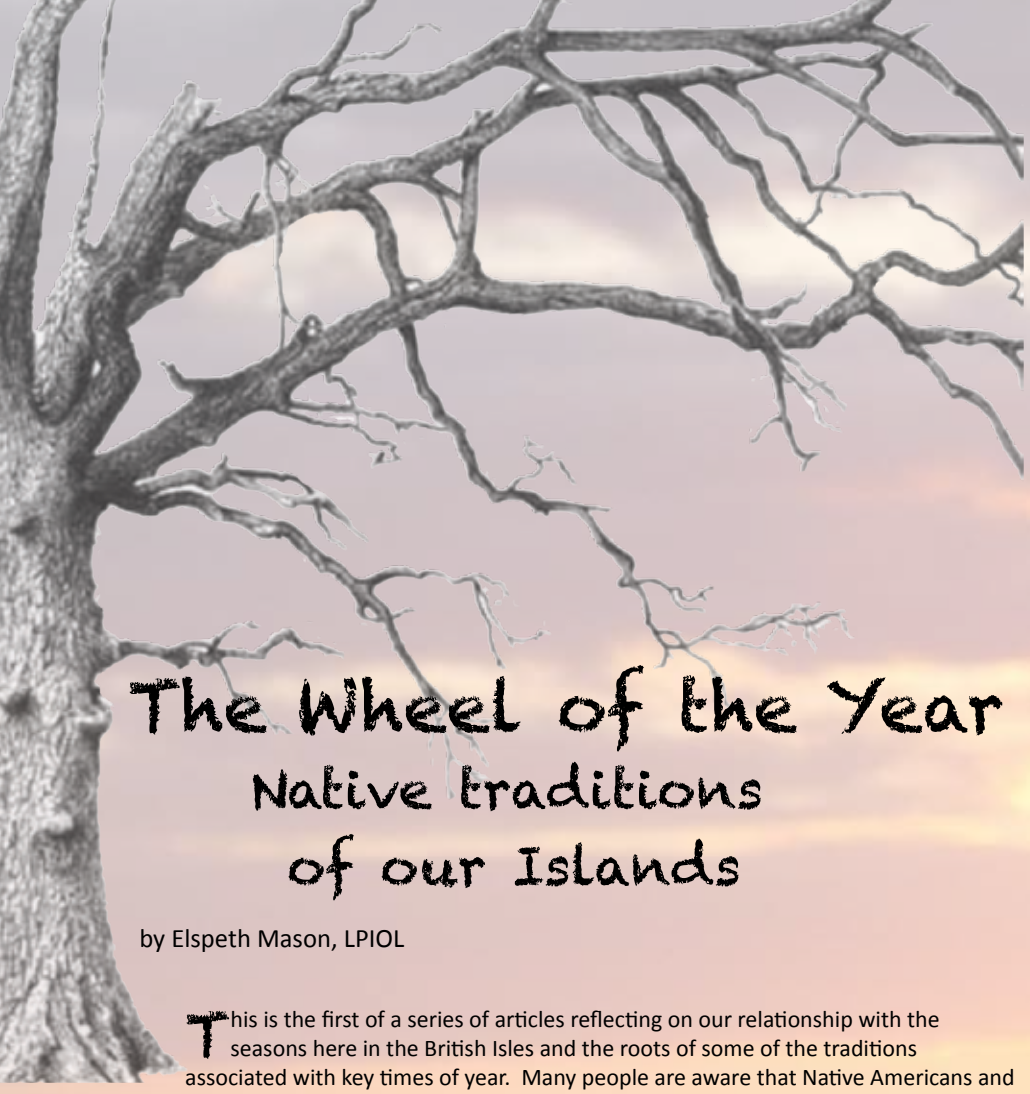

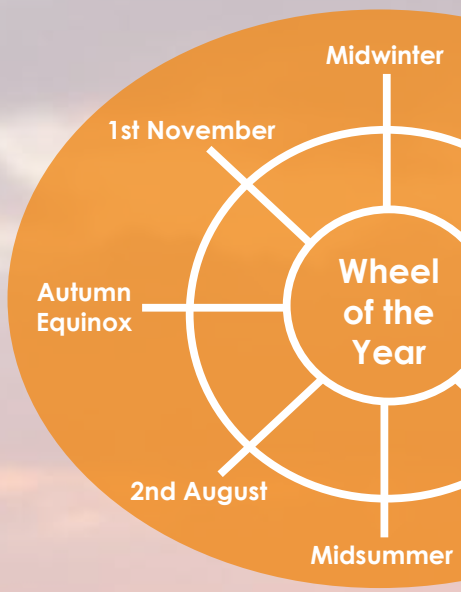

The Wheel of the Year

Native traditions of our Islands

by Elspeth Mason, LPIOL

This is the first of a series of articles reflecting on our relationship with the seasons here in the British Isles and the roots of some of the traditions associated with key times of year. Many people are aware that Native Americans and Aborigines have cultural stories and traditions that connect them to their landscape, but somehow we seem to have forgotten that in Northern Europe we have them too. We hear about Chinese New Year, but what about Celtic New Year?

One part of our disconnection from the natural world is our loss of these old traditions and equally importantly the loss of the meaning of these traditions as they relate to understanding our small place in the universe.

Taking outdoor learning beyond just activities and curriculum into the realm of inspiration and values can require a real and insightful relationship with the natural environment. Our sense of place links us to both the natural environment where we feel 'at home' and the cultural history of the people that have lived there and shaped the landscape.

The wheel of the year is a good way to explore and discuss the effect the changing seasons can have on us, well as on the plants and wildlife. We also react to sunlight levels although in our 24/7 culture with access to bright lights all the time we can lose sight of more than just the stars. Perhaps, it is time to try to piece together what is left of our native heritage and see how it can help us reconnect with the natural world. On a practical level it is a fun activity to create 'Wheel of the Year' environmental artwork as individuals or groups and discuss what different times of the year mean to us, which in our multicultural society could be quite varied. So many young people are detached from the natural world; this is one way to reconnect. But how much do we as leaders know of our native traditions and of how the seasons effect us? I write this as the evenings have just started to become noticeably darker, the first sign that summer is past its zenith, the year is rolling on towards Fall and the ending of another cycle. Which makes me feel a little sad, as endings always do, so it seems a good time to begin a cycle of articles; a journey through the year and exploring the seasons through the lens of our half forgotten Northern European traditions.

In the past, time was different.....

Days were still days.... years were still years... but what happened in between to measure the passage of time was much more closely tied to nature.

We measure time by what we can see. Ancient societies worked time out by watching the changes in the moon, the sun and the stars. Today our time and our calendars are set by governments and observed on electronic gadgets. However, underneath this is still calibrated from the cosmos.

Nature, of course, does not know this, so fortunately it still carries on doing what it always did. In pre-industrial agricultural and tribal societies everyone works all the time, there is no pay and no days off (bit like the outdoors). You get up when its light and sleep when it is dark, the only real need for a calendar is to know when to plant seeds or put the tup to the flock. Yet ancient people had some very elegant calendars to help them thrive in their environment, something we are only just beginning to understand. In these islands we have had wave upon wave of immigration (and invasion) from Northern Europe, and it is not always easy to see what traditions came from where as they blend together. In these articles I use the term Celtic very loosely to cover a time through Bronze Age to Roman times. There are also post Roman Viking and Anglo Saxon traditions in our cultural heritage as well.
The tribes who inhabited these islands before, during and after the Roman occupation had an entirely oral tradition for their history and folklore. However, there are traces of many of the old ideas to be found lurking in our language, our cultural habits, fairytales and superstitions. Why is Halloween spooky? Why do we have Valentines day when we do? Which plants do you never see brought into the house and why? Why are agricultural rents due at the start of certain months? Why is May Day important and why, until recently, did the Parliamentary year start in November?
In pre-Roman times solar year was not divided into 12 mathematically equal months, as the Romans attempted to do (and failed), but into observable moon cycles of 28 (and a quarter) days. A bit of maths will show that this does not fit neatly into 365, and leaves 12 full moons in some years and 13 in others (the blue moon).
A concept of a week came as an economic necessity. As society developed a week was the time between markets and varied from three to 10 days (presumably depending on how quickly the local produce went off). The idea of a seven day week with a day of rest came with the new religion of Christianity, whose Jewish roots meant that they observed the seven day week typical of the Middle East.

In the Celtic agricultural culture, regular days off were not an option. Cows do not milk themselves and when your survival depends on

getting the harvest in on time, you work when you need to. So the calendar was divided into seasons not weeks. The fixed points were the easily identifiable Longest Day (Midsummer) Longest Night (Midwinter) and the Spring and Autumn Equinoxes (when night equals day). Many cultures recognise these but for the people of the North the variation in light and dark was so great that is was a key part of their existence and has become a fundamental part of our traditions. Each of the four solar events in the year was marked with gatherings and celebrations (according to Roman and Christian writings). In addition, the Celts seem to have had four equally important quarter days – at the start of February, May, August and November. This divides the year giving about weeks weeks between festivals and a let up in the constant grind of work (strangely reminiscent of our education pattern!). A community-get-together-and-let-your-hair-down ceilidh every 6 weeks would seem to have a lot to recommend it!

Autumn, on all counts, is a time of change and the apparent death in the world around us. This change can feel scary to the young. Even today kids are frightened of the dark nights. Dark is an essential part of the natural cycle of these islands. Albeit it a part we try to hide from in the modern brightly-lit 24/7 culture. How keen are we to camp out even for one night without electricity in dark autumn evenings compared to the light spring evenings?

It's worth reflecting on how grim it can feel in the parts of the year where we have lost or forgotten the seasonal celebration. The most noticeable perhaps being the loss of the late January - early February festivals.

For the ancient cultures closely integrated with the life/death cycle of survival it was not so much a case of 'in the beginning there was light' as 'the beginning of the cycle starts with planting seed, then one day it grows, multiplies and dies'. These farming cultures knew that the first part of any new growth is hidden, in the soil or in the belly and that new growth often requires death and decay to free up the resources it needs to thrive. So, the first part of the year was the time of dark and of waiting.

The late autumn leading to Halloween is naturally a time of death and decay. This is not just the trees losing their leaves, the vegetation disappearing back into the soil or the elderly animals succumbing to the cold nights. It was the time when all livestock that could not be kept fed through the winter had to be slaughtered. This is the final harvest. However, we never talk of it as a harvest; perhaps because it involves blood and slaughter and death, something we all fear. It is not picturesque like reaping corn, cutting hay or gathering fruit; but it is just as necessary, and this culling brings the promise of life though the dark winter.
In these Northern Isles the time from November to January is the darkest and usually the bleakest. It can be wild, stormy and chaotic. It can be depressing or just deep and insightful. It is naturally a time of reflection, of looking backwards at what has been achieved and inwards at what effect this has had on us. It is a time to let thoughts roam in the dark without the distractions of daily life. The modern techno world does not allow for this very well. Instead, it forces us to have bright lights, to cope with shifting the clocks and expects us to operate our body clocks as we might want to in the height of spring.

So the natural rhythm and energy of the late Fall (November) is of quiescence, of waiting. And no, this is not just waiting for Christmas! The dark nights can be a time of reflection and of thinking rather than a time of doing (yet the media would have us shopping). It can be a time of planning, of planting the seeds for the next cycle. The tradition of New Year's resolutions we still have today.

The old Celtic year didn't start on the first of January (a Roman tradition) but on the first of November, when the last of the food collecting was largely done and it became too dark to do much work. Then, with a full larder, attention would turn beyond the immediate demands. The unavoidable darkening nights in northern latitudes, and the changing energy that this brings has not disappeared, even in our modern world. This results in the old traditions still being needed and sought. Halloween is not a modern American invention, rather it is a half remembered festival which has survived with the Celtic people who emigrated. In the UK we replaced the suppressed 'pagan' festival with non-religious concepts like Mischief Night (a northern tradition) and Guy Fawkes (the attempt to blow up the opening of the new Parliament).
We are used to an academic year, a financial year and a calendar year. Why not an older nature related year - the Celtic year; starting on All Hallows Eve and turning through the year with something to celebrate every 6 weeks or so?

Some activities to try as the Celtic year turns at the start of November.

✔ Think about the traditions we have at in the Autumn and compare the feeling of Harvest Festival with that of Remembrance Sunday.

✔ Take a look at the Elder tree now it does not have flowers or fruit on it. What do you see? - What do we use the wood from the Elder for? What do we not use it for?

✔ Cut an apple open horizontally and see the five pointed star each with it's own seed. Why does the apple appears in so many of our myths?

✔ Try a fungi foray – with all the usual caveats about eating them (i.e Don't unless you Know). How does the hunting make you feel in relation to the environment?

✔ Can you deal with the reality of meat? Get out of your comfort zone and prepare your own meat/fish from as far back in the process as you can. Try preserving some meat or fish by smoking or drying it. How much work is involved?

✔ Create something beautiful from the natural materials you have collected in the last year.

Reflect on your year's successes and failures. Let your mind wander over whether you are where you want to be, and if not what you might do about this. ■