  
England's cultural heritage*  
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## ***The Full English***

The Full English was a unique nationwide project unlocking hidden treasures of England's cultural heritage by making over 58,000 original source documents from 12 major folk collectors available to the world via a ground-breaking nationwide digital archive and learning project. The project was led by the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and in partnership with other cultural partners across England.

The Full English digital archive ([www.vwml.org](http://www.vwml.org)) continues to provide access to thousands of records detailing traditional folk songs, music, dances, customs and traditions that were collected from across the country. Some of these are known widely, others have lain dormant in notebooks and files within archives for decades.

The Full English learning programme worked across the country in 19 different schools including primary, secondary and special educational needs settings. It also worked with a range of cultural partners across England, organising community, family and adult learning events.

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By Malcolm Taylor, Doc Rowe and Carolyn Robson  
Edited by Frances Watt

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# Introduction

**This Beginner's Guide covers the period of the year between Twelfth Night (6th January) and Hocktide (the second Tuesday after Easter). Beginning with the Plough Monday commotion at places like Haxey in Humberside and culminating in the Hocktide goings-on at Hungerford in Berkshire, this is an introduction to some special and sometimes anarchic events in the British traditional Calendar which may amaze you.**

Commerce and the mass media ensure that we don't forget the key dates and events. Supermarkets, bakeries and corner shops bombard us with offers of pancakes, Hot-Cross buns and Easter eggs, while florists, chocolate and soap manufacturers get in on the act to remind us of our mothers ... and St. Patrick proves a great friend to the distillers. But many other customary practices are observed in a much more discreet way, displaying a greater local emphasis.

Epiphany, Candlemas, Shrovetide, Ash Wednesday, Lent, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter are the main Christian festivals referred to in this Spring period. This guide concentrates on the customary activities surrounding them and the other traditional celebrations unique and significant to the people of the British Isles. Many often lament the fact that their traditions lack the vitality and excitement of a Mardi Gras or Carnival, a fact which is very apparent in a multi-cultural society where we may share the joys and expressions of many other cultures. Take Chinese New Year or the Notting Hill Carnival, for example. But a simple glance at the contents will reveal a wide diversity of revelry and merry-making that still very much exists, even during the austere Lenten period.

## ***Change of Calendar***

We begin on 6th January - and there lies the first problem! Our calendar was changed in 1752 from the Julian to the Gregorian or New Style calendar by an Act of Parliament in 1751, eleven days disappeared and the day after 2nd September became 14 September. People took to the streets shouting, "Give us back our eleven days", and some adamantly refused to observe the change. Hence, even today, these Old Stylers believe that Christmas Day is really on 6th January.

It was common to start a special day at 6pm the previous evening and to have the Night or Eve coming before the Day, as in Christmas Eve or Night coming before Christmas Day and New Year's Eve before New Year's Day. Confusing? Well, the first day of our Spring calendar is no exception and is commonly known as Twelfth Night - the evening of 5 January and all day of 6 January - which, as we have already said, is Old Christmas Day and, to confuse matters more, Epiphany.

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## ***Wassailing Apple Trees***

**The Wassail Bowl is generally carried around just before Christmas and sometimes makes an appearance in the New Year. But in Bodmin, Cornwall, on Old Christmas Day, men in full evening-dress visit local houses singing songs, consume innumerable drinks and, when they get round to it, collect for charity. Yet another form of wassailing takes place on Old Twelfth Night - the Wassailing of Apple Trees ...**

In various places in the West Country and Herefordshire, Old Twelfth Night is celebrated by people surrounding the apple trees in local orchards where cider is poured over the roots of the trees, toast (soaked in cider) is placed in the branches of the trees, a wassail song is sung, and then shotguns are fired into the branches before a drink of hot cider is taken.

The shotguns are fired to drive away any evil spirits lurking in the branches of the trees which would spoil the apple crop, and the toast is provided for the robins. A unique variation in Devon saw a small boy hoisted into the branches who had to recite, "*Tit, tit, more to eat*", presumably being removed before the guns were fired. Whether he represented the birds or the spirit of the trees is not mentioned. More recent revivals have introduced a Wassail Queen, a young girl carried on a man's shoulders who places the cider soaked toast in the branches by means of a toasting fork.

The Wassail at the back of the 'Butchers Arms' public house on 17 January at Carhampton, Somerset, is a typical example of such Old Twelfth Night celebrations, although the passing of time has forced some changes even there. In 1986 there was only one tree was left standing. The local housing estate, includes a Wassail Close.

In Sussex and Surrey this practice is known as 'Howling' and the people would shout, bang tin-trays and generally make an awful racket to drive off the evil spirits. Areas with cider making industries have encouraged, even initiated, such happenings in recent times.

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# Plough Monday

*"God spede the Plough and send us ale corne anow, our purpose for to make.."*

*(inscription in church at Cawston, Norfolk)*

**Delaying tactics. That was probably one of the reasons for the raucous celebrations which happened in some regions on the Monday following Twelfth Night or 6th January. This is Plough Monday and records of it go back to the beginning of the 15th century. It marked the end of the Christmas holidays for agricultural workers and a return to the land. But just how much work was actually done on this day is another matter . . .**

For Plough Monday was the day when village life in many agricultural areas focused on the dragging of a decorated plough, sometimes a real one but often just a replica, around a community by bands of young men who would knock on doors and ask for money, food or drink. These men were variously known as *Plough Stotts* (Yorkshire and the North East), *Plough Bullocks*, *Plough Jags* or *Jacks* (Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire) or *Witches* (Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire) and they often wore very fanciful costumes adorned with ribbons, jewellery or any sort of ornament available, including horse brasses. One would often be dressed as a woman (the 'Betty') who would carry the collecting box, while others may have blackened their faces to disguise themselves. There may even have been some sword dancers, molly dancers or mummers performing plough plays in some places.

In medieval times it was common for ploughs to be blessed by the church on Plough Sunday and for money to be collected for the *Plough Light*, a flame that would be kept burning throughout the year to bring good luck to the ploughmen and farm labourers. The Reformation did away with most of these symbolic practices, but blessing continued in a few places and still occurred in the 1990s in Exeter Cathedral in Devon, Cottered in Hertfordshire, Cawston in Norfolk, Chichester Cathedral in Sussex, and Goathland, Knaresborough and Long Marston in Yorkshire.

The bounty collected from these perambulations was shared out by the individuals concerned, probably to supplement meagre wages or, if the weather was bad, sometimes none at all. This economic factor might just have been the reason for the continuance and popularity of the custom throughout the centuries. Today, any monies accrued tend to be distributed to local charities - and even commercial sponsorship is accepted.

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## ***Plough Monday Play***

In style, the performance of a PloughPlay was similar to that of the Christmas Mummers' Play. It was originally performed by young men and included some of the same story elements, such as the death and resurrection of one of the characters. However, that is where the similarity ends. Although existing texts vary considerably and border on the surreal at times, this play is basically about a strange courtship (which is why it is often called a Wooing Play) and the interference of a Recruiting Sergeant.

A farm labourer courts a 'lady' but is rejected and persuaded by the Recruiting Sergeant to enlist in the army. The 'lady' then accepts the advances of a Clown or Fool and they agree to marry. An older 'dame' arrives on the scene and accuses the Clown of being the father of her illegitimate baby, which he denies, and the two characters fight until one, usually the 'dame', is killed or wounded and then revived by a quack doctor.

The play would often include a song (in fact, in some cases much of the play would be sung) and in a few places the 'actors' would join the dancers, who followed them around during the day, and alternate their performances, maybe even incorporating the dance into the play. There was also, of course, a plough in attendance and should a household not be forthcoming with alms, it could well find some unwelcome furrows across its front garden.

## ***Straw Bears***

On the Saturday before Plough Monday a fascinating revival has taken place in Whittlesey, near Peterborough, Cambridgeshire. Since 1980 a man encased in a 'straw suit', wearing a sheaf for a hat, has danced through the streets collecting money for charity. This is the Straw Bear which, up until the early part of the 20th century, used to be accompanied by Plough Monday Witches in the Fenland villages between Peterborough and Huntingdon either on the Monday itself or what was called Straw Bear Tuesday. He was also known to have journeyed further north in Lincolnshire but was eventually outlawed as a form of beggar and disappeared until the revival in 1980. Like so many such characters in folklore, his origins are unknown. But this seems of little importance to the band and numerous dance teams who regularly join in the fun.



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# **A Collection of Saints**

St Valentine tends to hog the limelight in the Spring period - here are some others...

## ***Saint Bannock – 7 January***

Saint Bannock was a 6th century monk who sailed from Wales to Devon in a stone coffin. He is buried at Braunton in Devon where there is a carving on a church pew illustrating his amazing expertise in curing animals.

## ***Saint Agnes – 21 January***

Did you know that if you eat a salted herring before you go to bed on the Eve of St Agnes (20 January), an apparition of your future love might appear during the night? St Agnes is the patron saint of chastity and young girls, and honour bestowed upon her because she chose martyrdom rather than marry a non-Christian Roman soldier. She was only 13 at the time.

## ***Saint Vincent – 22 January***

St Vincent was stretched on a rack and then tortured by fire before being left to die in AD304. For no apparent reason he is the patron saint of drunkards - which might be celebrated by many landlords if they only knew...

## ***Saint Apollonia – 9 February***

Toothache? Dodgy gums? This is your saint. St Apollonia was a Christian martyr from Alexandria who was tortured by having all her teeth pulled out before she was finally killed.

## ***Saint David – 14 March***

St David's Day is the patron saint of Wales. This is the day when the Welsh wear leeks on their hats and lapels, although nobody knows the precise reason why. The day is celebrated with music, song and dance. This day, it is said, is also when fleas awake from their Winter slumber and invade houses.

## ***Saint Patrick – 17 March***

St Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland and his day is hugely celebrated by the Irish throughout the world. Patrick is best known for driving all the snakes out of Ireland and his now famous symbol, the shamrock, is said to represent the Holy Trinity.



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## ***Saint George – 23 April***

St George is the patron saint of England, boy scouts and soldiers. He is also the patron saint of Greece, Portugal and Aragon, so is quite a popular chap. Known mainly for his dragon slaying feats which surfaced in the Middle Ages, he was in reality a Christian Centurion who was martyred in Palestine in the 3rd or 4th centuries. Where the tales of his bravado come from is not certain, but he certainly became a symbol of heroism by the time of the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 where it is said his name was used as a war cry.

## ***The Haxey Hood Game***

On Old Christmas Day in the village of Haxey, Humberside, is to be seen a game which is regarded by many as the precursor of the more gentle sport of rugby. The Haxey Hood Game requires a strange mixture of endurance and struggle as well as a real sense of community involvement and celebration. The 'goals' are the local public houses and the 'ball' is known as a hood, which is actually a two foot long cylinder of leather. Up to 400 people may take part and the rules are . . . interesting!!!!

**The story goes** that a certain Lady de Mowbray was riding between Haxey and Westwoodside one Christmas Day in the 13th century when her hood blew off in the wind. Encouraged by the promise of a reward, the hood was chased by thirteen farm labourers working in a nearby field who, it is said, amused the lady so much in their pursuit by falling over themselves, tripping on the furrows in the field and generally getting muddy, that she not only bestowed thirteen strips of land on the parish but decreed that this event should be commemorated every year with a game featuring the hood and followed by a feast. Legend has it that the man who actually retrieved the lady's head dress was too shy to give it back to her and passed it on to a more confident man to do the honours. Having noticed this, the lady dubbed the first man a fool and the other the Lord of the Hood. These are two names that have stuck.

**What happens today is...** On the morning of 6 January, the main characters or 'officials' prepare themselves for the day: the *Fool* dresses up in rags and has his face smeared with coloured paints "to represent bruising" (at one time this was done with soot from the fire place, but with the advent of central heating and a wide choice of make up the habits have changed!); the *Lord of the Hood* and the *Chief Boggan* don their red hunting jackets and flower bedecked top-hats; and ten other men, known as *Boggans*, put on red jerseys.

Carrying his wand of office - which is made of thirteen willow withies bound with thirteen others thirteen times round - the Lord of the Hood then leads the twelve others to each of the four pubs in

Haxey and the neighbouring parish of Westwoodside where three songs are sung, 'The Farmers Boy', 'John Barleycorn' and 'Drink Old England Dry', known locally as 'Cannons'. They've already had some practice in this because the thirteen have visited up to fifty public houses and homes in the local area since New Year's Eve, singing these very songs, drinking and collecting money for charity!

The singing done, at around 2pm the Boggans process to the Mowbray Stone outside the village church of St Nicholas. Here the Fool attempts to escape but is carried struggling to the stone and there gives the annual speech of welcome to those present. He also reports that a bullock and a half have been killed for the occasion ... but the remaining half is still running about the field! He then recites the rules of the game and the ritual shout of:

*Hoos agen hoos  
Toon agen toon  
If thou meets a man, knock 'im soon  
But doant 'ot 'im (don't hurt him)*

Whilst the Fool is talking, dampened straw is lit behind him and he is 'ritually smoked' (the dampness of the straw does vary and often the fool finds himself being toasted rather than smoked!) Scrambling from the stone, he then leads the participants and crowds of spectators to a ploughed field where the main game takes place.

But to begin with, the Lord of the Hood throws up the first of twelve sacking (or dummy) hoods with the ritual cry, "Hoos agen hoos, etc." These may be run after, fought for or carried off the edge of the field, the holder being rewarded with a sum of money. If a Boggan (as referee) manages to intercept and regain possession, this hood is thrown up once more. These dummies include one with a red ribbon attached to it, specifically for women and girls. After all twelve are successfully thrown up, it is time for the main game to begin . . .

The leather *Sway Hood*, which has been carried by the thirteen officials since New Year's Eve, now makes an appearance. This is thrown up by an invited guest and grabbed firmly by Boggans in the middle, of what must look like the largest rugby scrum in the world, known as the *Sway*. Then the fun starts. Rules?... Anything goes except that the hood must not be run with, kicked or thrown, but remains in the centre of this solid mass of muscle whilst several hundred push in an attempt to get it to a pub of their choice. Yes, that is the 'goal' in this game.

The distance between the furthest pubs is about two miles and when the hood is finally deposited in one of the bars, the landlord or landlady has simply to reach out and touch it for the game to be over. Free drinks are then provided and the hood is hung above the bar until the next New Year's Eve when the Boggans again retrieve it for another six nights of singing, drinking and the playing of the ancient game of Haxey Hood.

The path of the Sway is clearly visible the following day, not least because of the mass of mud which has been carried from the field into the village streets on boots and clothing. The Sway is also no respecter of person or property. The field in which it starts is trampled flat and cars have been seen

to be moved in its wake. Bus services are curtailed and householders may find their prize privet hedge flattened or even in a totally different location the following day. The church wall has been a regular casualty!

And talking of casualties, why on earth would anyone want to risk body, muscle and bone in this gruelling and exhausting game every year? Injuries certainly do occur. "We have always done it", is justification enough for some, while the Sway is regarded by others as symbol of locality and community.

## ***Burns Night***

Commemorating the birthday and 'immortal memory' of Robert Burns (1759-1796), the great Scottish poet, Burns Night has virtually displaced St Andrew's Day as the main national festival. It all happens on 25 January, when food and drink is the order of the day along with much speech making, singing and readings from the great man's works. The central dish of the day haggis, a highly spiced combination of offal, mutton and oatmeal boiled in a sheep's stomach, which Burns himself called '*the great chieftain o' the pudden race*'. This delicacy is normally carried ceremonially into an assembly to the accompaniment of a tune played on the bagpipes, and the evening concludes with the singing of Auld Lang's Syne, possibly the bard's most well song.

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# ***From Candlemas to Red Feather Day...***

Whereas in the Midwinter period the Christian church seems to have cleverly placed their festivals alongside existing pagan ones and eventually displaced or adopted them, during this Spring period it has a much more central (and physical) role in customary practices. Here are a few examples ...

## ***Candlemas Day - 2 February***

This marks the feast of the Purification of Mary and Christ's Presentation at the Temple forty days after His birth, it is also the day when candles were blessed in church and distributed to congregation. It is perhaps no coincidence that a pre-Christian festival of light formerly took place on 1 February and in some parts of Europe it was thought that church candles had preventative powers, even helping to stave off storms and earthquakes.

## ***Blessing the Throats - 3 February***

At the Roman Catholic church of St Etheldreda, Ely Place near Holbom Circus in London, many sufferers of throat ailments congregate on this day to witness the invocation of St Blaise. Blaise, a 4th century Armenian bishop, had saved a child from choking to death on a fish-bone, whilst on his way to prison to be martyred by having his flesh torn from him with sharp iron combs and then being beheaded. Two long altar candles are tied together with ribbons in the shape of a St Andrew's cross and held under the chins of worshippers by a priest who prays, 'May the Lord deliver you from the evil of the throat and from every other evil'.

The comb connection resulted in St Blaise also being adopted by wool combers all over England, his effigy carried in great pageants and processions held up until the early part of the 19th century in wool-towns such as Norwich, Guildford, Northampton, Bradford and York.

## ***Candlemas Rock - Sunday nearest Candlemas***

At the Church of St Mary of the Purification in Blidworth, Nottinghamshire, an old wooden cradle, decorated with flowers and greenery, is brought into the church and placed in the candle-lit chancel near the altar. The most recently baptised baby boy is then presented by his parents to the vicar, who, after saying a special prayer at the altar, places the baby into the cradle and gently rocks him for a few moments. The child is seen to represent the baby Jesus and commemorates His presentation at the Temple. This ceremony was only revived in the 1920's, having lapsed after the Reformation. Before that it is said to have been held in Blidworth since the 13th century.

## ***Clowns' Service - first Sunday in February***

A casual visitor to the Holy Trinity Church in Dalston, East London, may have something of a shock. For this is the day of the annual Clowns' Service which commemorates one of the greatest clowns of them all, Joseph Grimaldi. Joe died in 1837, but it was not until 1946 that a service was held in his honour - and that was in a church in Pentonville Road where he is actually buried. It moved to the Holy Trinity in the 1950's where the museum of the International Circus Clowns Club is also to be found. The service is quite something, with the lessons and prayers being led by the clowns (in full kit) and performances given during and after.

## ***Red Feather Day - last Friday in February***

It is Feather Day at the school founded and named after the 18th century London Sheriff and MP, Sir John Cass staff and pupils go to the nearby Church of St Botolph's-without-Aldgate for a remembrance service for Sir John who was born on 20th February, 1661, baptised at St Botolph's, and who died in 1718. So what, you might ask? What is so special about remembering the founder of your school? Well, first of all they wear red feathers in their lapels, and secondly, there is the story. Sir John's timing was not of the best for, as he was writing his last will and testament, his lungs haemorrhaged and he died. His blood was splattered all over his writing and quill pen, thus making it a red feather!

# ***St Valentine's Day***

*Valentine's day is drawing near And both men and maids incline  
To choose them each a Valentine [Poor Robyn's Almanack 1757]*

*If you love me, love me true,  
Send me a ribbon, let it be blue,  
If you hate me, let it be seen,  
Send me a ribbon and let it be green. [Lincolnshire 1908]*

14th February is associated with St Valentine, the patron saint of lovers, the point, why? Valentinus was a common Roman name and there are two martyrs who bear it. One was a Roman Priest killed in 269 AD and the other an Umbrian Bishop who perished in 273 AD. They both died for their faith and supposedly on 14th February, but in spite of the million and one theories about their links with lovers, there is no historical reason why either of them should be regarded as their patron saint. Perhaps it was for no other reason than the fact that 14th February was the eve of the Roman Feast of Lupercalia, which was partly a fertility festival where animals were sacrificed for the protection of other livestock, but also when young men of high rank ran about striking women with thongs of goatskin in order to

make them fruitful!!! Another ritual carried out during this feast was for the men to choose their partners for the year by drawing lots. But the link with old Valentinus (whichever one you fancy) is tenuous, to say the least.

Whatever the origin of the custom, the date, the name of it and the idea of it being a celebration of lovers has persisted for a long time. We have references to joyous recreations and conversations about love in the courts of 14th century England and France on Valentine's Day, and Geoffrey Chaucer wrote in *The Parlement of Foules* of the popular belief that 14th February was the day on which birds met to choose their mate for the coming year. The church, of course, attempted to draw people away from such notions by focusing attention on Candlemas... but such ancient traditions did tend to linger.

Anyway, Valentine's Day became the customary day for exchanging tokens and, more importantly, choosing sweethearts. One way (it has to be admitted) is not far removed from the Roman method of drawing lots. Girls names were written on a piece of paper and placed in a hat to be drawn by the boys...or vice versa. Apart from anything else, this was a good way of overcoming shyness. In the Scottish Borders the names were drawn three times as an infallible test; a name chosen three times in a row was a certain omen of marriage.

An undeniably riskier way of identifying a future spouse on 14th February was to accept as a Valentine the first person of the opposite sex (outside your own family) you actually set eyes upon. Samuel Pepys' diary records that in 1662 Mrs Pepys shaded her eyes so 'she may not see the paynters ... gilding [the] chimney piece' until Will Bowyer came to be her Valentine'. Within living memory children have been seen being led about with their eyes closed until the right Valentine was at hand.

## ***Shrove Tuesday***

Some serious eating used to take place on Shrove Tuesday because this was the last opportunity for a binge before fasting for Lent, which begins on Ash Wednesday and lasts the forty days until Easter. It is therefore no surprise that this day is also called 'Fassens' or 'Fastern's Eve' in the north of England and Scotland and 'Nos Ynyd' in Wales. This was once the time for all Christians to make confessions or 'shriffs', hence 'Shrove' Tuesday.

Everything prohibited during Lent had to go, so huge feasts of meat, eggs, butter and other fats were prepared in the form of pancakes, which is how the day got its most popular title, Pancake Day. (It is interesting to note here that there are records of pancakes being eaten in England since the 14th century, yet the name Pancake Day does not appear until the 1820's!). It has also been called Guttit Tuesday, Doughnut Day, Lentsherd (or Lansherd) Night, Dappy-door Night, Lincrook Day and Sharp Tuesday. In some places the feasting actually started on the Monday when eggs and rashers or 'collops' of meat would be eaten. This was - yes, you've guessed it - Collop Monday in the north of England and Peasen Day in Cornwall where pea soup was also the order of the day.

In Scotland, beef, brose and bannocks were a must for Fastern's Eve, also called Brose Day or Bannock Tuesday. Beef would have been hard to come by for some, but farmers made a point of eating it because of a belief that their cattle would not thrive if they didn't. Brose was a thick, savoury broth eaten throughout the year but special on this day owing to its divination properties. A wedding ring would be dropped into the brose and young people would thrust their spoons into the thick liquid in the hope of finding it. Whoever did was supposed to be the first to marry. Other charms may also be hidden which would represent very different predictions. A small coin would mean wealth the following year and a thimble or button meant that the finder would go unwed, at least until next Brose Day.

Bannocks were usually made of oatmeal, eggs and salt mixed with milk or broth, but sometimes more pancake-like with the addition of flour, eggs and sugar. Of the many consumed on Bannock Tuesday, the all important one was the last to be taken from the pan or griddle. This one, variously known as the sauty or dreaming bannock or dream cake, was cooked in complete silence and would also contain a ring and other charms which would foretell the finder's future, just like the brose and (if you've read your Midwinter) Christmas puddings.

Needless to say, not everybody's larder was crammed with food which would rot during Lent. In fact, Shrovetide was a very lean time of the year for many, particularly agricultural workers, and it was quite common for the poor to go begging for money, food or just pancakes or their ingredients on Pancake Day. This was called 'Shroving' or 'Gooding' and it fulfilled a much needed community function during the widespread poverty of the 17th and 18th centuries. From Edwardian times, however, this practice was largely taken over by children who could be given generous gifts of foodstuffs. It still continues in a few places, particularly in the West Country.

*A shroving, a shroving,  
We be come a shroving,  
A piece of bread, a piece of cheese,  
A bit of your fat bacon,  
Doughnuts and pancakes All of your making.  
Here I come, I never came before,  
If you don't give me a pancake,  
I'll break down your door.            [Dorset rhyme]*

As this rhyme suggests, refusal to give to those Shroving or Lent-Crocking could mean big trouble, such as a barrage of broken crockery or stones pelted against your door. This was a kind of Shrovetide 'trick or treat' and referred to in parts of the West Country as Mischief Night. A more gentle and highly supervised version still exists in Gittisham, Devon. Tip-toeing is a great period for youngsters and gets its name from the rhyme:

*Tip, tip, toe  
Please to give us a penny  
- And away we'll go.*



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## **Shrovetide Skipping**

Skipping is another popular pursuit on Shrove Tuesday. At Scarborough, North Yorkshire, between noon (when the Pancake Bell is rung) and 5pm, nearly a mile of Foreshore Road is closed to traffic and thousands of people - young, old, locals and strangers - skip five to ten abreast over ropes stretched across it. This is quite a sight and perhaps no surprise in a coastal town such as Scarborough because it was the fishermen's long and heavy ropes that were originally stretched across the road and turned to enable this curious custom.

At Alciston and South Highton in Sussex, there has been a revival of skipping on Good Friday. In fact, many places along that coast used to have the same tradition.

## **Pancake Racing**

In Olney, Buckinghamshire, there is a local legend about an absent minded housewife who, realising she was more than a little late starting off for church, dashed the 420 yard journey only to realise that she still had a frying pan in her hand. Whether or not this actually happened, this dash is commemorated annually on Shrove Tuesday by a race which, with occasional lapses and revivals, is supposed to have been first run in 1445 - some 550 years ago! This is the world famous Olney Pancake Race (<http://olneypancakerace.org/>).

The traditional format of the race was something like this. The runners, who must be women inhabitant of Olney, donned aprons and head scarves and waited in their kitchens for a bell to ring twice. The first warned them to make their pancakes and the second summoned them to congregate in the village square with their frying pans where the race would begin. The Pancake Bell was then rung and they were off. During the quarter of a mile dash to the parish church, the contestants had to toss the pancakes a minimum of three times, the rules allowing those spilt to be picked up. The winner was the first to arrive at the church door where the Vicar would present her with a bible or prayer book, and the verger would claim a kiss and sometimes even the pancake. The runner-up may even get something, too. Then all the pans were placed around the font in the church and a blessing took place. And that was it.

Today it is much the same, only that the pancakes are ready-made and the sponsor of the race will later greet the winner and present her with a nice new set of non-stick cooking pans. However, the Olney race is far from unique. Winster in Derbyshire also has a race for men, women and children which has been run since 1870, and there are others at Lincoln's Inn field, London (recently discontinued and replaced by races in Soho and Covent Garden by street performers and local workers), Liverpool, Ely in Cambridgeshire and Bodiam in Sussex. But perhaps most interesting is the

one in Liberal, Kansas, USA, which for nearly fifty years has staged a replica of the Olney version - run at exactly the same time - in order to present a direct challenge for the fastest times run.

## ***Massed Ball Games***

Still played on Shrove Tuesday in a few places throughout the British Isles are massed ball games. These are usually held in boarded up main streets (or, in fact, wherever the ball takes the players) with the number of participants unlimited and the rules governing them virtually non-existent.

### ***Royal Ashbourne Shrovetide Football***

One of the most famous takes place in Ashbourne, Derbyshire, on the Tuesday and following day if necessary. It has been called 'royal' since 1928 when the Prince of Wales threw up the ball to start the game. The ball here is a specially decorated one made of leather filled with cork and painted on one side with a Royal image and on the other with a picture relevant to the celebrity who is to throw it up. This initial throw takes place from a concrete platform in the middle of the car park - car drivers having of course been warned not to park there that day.

**What happens is...** Before the start the 'players' are warned to stay out of the churchyard, Auld Lang Syne and God Save The Queen are sung, and then at 2pm the ball is thrown into the throng, which is made up of Up'ards and Down'ards - those born north and south of Henmore Brook, which runs through the town. The elaborately painted ball is then kicked, carried or thrown towards the goals, which are two spindles from old mill wheels standing three miles apart. The ball travels in a scrimmage called the 'hug'. The whole thing is something of a free-for-all which is made even more chaotic by the fact that the Brook runs between the goals and the players inevitably find themselves in it. As if the struggle to get there wasn't enough, when reaching the goal a player has to strike the ball three times against the post before it can be said to be a score. With several hundred people in the 'hug', the progress of the ball and final score can take some time, and if no score is made on the Tuesday (they call a halt at 10pm) then the game restarts at the same time on Ash Wednesday. This has been going on since at least the 17th century.

### ***JathartBa'***

A boisterous game also occurs in Jedburgh, Roxburghshire, on Candlemas Day (2nd February) as well as on Fastern's Eve (that is to say, the Jedburghers continue to play on the first Tuesday after the new moon following Candlemas, which is their way of naming the day even though often out of step with church dates). Their game is called JathartBa' and is a handball game played throughout boarded up streets and in the River Jed where, again, few rules apply. Indeed, this game once

became so rough and disorderly that lives were nearly lost and it was officially banned. That was in 1704. After a short period it reappeared in an equally vigorous version and there have been further attempts to ban the game in more recent times - but to no avail. The opponents here are called the Uppies and the Doonies, which relates to the place in the town where the participants were born. Local legend says Jathart Ba' dates from a time when the victorious Scots played football with the severed heads of the English.

## ***Hurling***

At St Ives and St Columb in Cornwall they have games of Hurling. The ball here is the size of a cricket ball, made of apple wood, weighs about a pound and is covered in sterling silver. This ball is thrown, hurled and run with, but never kicked. St Column play their game on Shrove Tuesday and the second Saturday following. Here the ball is thrown up in the market place, either by the winner of the previous game or an invited guest, and the hurlers deliberately confine themselves to the shuttered main street in the first hour for a financial reward. After that the Townsmen try to keep the ball going to the Southwest, towards the town, and the Countrymen try to get the ball out of the town to the North. The two goals are stone-troughs two miles apart and the winner is the person finally holding the ball at the one aimed for. That person is then carried shoulder high in triumph to the nearest pub where the ball, which the winner keeps until the next game or has to donate a new one, is submerged in a jug of ale and 'silver beer' is drunk by all. In fact, this is done at quite a few pubs after the event. The St. Ives version takes place a day earlier, on Feasten Monday.

An early account of the Cornish game was recorded by Richard Carew in 1602.

## ***Kiplingcotes Derby***

On the third Thursday in March is held what is probably the oldest horse race in Britain - the *Kiplingcotes Derby*. This chase, which starts at noon and is run over a four mile course, takes place at Dalton Hall near Market Weighton, East Yorkshire, and lasts for just over ten minutes. It was first held in 1519 but did not become an annual event until about a 100 years later, since when the rules have become very strict. They include the stipulations that each rider must be over ten stone in weight - so each rider may have to carry extra weight - and the runner-up receives the gate money, which is usually considerably more than the winner earns. Customs are nothing if not a little perverse ....

## ***Losing your marbles***

Traditionally, the marbles season starts on Ash Wednesday and ends at noon on Good Friday, but the British and World Marbles Championship, held at the Greyhound public house at Tinsley Green, Sussex, doesn't actually start until 1 lam on the final day. It carries on until the winners are decided, which certainly takes more than an hour!

There are five heats in today's championships, with teams of six who attempt to be the first to knock twenty-five of the forty-nine marbles out of the special rings located in the grounds and car park of the pub. Following rules laid down by the British Marbles Board of Control, each game starts with the 'nose drop', which means that a selected member from each team holds their 'tolley' - the shooting marble - beside their nose before dropping it into the ring, and the one whose marble is nearest a set point starts the proceedings. The 'tolley' is 'shot' by holding it with the tip of the index finger and

## ***Mothering Sunday***

This is a classic case of two customs becoming confused and rolled into one. For Mothering Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Lent, is regarded by most people in Britain today as Mother's Day, a celebration which actually started in America and happens there on the second Sunday in May. It stems from a Philadelphian called Anna Jarvis who, in 1907, set about establishing a special day for mothers and gained official recognition of her wish in 1914. Mother's Day was the time when red carnations were brought for living mothers and white ones for the dead, and a very popular practice it proved throughout the whole of north America, too. The confusion started when US servicemen, who were stationed in Britain during the Second World War, mixed up Mother's Day and Mothering Sunday and effectively rekindled our interest in the British tradition...since when it has become a thriving industry.

In Britain, the origins and title of Mothering Sunday are something of a mystery. The epistle on this day, which is essentially one of the breaks in Lent, mentions 'Jerusalem, the mother of us all'. It was also recognised as the Sunday when the devout would visit the Mother church of the parish to proffer gifts and donations. To confuse matters more, it also was once known as *Refreshment Day*, recalling Christ's feeding of the five-thousand. The most likely reason for the existence of the British version is that, since the 17th century, this was the day on which apprentices and servants were given leave to visit their mothers, bearing gifts and flowers, usually trinkets or violets and primroses from the hedgerow.

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## **Simnel Cake**

Flowers and boxes of chocolates seem to be the norm today, but once Simnel cakes were synonymous with Mothering Sunday and Easter Tide too. There are three famous types that are named after the towns that make them : Shrewsbury, Devizes and Bury.

The word *Simnel* is said to come from *simnellus*, Latin for the fine wheaten flour used to bake loaves as early as the 11th century. However, there are many theories about the origins of the name. One is from the legend of Simon and his wife Nell who argued about the way to cook the cake. Should it be boiled or baked ? So as a compromise, it was both boiled and baked and the result was called after both of them.

## **Pax Cakes**

Palm Sunday (the Sunday before Easter) commemorates the day when Christ rode into Jerusalem on his final journey before crucifixion. It is also the day when, following the service, small circular biscuits called Pax Cakes are distributed to the congregations at King's Cople and Sellack in Herefordshire, with the words 'Peace and Good Neighbourhood' stamped on them and recited by the vicar with each giving. It is believed that this ceremony dates back at least to the 16th century when it was once common for some churches to have a shared meal as part of the service, known as a love feast. Cakes and ale would be served at morning service and consumed in the church for peace and good neighbourliness, the food often provided by a local benefactor. The ale, not surprisingly, disappeared from the proceedings by the end of the 19th century, and the large cake gradually evolved into buns and then the current wafer.

Palm Sunday was also known as Fig Sunday in some places commemorating the barren fig tree which Christ came upon the day after he first entered Jerusalem (i.e. the first Palm Sunday). To counter-balance His great disappointment, at one time fig puddings and pies were part of the midday fodder on Palm Sunday, and fig feasts were held on Dunstable Downs, at Kempton in Hertfordshire, and on the top of Silbury Hill in Wiltshire, where people met to eat figs and toast each other with beer or cider. This practice died out before the First world War.

Palm Sunday in Wales is also Flowering Sunday. This is the day when family graves were dressed and cleaned, all the while remembering your dear departed. There are many 19th century accounts from Glamorgan.

## April or All Fools' Day

1 April is another well known and popular day with its tradition of people making fools of each other by playing practical jokes. The origins of this custom are obscure but it has been in common practice throughout the world for at least 300 years and enjoyed by all age groups. The range of jokes is limitless, spanning from a simple untruth about somebody's appearance to elaborate hoaxes played on a whole population by the media. Reading a newspaper on this day can be a little confusing and sightings of unidentified flying objects (with actual photographs) abound. *Spaghetti-trees* were featured on one famous TV news item in the 1960's, resulting in a huge mailbag asking where saplings could be purchased!

The work place has produced some of the best ruses and young apprentices have borne the brunt of many pointless errands and impossible tasks over the years. Sending someone to fetch a can of striped paint, or even for a 'long stand' or a 'short weight'. In Scotland, the great scam was *Huntigowk Day*. This was where an unsuspecting should would be sent on a fool's errand to deliver a letter to a person who, having read the instructions contained, would then sent the letter with the bearer to somewhere else's...and so on. This could take all day!

But remember, All Fool's Day is actually only half a day. It begins at midnight and finishes at noon. Play a joke after the deadline and you might get shouted in your ear:

*April Fool's gone and past  
You're the biggest fool at last!*

## Orange and Lemon Service

*'Oranges and Lemons', say the bells of St Clement's  
'You owe me five farthings', say the bells of St Martin's*

So goes the famous nursery rhyme to a tune which is very important to a particular church in London. On a weekday in late March at the Church of St Clement Danes in the Strand, pupils from local schools gather for a short service before they are given free oranges and lemons to the accompaniment of 'the tune' played on the church bells. This ceremony has been going on since 1920 when the church bells were re-hung on a new oak frame and the music could once more ring out from the belfry. However, the association with fruit goes back much further.

The present St Clement Danes was built in the 17th century on a site where another church was erected as early as the 10th century. This served the local Danish population, hence the name. When oranges and lemons first came to England in the Middle Ages, they were brought up the River

Thames in barges and carried to market through Clement's Inn, near to the church, where a toll had to be paid. Up until not so long ago, the residents of Clement's Inn were presented with an orange and lemon and a half-a-crown (2/6d or 12.5p) on New Years day.

Before the present ceremony was inaugurated, the bells had been silent since 1913 and were again put out of action during the Second World War. It was not until 1957 that they were again re-hung and the whole building restored to become a Royal Air Force church. Today, the 'Oranges and Lemons' tune can be heard every three hours from 9am until 6pm and, as somebody once remarked, this event has probably got more vitamin C in it than any other you could find!

## Clipping the Church

Clipping the Church is not an ecclesiastical manicure but a mass embrace of the actual building. This dance-like ceremony was commonplace at certain times of the year up until the early part of the 20th century and is basically a human chain around a church to symbolise their love for the place and the parish. Easter, Shrovetide and a church's paternal feast day were usually the favoured times for this, and there are still some flourishing examples ...

On Shrove Tuesday at Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire, the event starts at dusk when participants play Thread the Needle, a dance involving a double line of players weaving in and out of arches formed by the uplifted arms of the leaders. After this they rush into the churchyard, join hands and surround (or clip) the church. At South Petherton, Somerset, a similar procedure takes place with the participants clipping it three times. Other well known examples are at Painswick, Gloucestershire, and at Radley in Berkshire, where the custom was revived in 1965 after a 200 year gap.

## Lady Day

25 March is Lady Day, which celebrates the Annunciation of the Virgin (i.e. the Archangel Gabriel's revelation that the Virgin Mary would bear Christ) and a date cleverly fixed nine months before Christ's birth on 25th December. Up until the 18th century, this day was regarded as the start of the new administrative year (thus causing great confusion with historians) and remains one of the four Quarter Days when quarterly rents are paid.

There was a popular saying :

*If Our Lord falls in Our Lady's lap,  
England will meet with some mishap!*



## Carling Peas

The fifth Sunday in Lent (the second before Easter) is Passion or Care Sunday, which refers to the care, or sorrow, of Our Lord's Passion. In the North of England it is more commonly called Carling Sunday and the day on which Carlings are served for dinner and publicans are expected to provide free portions of them with their customers' beer.

Carlings are grey parched peas which are soaked overnight on Friday, boiled on Saturday and served on Sunday. They can be eaten hot or cold, seasoned with salt, pepper and sometimes vinegar, fried in butter and even soaked in beer or mixed with sugar and rum! Just why these peas are the order of the day - or, indeed, why they are called Carlings at all - is uncertain, but a legend in Yorkshire has it that a ship called the Carling was wrecked on this day in the 1880's and its cargo of swollen grey peas was washed ashore in Filey Bay and made into a local delicacy.

Another legend on Tyneside states that during a famine in the area, a pea-laden boat was blown up the Tyne by a furious storm and its arrival saved the locals from starvation. Whatever the reason, Carlings in Northumberland have a most practical use: that of divining matrimonial matters. Groups of youngsters sit around a plate of these 'bullets' and pick them up one after the other to decide who will be the first to marry. The person who picks up the last pea is the dubious winner.

## Hot Cross Buns

Good Friday, the day of Christ's Crucifixion, is perhaps the most solemn day in the Christian calendar and has always been seen as a day for charity. As Lent is coming to an end, Good Friday also means.... Hot Cross Buns!

*Hot cross buns!  
Hot cross buns!  
One a penny, two a penny,  
Hot cross buns!  
(London Street Cry)*

Although the cross on the top of these buns is commonly believed to represent the cross on which Christ was crucified, it is known from petrified cakes excavated on a number of sites in Britain that the Anglo Saxons ate similar cakes, probably at their Spring festivals, and the Greeks and Romans had wheaten varieties which were consumed at the festival of Diana at the Vernal equinox. These were circular, just like the modern ones, and thought to represent the moon, the cross on top creating the four lunar quarters. Whatever the origin of our current buns (sorry!), there is evidence of their existence in the 14th century and a vast growth in popularity since the 18th century.

Needless to say, there was much regional variety in ingredients, size and even shape. Imagine a spiced, triangular bun without even a cross, because some are known to have been just like that!

There was a widespread belief that bread baked on Good Friday would never go mouldy and had great curative powers, particularly for whooping cough and diarrhoea. These powers were gradually attached to the Hot Cross Bun, which was also said to protect horses and cattle from being bewitched, households against rats and fire, and generally bring prosperity. Not bad for a simple bun.

However, although it is also supposed to bring good luck to those at sea, at least one poor old widow might beg to differ. This is the lady who lived in Devons Road, East London, whose son went to sea during the Napoleonic Wars. Knowing how fond he was of his Hot Cross Buns, she naturally put some aside for him on Good Friday to enjoy on his safe return. When he didn't show up in the first year she simply baked more the following year and added them to the pile. Either in hope or in mourning, this went on until she died and dozens of uneaten buns were discovered in her house, the site of which was later used for a public house called - yes, you've guessed it - The Widow's Son.

It is here at lunch time each Good Friday that The Widow's Bun Ceremony takes place, which is basically the adding of a specially baked Hot Cross Bun to the existing collection of mouldering buns already hanging from the ceiling in the bar. This task falls upon a serving British sailor, although occasionally this stipulation has been difficult to fulfil. For example, during the Falklands war there simply wasn't one available for the job, so an American sailor was press-ganged into doing it. In recent years, even the Wrens have been allowed in on the act. Hip - Hip - Hooray!

But if Hot Cross Buns are lucky, then the children of Sidmouth in Devon are the luckiest of the lot. Since 1898, when the local bakers went on strike and supplies were rushed in from a neighbouring village to avert bad luck, they have been given them free of charge on Good Friday morning.

## **Charities, Dice and Doles**

In modern times, the term *charity* usually conjures up images of people with collecting boxes and the work of national and international organisations attempting to alleviate problems and suffering in the world. Similarly, the word *dole* suggests a trip to claim benefits. However, up until the 20th century the vast wealth of charities and doles to be found in the British Isles operated on a much more personal and local level and sought to provide relief for some very specific hardships, mostly brought about by wars, changes in land ownership and the resultant inequalities in society. Many land charities and doles were created at the same time as the abolition of many feudal constraints still surviving in the Tudor period, when it was left to local philanthropists (often the land owners themselves) to look out for the needy in the parish. 17th and 18th century records show just how

seriously charities and doles were regarded, with loyalty and good character, as well as need, at the heart of them.

Most have lapsed, although not all. Some have survived as social or customary celebrations - maybe just communal reminders - while others which have not been legally abolished by Act of Parliament have actually been invoked in the law courts as existing customary rights.

Here are just a few ...

## ***Dicing For Maids' Money***

On 29th January, 1674, John How of Guildford, Surrey, departed this life leaving £400 in his will for the benefit of maidservants. Mr. How stated that the annual interest from this sum should be competed for by two women who will have qualified for a chance to benefit by remaining in service in the same Guildford household for two years - provided it was not an alehouse or inn. Known as *Dicing For Maids' Money*, the successful maidservant had simply to roll a dice and achieve the highest number.

Originally there was nothing for the runner up - nor, of course, anything for men. Perhaps to redress this balance, in 1702 another inhabitant of Guildford, John Parsons, bequeathed the interest on a sum of £600 to any poor male who had finished a seven year apprenticeship. One proviso to this was that should no man present himself as suitable for the claim, then the money would go to an unmarried maidservant 'of good repute'. Following a prolonged period of failing to find such a man, in 1909 the money became permanently attached to John How's Maids' Money and because of the larger amount involved, it meant that the maid who lost at the roll of the dice would also benefit. Perverse as customs tend to be, the runner-up would receive the larger sum from Parsons' bequest! However, as the difference is currently under 20p, there is little resentment between the rivals.

This gentle and curious custom usually happens on the last Thursday of January at the Guildhall in Guildford.

## ***Maidservants' Charity***

Even older, though, is the *Maidservants' Charity* in Reading, Berkshire. By a will dated in June, 1611, the mathematician John Blagrave provided a payment of twenty nobles which was £6 13s 4d (£6.67p) to '*one poor maiden servant who should have served, dwelt, or continued in any one service within any of the three parishes of Reading, in good name and fame five years at the least, for her preferment in marriage*'. For fairness, it was stipulated that three qualified girls would cast lots '*yearly forever on Good Friday*'. And so they have, although not always on Good Friday. Once held at the town hall, the action now takes place in St Mary's Church House in Reading.

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## ***Forty Shilling Day***

In 1717, in Wotton near Dorking, Surrey, William Glanville provided in his will for the payment of forty shillings (£2) each to five local poor boys, aged sixteen or under, who could recite from memory on the anniversary of his death the Lords Prayer, the Apostles Creed and the Ten Commandments. This had to be done with both their hands placed on his tomb. They also had to read aloud from the fifteenth chapter of the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians, as well as write two verses of the same chapter in a clear hand. Not much to ask for a couple of quid, really!

Glanville died on 2nd February and this date is known locally as Forty Shilling Day. The tenacity of the people to maintain this custom has seen tents erected around the tomb when inclement weather has threatened to defeat it - and even a shift to a Spring date when things were really bad.

## ***Butterworth Charity***

Another dole administered by a tombstone is the Butterworth Charity. This takes place each Good Friday at St. Bartholomew the Great in Smithfield, London, where, after an outdoor sermon is given, hot cross buns are distributed to those attending. In earlier times this involved the distribution of silver-sixpenny pieces, as well as hot-cross buns, to twenty-one 'poor widows of the parish'. The origins of this one are uncertain but are thought to stem from the 17th century, and it is unlikely that the gravestone used here is that of the original benefactor. His or her name is a mystery. The name Butterworth comes from a 19th century philanthropist who re-endowed the fund when it was on the point of bankruptcy.

## ***Travice Dole***

At Leigh, near Manchester in Lancashire, the *Travice Dole* is distributed on Maundy Thursday. Forty poor people of the parish receive five shillings (25p) each after visiting and walking the length of the tomb of Henry Travice, who died in 1626. Here again the actual location of this tomb is unknown because the original site of the church was used to build a new one in Victorian times. Today, recipients are expected to walk the length of a particular pew before collecting their bounty.

## ***Carlow Bread Dole***

The whereabouts of George Carlow's tomb, on the other hand, is known - it's in the backyard of the Bull Hotel in Woodbridge, Suffolk. This yard now occupies the site of Carlow's garden where he was buried in 1738. His will allowed for the tomb's upkeep from the rent-charge on his house (the Bull Hotel annexe), and the following inscription tells the rest:

*Weep for me dear friend no more for I am gone a little before  
But by lite of pity prepare yourself to follow me.  
Good friends for Jesus sake forbear  
To move the dust entombed here.*

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*Blessed be he that spares these stones.  
Cursed be he that moves my bones.  
Twenty shillings worth of bread to be given on this stone  
To the poor of the town on the second of February forever.*

This is the *Carlow Bread Dole* and whereas once 20/- (£1) would have provided the 120 'two-penny loaves' originally intended, today it would buy but one large loaf. Nevertheless, a dozen loaves are still distributed each Candlemas by the rector and churchwardens of St. Mary's parish church, which in fact has its own weekly bread dole.

## ***Tichborne Dole***

Possibly the oldest of those still surviving is the dole at Tichborne in Hampshire, which dates back to the 12th century and takes place every 25th March (Lady Day). It involves the distribution of flour to the parishioners of Tichborne, Cheriton and Lane End from the steps of Tichborne House: a gallon for local adults and half a gallon for the children, a maximum of four gallons per household.

The origins are quite fascinating. It is said that during the reign of Henry I the aged and bed ridden Lady Mabella of Tichborne, who was well known locally for her acts of charity, requested of her husband, Sir Roger de Tichborne, for the distribution of bread to the poor on Lady day, 25th March. Sir Roger agreed but, being an extremely cruel individual, would only give to those living on land that Lady Mabella could walk around with a lighted torch before it went out. Being unable to walk, she began to crawl through the night and managed to travel 23 acres of land in this way before she collapsed with exhaustion and the torch went out. The spot where she and the torch were finally extinguished is called 'The Crawls'. Having suffered such meanness of spirit in Sir Roger, she cursed the family with her dying breath by threatening loss of wealth, family name and collapse of the house and if they ever did away with the annual dole. The prophesy was that seven daughters would follow the birth of seven sons.

What do you know - in 1794 Sir Henry Tichborne foolishly agreed with local magistrates to stop the ceremony and diverted the Crawls' revenue to the church. Having seven sons already, he should have heeded the warning! Amongst other calamities brought about by the curse, Sir Henry's grandson and rightful heir duly had seven daughters born to him, thus threatening the family line, and part of the house fell down in 1802. Needless to say, the dole was restored in 1835 and has continued ever since, in spite of the occasional threat. One of these was just after the Second World War because of food rationing. When over 5,000 bread coupons were sent to the Ministry of Food in support of the charity, it was decided to let the dole continue - and the bread coupons were even returned.

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## ***Biddenden Maids' Charity***

On Easter Monday at Biddenden in Kent, the *Biddenden Maids' Charity* is distributed, which takes the form of a loaf of bread, a pound of cheese and a pound of tea. Legend has it that this began when Eliza and Mary Chulkhurst bequeathed to the parish twenty acres of land, still known as the Bread and Cheese Land, ensuring that the income from it would be used to provide an annual dole for the poor of the district. The Chulkhursts were Siamese twins, born in 1100, who were joined at the hip and shoulder. At the age of 34 one sister died and the other, needing to be immediately separated from her sister in order to survive, refused to be cut apart and died as well some six hours later. It was then that the dole was born.

However, this explanation of the origin of this dole has been seriously contested for at least 200 years by a whole gaggle of historians. One states that no image of twins appears until the early 18th century and that the land was most likely given by '*two maidens of the name of Preston*'; while another places the origin in the 16th and not the 12th century, which means that it is still pretty old. Whatever the origin, the dole was administered in the church until 1682 when, owing to scenes of '*disorder and indecency*', it was moved to the church porch. In the 19th century it was moved yet again, this time to the old workhouse where it is still distributed. If you go there on Easter Monday you will be given a *Biddenden cake*, which has on it an impression of the two sisters with one arm each and A34Y, their age at death. As one folklorist says, the cakes are '*more valuable as memorial than food ... hard, long lasting and practically uneatable*'. Each to their own taste!

## ***Eggs***

In many cultures and ancient religions throughout the world, eggs have long symbolised rebirth, fertility and continuing life, and been seen as ideal in representing the emergence of Spring from the dark Winter months. The Greeks, Romans, Persians and Chinese exchanged coloured eggs at their Spring festivals, and the early Christians used them to embody Christ's Resurrection and adopted them as gifts at Easter when they were brought to church to be blessed. They were a forbidden food in Lent, of course.

The chocolate Easter Egg is now the norm as a gift for Easter, becoming available in our shops as soon as Christmas is out of the way. This manifestation is hardly more than a hundred years old and displaced the widespread tradition of giving a hard-boiled version of the real thing which had been decorated in bright colours. These eggs would appear on breakfast tables or be concealed about the house and garden for children to find...hidden by the Easter hare or rabbit, naturally.

To decorate an egg nowadays it is easy to buy commercial dyes, but in former times a whole variety of natural produce was used for the desired effect. Boiling an egg inside a covering of onion skins is one simple method of dyeing, but gorse blossom, cochineal, logwood chips, spinach leaves and

anemones are others which add immense variety in colour. Put any of these under the onion skins with an egg and it is easy to make patterns similar to using wax pencils or candles. A white design can be made on a coloured egg by scraping away the dye with an engraving tool or a stylus, and so on ...

Colouring and decorating eggs is international. A Polish legend has the Virgin Mary colouring eggs to amuse the infant Jesus, and in Romania there is a story that the Roman soldiers at the Crucifixion were given eggs in the hope that they would treat Christ with more compassion. The Romanians dye theirs red because it is said that these soldiers' eggs were stained with Christ's blood. Red, of course, is also a symbol of life and the Chinese are known to have made gifts of red eggs back in 900 BC!

But why do hares and rabbits feature so much in the imagery and folklore of Easter? Well, according to the Venerable Bede, the term Easter developed from *Eostre*, a Saxon Goddess of Spring and the Dawn, whose sacred animal was the hare. The rabbit, which has completely replaced the hare in some places, seems to have become confused with the folklore of the hare at some stage in the past and simply stayed.

In the north of England, decorated Easter eggs were often known as *Pace* or *Paste* Eggs. The really elaborate ones may have been kept as ornaments, but generally they would be eaten or used in the many egg games associated with Easter. Children would go house visiting to collect the eggs, reciting rhymes and songs in exchange for their spoils. In some cases there would also be a Pace Egg Play ...

## Pace Eggers

*There's one, two, three jolly lads all in one mind,  
We have come a-pace egging, We hope you'll prove kind.  
We hope you'll prove kind with your eggs and strong beer,  
And we'll come no more nigh you, until the next year.*

An Easter version of the Christmas Mummers Play, the Pace Egg Play also has death and resurrection of certain characters and was widely performed by young men known as *Pace Eggers* (in Yorkshire and Lancashire) and *Jolly Boys* (in the North East) whose costumes were generally made with paper and highly colourful - not to say bizarre! Although ostensibly the begging for eggs was their prime reason for going around, the plays took on a life of their own with characters such as Old Tossopot, Betsy Brownbags and topical ones like Lord Nelson.

The popularity of these plays dwindled in the early part of the twentieth century, but some still exist today. In the Calder Valley, Yorkshire, the Midgley version is enacted by the boys of the Calder Valley High School, in Mytholmroyd, on Good Friday. Their performances start at 9am on a housing estate near the school and then moves to various other locations such as Luddenden Foot, Midgley,



Hebden Bridge and Todmorden throughout the day. Old Tossopot, King George and the Turkish Knight are the stock characters who wear odd, mortar board type hats embellished with highly coloured crepe paper, and carry wooden swords.

A similar play has been revived at Brighouse, also in Yorkshire.

## ***Britannia Coconut Dancers***

Bacup is a small, quiet town in the Rossendale Valley in Lancashire. Quiet, that is, unless you happen to be there on Easter Saturday! For this is the day when the Britannia Coconut Dancers perform their unique dances through the streets, calling at houses, senior citizens' homes, working mens' clubs and, of course, public houses.

It all begins at 9am at The Travellers' Rest in Britannia, an adjoining village, when eight men with blackened faces appear wearing white turban-like hats bedecked with rosettes, feathers and pom-poms, long sleeved black jumpers with white diagonal sashes, white 'kilts' with red horizontal stripes, black velvet breeches, white socks and black clogs. They are accompanied by another man carrying a whip, known as the Whipper-In, and a silver band which plays the music for their complicated routines. 'Wow!', I can almost hear you say, but that's not all. Five of the dances they perform are done with half-hoop garlands covered in red, white and blue crepe paper, and the dance that gives them their name is performed with round pieces of wood called 'nuts'. These are made of maple wood and are attached to hands, knees and waists. The dancers literally knock them together to make a sound which, when mixed in with the scraping of clogs on the road, produces an astonishing rhythmic effect.

Although they may appear at other times of the year with concertina players instead of the silver band, Easter Saturday is the 'Nutters' main outing of the year and people travel hundreds of miles to see a spectacle which has been around since at least the mid-19th century. Folklorists have long speculated about their origins. "A pirate dance of mad revelry brought up by Cornish tin miners" is one theory, which is historically possible. 'Dawn of time' theories also abound. What is known for sure is that there were a number of similar troupes in the 19th century and that one, created in 1857 at Tunstead Mill, now in the borough of Bacup, had a coconut dance. It was from this team that the Britannia Coconut Dancers developed their dances.

Oh....the man with the whip? His job, according to some, is to whip away the Winter as the dancers progress through the town. On a more practical level, the Whipper-In is there to make sure the dancers have enough room to dance.

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## ***Hare Pie Scramble and Bottle kicking***

Hallaton in Leicestershire on Easter Monday is the venue for two more 'sports' of an unusual nature - the Hare Pie Scramble and Bottle Kicking. This is basically a contest between the villagers of Hallaton and Medbourne and is thought to be very old ...

To begin with, a large hare pie made to a secret recipe is blessed at the parish church before being cut up and half of it distributed to the gathering crowd by the local vicar. This distribution is done by throwing the greasy lumps of pie into the throng, who then proceed to eat it or save it as a souvenir. To the accompaniment of a brass band, the other half of the pie is placed into sacks and paraded through the village of Hallaton, followed closely by three men holding aloft small wooden barrels which have been filled with beer and decorated with ribbons at the Butter Cross. These are the 'bottles'. The procession then heads for Hare Pie Bank where the remainder of the pie is thrown and scrambled for, although few people bother doing this nowadays. All energy is reserved for the next part of the event - the bottle kicking.

The scramble over, the first of the barrels is thrown up three times and on the third throw the crowd kick, push and generally attempt to grab the barrel. It's a free for all with anyone joining in. The point? Well, a bottle has to be carried over a specific location to score a goal, Hallaton's being a stream on one side of the Bank and Medbourne's the hedge of a field on the other side. Only if the first two barrels produce a draw is the third 'dummy' barrel thrown up. Each 'game' can continue for 3-4 hours and whatever the result, the winning scorer is expected to climb the old Butter Cross (a pyramid with a stone ball on top) and drink the well-shaken beer from the winning bottle. Then it is shared around ...

## ***Hocktide***

Hocktide is the period covering the Monday and Tuesday after Easter and was once the first major festival day after Lent. It was a time for sports and games as well as a day for the collection and payment of rents and dues. Nowadays it passes almost unnoticed.

In some places it used to be known as Binding Monday and Tuesday because of the mock kidnapping and ransom that traditionally took place. On the Monday the men would be caught and tied up with ropes by women who, as in the Easter Lifting, would then demand money from them for their release. On the Tuesday the roles were reversed. In most cases the funds went towards buying food and drink for the revellers, but some Churchwardens' Accounts state that this 'Hock Money' was often donated to parish funds. The origins of this practice (in fact, Hocktide in general) are uncertain,

but they certainly go back a long way. For example, in 1497 13s 4d (65 Ap) was 'gathered by the women on Hob Monday' in the parish of St Mary Le Hill, London, and in 1607 'women went a-hocking' in Chelsea and collected 45/- (£2.25p). But it all obviously became too much of a bind and fell out of fashion ...

There is, however, one place where Hocktide is still very much observed. This is at Hungerford in Berkshire where the ceremonies are certainly unique, quite elaborate and very functional, tied up as they are with the administration of common rights. Hocktide day in Hungerford is Tutti-day (pronounced with a 'tut' and not a 'toot') and confined to the second Tuesday after Easter.

At around 8am on Hock Tuesday, the Bell Man (or Town Crier) summons all Hungerford commoners to 'court' by perambulating the town ringing his bell and periodically blowing the ancient John O' Gaunt horn from a balcony on the town hall. All are 'under pain of being fined a penny' for not attending, which is not a serious amount these days. However, these commoners are bound to attend since their absence could result in their losing valuable privileges granted to them for free grazing, watercress, and salmon fishing on the River Kennet. These privileges date back to the time of John O' Gaunt (1340-99) and relate to a piece of common ground of over two-hundred acres in size which was left to those living in certain houses in its proximity. These people are the commoners and the 'court' and jury of twelve elects from their ranks the various Hocktide officers for the following year.

The 'court' meets at 9am and in attendance are these various officers, including the Constable, the Bailiff, the Portreeve, Ale-tasters and Overseers. Just before the main court business begins, the Tutti (or Tithing) Men set out on their rounds to enact what is perhaps the most well-known part of the proceedings. Dressed up in top hats and tails and carrying their poles of office (two long staves beautifully adorned with Spring flowers, blue ribbons and an orange on the top), they aim to visit every common right household in the main street to collect their dues or tithes. They are accompanied by another man carrying a sack of oranges, known as the Orange Scrambler, whose purpose soon becomes clear. For the dues sought by the Tutti Men turn out to be kisses from each of the women in these households who, in return, receive the gift of an orange provided by the man with pheasants' feathers in his hat. They then accept the offer of a drink or two and continue along the street. This procedure goes on for up to twelve hours and the kissing can even extend to women innocently passing by. Indeed, it is not unknown for a Tutti Man to sniff out a shy or elusive female by climbing a ladder and gaining access to a house through an upstairs window! Perseverance is all....

At 1pm there is a large luncheon these days held in the Town Hall for all the Hocktide officers and local people, after which some toasts are proposed to the immortal memory of John O' Gaunt (the tippie is rum punch) and the Tutti men return to their arduous duties. The remaining company is then treated to some speeches and reports on various matters by the officers before the arrival of the infamous Blacksmith, who appears carrying some small horseshoes and nails for the 'shoeing of the colts'. The 'colts' are the newcomers to the town and luncheon, who are one by one grabbed for the Blacksmith to hammer a farrier's nail into the heel of one of their shoes. By tradition he

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continues hammering until the shod person yells “Punch” and thus agrees to buy a round of drinks for all those present. As their number can amount to over two hundred these days, it is now sufficient for the ‘colt’ to pay a small token to the Blacksmith in exchange for the nails and horseshoe. Those already initiated in this way may find it sensible to carry these as proof, just in case they run into this character again.

After this dramatic interlude, the whole company adjourns to ‘The Three Swans Hotel’ for anchovies on toast, which is a highly subtle way of encouraging even more drinking until late into the evening. The Tutti Men, meanwhile, continue their rounds until after nine o’clock at night when they too return to the Three Swans for one last beverage!

For what it’s worth, they are automatically made ale tasters for the ensuing year, having by now undoubtedly served their apprenticeship!



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