

Midsummer in Britain

01989, Tana Culain ·K·A·M

Midsummer is a celebration of the Summer Solstice which occurs around June 21st. On this longest day of the year the sun reaches its highest point in the sky. Midsummer has been celebrated in the past as a sacred solar festival and a sacred water festival.

The early Celts started out celebrating Midsummer in much the same way they had always celebrated Beltane, with bonfires, dancing and burning wheels. It was already a Beltane custom for women and girls to bathe in a river as a form of renewal and as a magic for bringing rain. River and spring water was always flowing, always new.

Northern Practices

In the northern countries it was too cold to bathe much before June, as is the case even in southern England today. Thus the practice of bathing for renewal may have shifted forward to Midsummer for practical reasons and drifted south. The shifting of the ritual bath to Midsummer would also explain the tradition of June weddings. Nobody in their right mind wants to spend their wedding night with a man or woman who hasn't bathed since the previous autumn!

Midsummer was also a good day for divinations by girls who wanted to know the identity of their future mates.

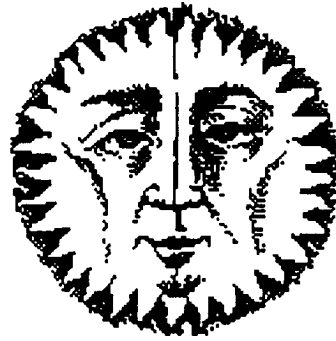
On Midsummer's Eve,, always June 24th in Scandinavia, girls would climb over nine fences, pick nine kinds of wildflowers, and then put them under their pillows in order to dream of their future husbands. The northerners call this day St. John's Day and claim to be celebrating the birth of St. John the Baptist. John was a fortunate man indeed, to be born on a day so sacred to bathing. Or perhaps the date of his birth was announced only after his vocation was decided.

On Midsummer's day in Skagen, on the northern coast of **Jutland**, the Danes still celebrate with a huge bonfire. The Swedes dance around a Maypole (maybe it's too cold in May) that has been hung with floral wreaths and eat a special dish of potatoes with sour cream and herring. Those who are ill bring water from special magical springs and stay up **all** night keeping vigil.

British Well-Worship

In Britain Midsummer is a time to pay special attention to wells and springs. Today it remains a time for **well-dressing**. Well dressing involves making elaborate floral panels, usually on Mary-oriented Christian themes and setting them by designated wells.

This custom is still very popular, and dates back to the Pagan Celtic and Roman practice of venerating wells, springs, pools, rivers and lakes. Ancient peoples, unlike many today, recognized the fact that life depended on an adequate supply of good clean water. Wells and springs were decorated with



garlands and danced around. They were the dwelling place of the Gods and Goddesses, and in many cases a direct symbol of the Great Goddess and of fertility.

At Buxton, in the English Midlands, there are famous mineral springs that were popular as far back as the Romans and Celts before them. Numerous Roman relics have been found in and around the springs. The wells in Buxton are dressed on the Thursday closest to June 24th with pictures composed of flower petals, leaves and grasses.

The Chalice Well in **Glastonbury** is a good example of an ancient holy well in magical use today. It is fed by a spring of pure water, quite accessible, very drinkable, and great to use in special Circles such as Initiations. You can bring back a tiny amount from your visit in a plastic bottle. In my own view a visit to the Well is of far more value than a climb of the more famous "Tor".

The Bronze Age Celts also saw water as entrances to the Underworld. They cut ritual wells into the Earth and threw offerings into the wells for the Gods. Today's custom of tossing coins into

wishing wells or fountains comes from this practice. Many wells were Goddess wells only and symbolized the secret entrance into the body or womb of the Great Mother. Women desiring children threw pins into these wells as offerings. The pins were the straight pins of the sort used to hold on clothing, not jeweled brooches, which almost nobody owned or could afford at that time.



Water-worship was not limited to Sacred Wells and Springs. The major rivers of Europe have sacred ancestry and are named for their patron Goddesses —

Seine for Sequana
Marne for Matrona (of the
Matronae, Gaulish
mother Goddesses)

Dee for Deva
Clyde for Clota, the
divine washer

Braint for Brigantia/Brigit
Thames for Tamesa
Shannon for Sinainn
Severn for Sabrina
Danube for Danu

The Solstice lived on in the Middle Ages in the guise of the Midsummer fair, featuring games, food and crafts. Historical reenactments took the place of rituals. The fairs doubled as hiring fairs. Potential servants and farm laborers came to seek employment for the coming year. Seasonal fairs on various themes still take place on a smaller scale all over Britain, including the **Alnick** Fair in Northumberland and the **Eisteddfodd** in Wales.

Midsummer Fire Worship

In much of Britain, Midsummer was celebrated on June 24, three days after the Solstice. Perhaps it wasn't until the sun began to wane and the days grew shorter that there was need of magical support from the bonfires.

The light was ritually strengthened by the fires, torchlight processions, flaming tar barrels and wheels bound with straw, set on fire and rolled down the hills. People danced around the bonfires and many would leap over the flames as they died down to gather power. In some Cornish villages it is still good luck for couples to leap through the flame. All dancing is done *deosil* around the fire, following the sun's course **from** east to west. Cattle were sometimes driven through the bonfire ashes for good fortune, as at Samhain.

If you go by the old calendar, July 4 corresponds to the old Midsummer Eve. In many places the bonfires are lit on the Fourth. The people of **Whalton** in Northumberland celebrate on July 4th with a

"Baal Fire", while in other villages in Northumbria "Bale Fires" are lit along with Morris and Sword dancing on the village green or square.

It is interesting to speculate on the choice of July 4th for the United States Independence Day. Perhaps George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and other Masonic Initiates who helped found the States were more Pagan than met the eye. Their eye in the pyramid wasn't put on U.S. currency by Fundamentalist Christians, you can be sure of that!

Midsummer fires are still lit today in Scotland, Cornwall, Northumberland, Sweden and Denmark. In the Scottish town of Peebles there is an annual "Beltane Feast" on June 23. A bonfire is ceremoniously lit and a young girl is crowned as the **Beltane** queen on the steps of the old parish church.

Midsummer folklore is abundant. In Scotland, the Orkneys and the Shetlands seals are said to shed their skins and dance on the shortest night. In several spots on the South Downs, in Sussex England the Fairies are said to appear on Midsummer Eve and dance in the moonlight.

Midsummer and the Church

When the Roman Church first gained power in England, the priests declared that Midsummer was "really" St. John's Day and that people should burn their fires for him instead of the Sun. By around 450 AD a

Church Council held in Arles passed a prohibition against infidels lighting torches or venerating trees, fountains or stones. Charlemagne issued an edict stating:

“With respect to trees, stones and fountains, where certain foolish people light torches or practice other superstitions, we earnestly ordain that that most evil custom . . . should be removed and destroyed.”

It remained safe, however, to worship the Virgin Mary and the saints at the old sites. Not surprisingly, little statues of the Virgin and various saints began to pop up at all the wells, and people continued to honor the holy spots as before. The names were literally changed to protect the innocent.

Times change. I have noticed that nowadays it is the English village churches that have become partial caretakers of the rituals from the Old Religion. The Church of England is sometimes like South American Catholicism — a blend of old and new traditions, old and new Gods.

Midsummer and the Circles of Stone

Stone Circles are currently associated with Midsummer in the popular mind because of the publicity created by the alleged modern Druids at Stonehenge, and the more recent conflicts between English nomadic “hippies” and police. In fact the ancient Druids of 500 BCE would have been far more at ease in a grove of trees.

Stonehenge was built long before their time, and there is little evidence of Druidic use.

Stonehenge has a special Heel Stone that is aligned with the entrance in such a way that the sun rises straight up over the tip in the center of the entrance on the Summer Solstice. But Stonehenge, built over a pe-

riod between 3000 and 1500 BCE, was meant to be a year-round Temple and calendar. Circles like Stonehenge are useful for both Solar and Lunar measurements as well as religious practice. It is less than accurate to associate them too strongly with one particular day, or a religious group that came to power long after their construction.

The Giant

01989, Robin **Culain, ‘K·A·M**

*I stand alone upon the hill
The focus **of** attention
My upright stick and **ballocks** proud
Attract the couple and the crowd
In search **of** intervention.*

*The crowd seeks novelty and finds
A hearty joke between my thighs
And stopping in the village square
Are sure to find a souvenir
To make their spirits rise.*

*The couples court me, two and two
Like furtive birds they seek my nest
And make the beast that rocks and moans
Amid my nettles, grass and stones.
‘Tis them I love the best.*

*The joyful promise **of** a child
Is worth the sweaty half-mile climb
The thrill as planes skim overhead
Sweet coupling in the midst **of** dread
Their passion matched to mine.*

*So **few** my secret will divine
My outstretched arm a beacon clear.
These lovers seeking three **from** two
Must find the source that’s ever new
Most common, yet most dear.*

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Many stone Circles in Britain are supposedly composed of the remains of people who "danced" on the wrong day and were literally petrified. At Stanton Drew, in Avon, there are three stone Circles known as the Weddings. The stones are said to be members of a wedding party that either danced on a Sunday or on Midsummers Eve, depending on version, and were turned to stone. The Men-y-Maidens in Cornwall is a particularly lovely stone Circle, reputedly composed of girls who were turned to stone as punishment for untimely dancing.

The message intended may be deeper than a mere prohibition of merriment on a solemn day. The "Sober Sabbath" idea is more fruit of the Protestant Reformation than early Christianity. It seems more likely that the early Christian priests didn't want people dancing in the Circles as a way of celebrating the Sabbath in a Pagan way. They particularly would not want anyone dancing around on the Solstice to celebrate a Pagan holy day.

In the main, Midsummer Celebration centers around Fire and Water, while the media attention centers around Earth and a certain amount of hot Air. This may be just as "well", for while the cameras focus in on the Heel Stone the faithful may gather by the river in peace.

A magazine that doesn't offend somebody, couldn't possibly interest anybody. **International Red Garters**, the official voice of the New Wiccan Church, is currently published at least 8 times per year, so the news is fresh enough to be news. We focus on issues of particular interest to the English Traditions (Alexandrian, Gardnerian, Kingstone Majestic, Silver Crescent, & Taran). We aren't afraid of controversy. 1 year for \$10 (USA and Canada) or \$12 (foreign). Sample copies \$1 each. Subscription in flat plain brown envelopes is available for an additional \$3 per year over the annual subscription. New Wiccan Church, P.O. Box 162046, Sacramento, CA 95816

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