

Celtic Irish Festivals

There are four Celtic seasonal festivals; they occur in a cycle like the seasons of the year. They are called Samhain, Imbolc, Bealtaine and Lughnasa. These are old festivals and come from a time when Ireland was more rural and the people were superstitious and spiritual.

The Festival of Samhain

When Was It Celebrated?

Samhain was celebrated at the end of October. It was supposed to mark the beginning of the darker half of the year.

Why Was This Festival Celebrated?

Samhain marked the beginning of the Celtic year. It was a time of endings and new beginnings, and a time of death and rebirth. At this time of year, it was believed that the division between the worlds of the living and the dead was at its smallest so it was the easiest time of year for the souls of those who had died to pass on from the world of the living. It was also a period of rest and reflection in preparation for the new life and growth coming in spring.

How Did People Celebrate the Festival of Samhain?

People commemorated their ancestors at this time. Everyone prepared lots of food for the festival and this food was prepared not only for the living, but also as a gift to their deceased family members. They also tried to keep away evil spirits by wearing costumes and masks to look as though they were evil spirits themselves. There were large bonfires lit and people came together to celebrate around them.

The Festival of Imbolc

When Was It Celebrated?

Imbolc occurs midway between the winter solstice and vernal (spring) equinox. It was celebrated during the first week of February.

Why Was This Festival Celebrated?

This festival celebrated the beginning of spring. People celebrated the growth on the land and new life. Many animals, like sheep and cows, give birth to their



young during spring. It was also a time to celebrate the Celtic goddess Brigid. Brigid was the goddess of healing and inspiration, and people associated her with fire and poetry. She later became known as Saint Brigid of Kildare and the anniversary of her death was celebrated during this festival, on the first day of February.

How Did People Celebrate the Festival of Imbolc?

To celebrate Imbolc, people gathered together to light big fires and they feasted together. The fires represented the returning of the sun and heat as the weather became warmer. Farmers also prepared their fields for sowing.

The Festival of Bealtaine

When Was It Celebrated?

Bealtaine was celebrated at the start of the summer. Lá Bealtaine (or May Day in English) was celebrated during the festival and this occurs on the first day of May.

Why Was This Festival Celebrated?

This festival, celebrating the beginning of summer, marks the beginning of the brighter half of the year and the warmth that comes with that. This was the time of year when animals were moved to the summer pastures. The people hoped that summer would bring them healthy crops and therefore a good harvest when autumn came.

How Did People Celebrate the Festival of Bealtaine?

Great bonfires were lit on the eve of the start of May in celebration of Bealtaine. The word Bealtaine means bright fire. People and herds of cows walked between two bonfires in the hope of being purified and to bring them luck for the coming summer months! During this time of year, witches and fairies were thought to



be up to the most mischief. People protected their homes and their cattle from them at this time. On the first day of May, people got up early to go and pick flowers, especially hawthorns and primroses. They hung these flowers above the door of their house and sometimes on the horns of their cattle to keep them safe. There was also lots of feasting and dancing during the festival of Bealtaine.

The Festival of Lughnasa

When Was It Celebrated?

Most Irish festivals celebrate a forthcoming season or event. Lughnasa was celebrated at the start of harvest season. This occurs at the start of August.

Why Was This Festival Celebrated?

Lughnasa signalled the change from summer to autumn. This was the time when harvesting began. It was a time when the people showed their gratitude for all that had grown during spring and summer, especially their crops and animals. The aim of the festival of Lughnasa was to appease the Celtic god, Lugh. People hoped that showing him respect by celebrating through food, dance and poetry and making sacrifices for him would keep him happy — he was renowned for having quite a temper! If Lugh was pleased with the celebrations, it settled his temper. If Lugh was in a bad mood, he would cause storms which would affect the crops badly.

How Did People Celebrate the Festival of Lughnasa?

To celebrate Lughnasa, families gathered together to eat. Lughnasa marks the start of the harvest season and people ate the first meal of the new crop of the year. Communities gathered together to celebrate with dancing and sport.



Questions

1. When are the four Celtic festivals celebrated?

2. What do you think was most important to the people who celebrated these festivals?

Explain your answer using evidence from the text.

3. What did Samhain mark?

4. Why did people wear costumes during Samhain?

5. What did people hope for during Imbolc?

6. How did people celebrate Bealtaine?

7. Why was it important to please the Celtic God Lugh and how did people do this?

8. Do any of the festivals remind you of festivals celebrated today?

9. In your opinion, were Celtic people more superstitious than people are today? Explain your answer.

10. Define these words from the text:

superstitious _____

purified _____

harvest _____

gratitude _____