

The Wheel of the Year

ALL THINGS COME TO AN END – THE WHEEL TURNS AND LIFE GOES ON

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For ancient Celtic tribes the end of October was the end of one year's cycle and the start of the next. New beginnings, like last year's seeds, need to begin life in the dark womb of the earth. This is the fifth and final part of the series that started this time last year exploring our culture through the Wheel of the Year and how this awareness of seasonal traditions can be used to help reconnect to both our environment and the heritage that has evolved in these islands on the edge of the habitable world. It ends where it started as the busy summer season draws to an end and the dark draws in shifting the focus from external and active pursuits to internal and reflective ones in a natural cycle.

From 1st Aug to 1st Nov is a time of very noticeable natural change taking us from the hot haze of high summer through the mellow autumn shades into the dark nights of Halloween. The focus of this quarter was the gathering and storing of produce to support life through the winter. Starting with Lammas/Loaf-mass to celebrate the first corn harvested, then Harvest festival around the Autumn Equinox on 21st/22nd September (sometimes called Mabon in the Celtic calendar) to the final and darker deeper celebration of Samhain (Halloween) following the killing of all the excess livestock which cannot be over-wintered but must be salted, smoked as an investment against the lean times of winter. A reminder that nothing is forever and death is an unavoidable reality.

Today people are largely immune from the effects of the encroaching dark. Traditional festivals have evolved out of the routine survival needs of the past and been maintained because they served a purpose. We may not need them for physical survival anymore but they can still make a positive contribution to our mental health and well-being and to our understanding of our environment and our place within it. In them we can find the story of our native culture. In pre-historic times, the British Isles was the northern limit for human survival providing a frugally sustainable habitat for small tribes of hunter-gatherers to overwinter on seaweed, shellfish and hunting. Later as tribes started clearing


areas for keeping livestock, these islands provided many sheltered coastal valleys where a family could scratch out a living huddling indoors through the cold dark evenings. Life on these islands must have been hard and the further north you went the harder you would have had to be (something Scots and Northerners might still claim!). However, it was a mild enough climate to both sustain the Celts and to attract the Vikings whose traditions have become integrated into our culture. Celts having arrived from Europe, Danes settling from the SE and Norsemen coming via Shetland and the Hebrides down the coast and into Ireland where the relatively easily navigable Irish sea became a major highway for trading and settling. For the Norsemen there were just two seasons, Winter and Summer. The transition from the farming focused summer to the hunting focused winter was probably celebrated either at the autumn equinox or more likely when the dark nights are becoming really apparent at the end of October with a celebration called 'Winter Nights', when the ghostly Wild Hunt led by Odin/Woden/Herne begins. The Hunt rides all winter and does not rest until Mayday – both nights being considered as 'time between worlds' and a time of mystery and magic.

Autumn Equinox and Harvest Festival

These two festivals fall at the same time but are generally celebrated separately. The one being about celebrating and giving thanks for the Harvest. The other being a more mystical contemplation of the balancing of light and dark as we turn again towards the more reflective, introspective time of the year.

Traditions like Harvest Suppers survive, but little of the Mabon festival is known, yet the balancing of light and dark is a key theme for this time of year, when the earth begins to pull back into herself and the dark skies offer a time for reflection on the immensity of space and our small place in it.





Samhain, Hop-tu-naa (Hogmanay), or Halloween

The final harvest of the year is the late apples and the livestock as the available fodder dwindles and only a few animals can be kept for next year. The slaughter of sheep/goats which grazed the high pastures and pigs which were a sort of pre-fridge system of eating up the summer excess and storing food 'on the bone'. It is easy to see where Halloween traditions like bobbing for apples, turnip lanterns and the bone themes originate.

Samhain was the period of pause between what is now and what will come next. This was a big celebration and marked an important transition: a time of taking stock of what has been achieved and laying plans for what comes next. The Isle of Man still has the tradition of Hop-tu-naa at the end of October, what would be in a different dialect Hogmanay. Today we think of the New Year as 1st Jan, a leftover from the Romans but Hogmanay traditions like First Footing have probably migrated from the old Celtic new year; where in the large tribal round houses all the families would gather around the central fire to listen to stories and feel safe through the long night of Souls when the wall between worlds was thin and the dead seemed very close. Food was set aside for those loved ones departed so they could join in/be remembered and at the end of the long night each family probably took back a lump of glowing peat (coal) to rekindle the fire in their family hearth. Other old traditions like Turnip Lanterns to scare away unhappy spirits have survived and although many people find the Halloween themes of mischief and mayhem worrying, they are part of a very old tradition; a sort of 'time out' where people stop and mark the transition from one phase to the next and in that time and space the normal rules do not apply. Events like 'Lord of Misrule' where a youngster is made king for a night or 'Mischief Night' where pranks are played are all 'traditional' and worked well in tight knit communities where some fun was needed and the rules were known to all. This chaos has a serious side: everything comes to an end, and just as the leaves fall in their time so we are all going to die. This is the unavoidable truth that we either try-to-ignore through keeping busy or try-to-face though religious beliefs like reincarnation or life-after-death. Samhain focuses on the dark and death that we naturally fear; so we light fires, make mischief, tell stories and dance in the face of death. What else can we do when the end is in sight? ■

WHEEL OF THE YEAR ACTIVITIES

Harvest / Equinox

- ✓ **Collect berries** and make deep dark red elderberry cordial, the counterpart of the spring/summer light white elderflower fizz.
- ✓ **Fungi foray** – hunt for fungi we usually fail to notice (usual warnings about 'don't eat unless you are certain and don't pick if rare')
- ✓ **Create autumn wreaths** for the wheel of the year, celebrating the colours autumn leaves bring.
- ✓ **Hedgerow harvest** – what can you find in your local hedgerow and what would it have been used for?
- ✓ **Make willow lanterns** for a night walk (use LEDs inside for ease)

Halloween alternatives

- ✓ **Make drums and lanterns/flaming torches** and have a procession to beat-the-bounds to both embrace and defy the scary dark.
- ✓ **Lantern procession** to a campfire circle, extinguish all the lights out and reflect on life without electricity before lighting the central fire (with drama) reviewing the gains of the summer/year and then relighting all the lanterns from the central fire.
- ✓ **Find and plant an acorn** – and think of new ideas for the future.
- ✓ **Cut an apple in half around its equator** – see the star inside and the pips, cast a pip into the fire/earth and make a wish for next year.
- ✓ **Grunge or Trick-n-Treat trail** – a night line with feely bags/boxes en-route. Death and decay theme eg cold spaghetti for worms or intestines, hard-boiled egg for an eye ball, pumpkin for a skull etc. (oh and maybe some sweets too).