

Halloween

All Hallows' Eve

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The Origins of Halloween

Halloween is a night-time festivity. It is celebrated on the last night of October. It is the night when witches and evil spirits come back to earth to put their magic spells on people. The Halloween customs English people celebrate today had their origins in the lands of the Celts over 2000 years ago. These customs came from the Druid festival of Samhain which was on November 1st, the first day of their new year and the beginning of winter. Samhain was Lord of the Dead and Prince of Darkness.

According to Celtic belief, Samhain allowed the spirits of all those who had died during the year to return to their earthly homes on the evening of October 31st. On this evening the Druids built huge bonfires and wore costumes during the celebration so that the evil spirits would think that the people belonged to the spirit's evil company. While the Druids sat around the bonfires, old women called "witches" foretold the future.



When the Romans conquered the Celts they combined the autumn festival dedicated to Pomona, the goddess of fruit and trees, with the Celtic festival of Samhain. Many of the customs of the Celts survived even after the Celts became Christians. During the 800's, the Church set aside November 1st to honour all the saints and called it All Saints' Day or All Hallows' Day. The night before became known as All Hallows' Eve which was later shortened to Halloween.

In Medieval times, people believed that witches, who could take the form of cats, flew on their brooms on All Hallows' Eve, so they lit bonfires to keep the evil spirits away. It is from all these various traditions that Halloween is associated with witches, ghosts, masks, bonfires and so on. Later on, when the Irish, the Scottish and the English emigrated to America in the 1840's, they took these traditions with them. In modern times Halloween has become a time for parties and fun. Children enjoy dressing up, not only as ghosts, witches and monsters, but also as fairies and cartoon characters.

Why are PUMPKINS associated with Halloween?

The jack-o-lantern is the most typical of Halloween symbols.

A jack-o-lantern is a hollowed out pumpkin with a candle burning inside it. How did the pumpkin become associated with Halloween? The tradition of hollowing out large turnips and placing lights inside began with the Irish. According to Irish folklore, a man named Jack was condemned to walk the earth carrying a lantern because he had played tricks on the devil.

The devil gave Jack a piece of coal to help him find his way in the dark of limbo. Jack put the piece of coal in a turnip and it became known as a jack-o-lantern.

The use of jack-o-lanterns as festival lights for Halloween is a custom that descended from the Irish, who used carved out turnips as lanterns. When the Irish emigrated to America turnips were replaced by pumpkins, which were much larger and already partially hollow.

