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## Hallowe'en

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**Be careful on your way home next Wednesday night! Ghouls and ghosts and witches and vampires will be in the air.**

Hallowe'en (October 31<sup>st</sup>), like many holidays, has become a huge money-spinner and we can now buy a huge variety of Halloween decorations, including foam tombstones and gargoyles and inflatable and *animatronic* monsters! In fact, when it comes to decorating, Hallowe'en is now America's second most popular holiday, second only to Christmas.

That said, Hallowe'en really only appeared in the US a couple of centuries ago as a result of immigration from the British Isles. The feast day has its real roots as a pagan festival among the Celts of Ireland and Great Britain.

*Samhain* (pronounced /ʊsAYə v/) was an autumn festival celebrated by Pre-Christian Celts. *Samhain* was a fire festival, when the dead revisited the mortal world, and large communal bonfires would be lit to keep evil spirits at bay.

During the 'Dark Ages' the Popes got wind of all this unacceptable pagan behaviour and decided to intervene, moving the existing Christian feast of All Saints' Day (May 13<sup>th</sup>) to November 1<sup>st</sup> in an attempt to Christianize, and ultimately replace, the pagan *Samhain*. This was by no means an isolated instance of the church imposing a Christian significance on pagan heritage. The Pantheon in Rome - originally built in 31 BC as the pagan temple of all gods - was also hijacked in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD and has been used as a Christian church ever since.

The Christian All Saints' Day was also known as All Hallows and the evening before, the eve, was therefore All Hallows' Eve, which became, Hallowe'en. Simple!

The main event for children of modern Hallowe'en in most countries is trick-or-treating, in which children dress up and go door-to-door in their neighbourhoods. The children knock on the neighbours' doors and shout "trick or treat" in order to gather fruit, nuts, and sweets. Failure to opt for the 'treat' results in the children playing a 'trick' on the neighbour.

Hallowe'en's most prominent symbol is the carved-out *Pumpkinhead* - the 'Jack-o-lantern'. This goes back to the Irish legend of 'Stingy Jack', a greedy, gambling, hard-drinking old farmer who tricked the devil into climbing a tree and trapped him there by carving a cross into the tree-trunk. In revenge, the devil cursed Jack to forever wander the earth at night. This fable prompted children to carve out faces in swedes or turnips (pumpkins weren't too plentiful in Ireland) and place a candle inside in memory of Jack.

Bobbing is a well-established Hallowe'en custom where apples, nuts, raisins and some small coins are placed in a big tub of water. The apples and nuts float, but the coins, which sink, are harder to catch. Everyone takes turns catching as many items as possible using only their mouths. Some say that the first participant to get an apple would be the first to marry.

Another common game, snap-apple, involves eating an apple hung on a string attached to the ceiling, without using the hands. In a variation on this, the apple is replaced with a treacle or syrup-coated scone, an activity which inevitably leads to a very sticky face. To make it even more interesting, this is sometimes carried out while blindfolded!

One Hallowe'en custom which still exists in Ireland is the baking of a *barmbrack*, a fruit cake with sultanas, raisins and nuts. Eaten with butter along with a mug of tea (yum, yum), the *brack* contains objects baked into it and Halloween tea-time becomes quite an exciting event as slices are dished out. Each baked-in object carries a message for the person who gets it.

- a ring - marriage within a year
- a pea - will not marry that year
- a stick - an unhappy marriage or disputes
- a piece of cloth - bad luck or poverty
- a coin - good fortune or wealth