

Things English: The English Calendar

Presented by Margaret Nelson at the March 10, 2008 SOB Meeting

On Groundhog Day, I heard about St. Brigit's Day and started to explore the English calendar. I found many terms I'd heard in the old border ballads and in "Lord Peter Whimsey" and "Rumpole of the Bailey" books. Being Anglophiles, I thought you too would find interesting some unusual dates on the English calendar, along with an explanation of their meanings. I'm keeping my copy handy in a book so I can find it when next I read an English-oriented book.


February 1: Imbolc was a spring festival that was sacred to the goddess Brigit, now St. Bridgit's day. It was this time of the year, when ewes begin to lactate. Imbolc is traditionally a time of weather prognostication, and the old tradition of watching to see if serpents or badgers came from their winter dens is perhaps a precursor to the North American Groundhog Day. A Scottish Gaelic proverb about the day is: *"The serpent will come from the hole On the brown Day of Bride, Though there should be three feet of snow On the flat surface of the ground."*

Fire and purification are an important aspect of this festival. As goddess and saint Brigit is associated with holy wells, sacred flames, and healing. Lighting of candles and fires represents the return of warmth and the increasing power of the Sun over the coming months.

May 1: Beltane was a great fire festival, held according to the Celtic calendar at mid-year, which is May Day. The festival marked the beginning of summer and was sacred to the god Belenus. Traditionally, the people normally ate Beltaine cake or bannocks.

August 1: Lughnasad was a harvest festival sacred to the Irish god Lugh or the Gallic god Lugus. It is the wake of Lugh, the Sun-King, whose light begins to dwindle after the summer solstice. The grain dies so that the people might live. In English-speaking countries in the Northern Hemisphere, August 1 is Lammass Day (loaf-mass day), the festival of the first wheat harvest of the year. On this day it was customary to bring to church a loaf made from the new crop. In many parts of England, tenants were bound to present freshly harvested wheat to their landlords on or before the first day of August.

September 29: Michaelmas (pronounced mĪkəlməs/; also the Feast of Ss. Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael) is a day in the Christian calendar which occurs on 29 September. Because it falls near the equinox, it is associated with the beginning of autumn and the shortening of days.

November 1: The Samhain marked the end of summer, and the start of a Celtic New Year. According to Celtic myth, the night of Samhain (or Samhain-eve, October 31) was the Feast of the Dead, where the gods visit roamed the land. 

Things to See, Buy, Do & Know

- The Toronto Public Library has made available a digital edition of [Lady Conan Doyle's Diary](#) from the Doyles' 1914 tour of Canada. The URL is: ve.torontopubliclibrary.ca/Showcase/Lcd_Diary.

- **Things that you can no longer do in London:** Ride a horse drawn cab through the parks, as The Royal Parks says it was banned because it advertised the Sherlock Holmes Museum.

- **Thanks to Peter Blau for these:**

⇒ According to a poll commissioned by a British health insurer, Dr. Watson "is sadly more well-known to the average Brit than many real-life medics that have actually made a genuine difference to people's lives." Watson was correctly identified by 59% of the respondents, Sir Alexander Fleming (51%), Dr. Kildare (47%), Dr Frazier Crane (43%), and Florence Nightengale (37%). (PFL David would argue that Watson has, indeed, made a difference in people's lives—if only for his

emphasis on the curative powers of brandy!)

⇒ At www.sherlockiancalendar.homestead.com, you'll find a site that lists **Sherlockian events throughout the world**. A perfect place for the traveling Sherlockian to be able to visit fellow followers of The Great Detective, including SOB Monthly Meetings.


⇒ **Teenager gives dolls literary makeovers.** Margaret Hoang is a 15-year-old doll clothing crafter from Edgewood, WA who makes Barbie versions of famous characters from literature like Sherlock Holmes and Jane Eyre. Her work is on display at the Sumner Library through March.

Number of dolls she's made: 12.

Her first doll: Sherlock Holmes.

Time to produce a doll: One to three days.

Library hours: 1-5 p.m. Sundays, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

Fridays, 10 a.m.- 5 p.m. Saturdays. 

The "Legal Year"

In English law, the legal year is the calendar during which the judges sit in court. The year is divided into four terms:

- ☀ Michaelmas, from October to December;
- ☀ Hilary, from January to April (Hilary's feast is January 14);
- ☀ Easter, from April to May; and
- ☀ Trinity term, from June to July.

Between terms the Courts are in vacation and no trials are heard.

As an example, Michaelmas term is used in the extended sense of autumn, as the name of the first term of the academic year, which begins at this time, at various educational institutions in the United Kingdom and Ireland (typically those with lengthy history and traditions).

Don't Forget St. Swithin!

Thanks for the information on the English calendar, Marge. But you missed one of my favorite days: July 15th, St. Swithin's Day—a day on which people watch the weather saying that whatever the weather is like on St. Swithin's Day, it will continue so for the next forty days.

St. Swithin was a Saxon Bishop of Winchester, who as he lay on his deathbed, asked to be buried out of doors. For nine years, his wishes were followed, but then, the monks of Winchester moved his remains to a splendid shrine inside the cathedral on 15 July 971. According to legend, there was a heavy rain storm either during the ceremony or on its anniversary, which led to the aforesaid old wives' tale.

However, according to the Met Office, this wives' tale is a myth, having been put to the test on 55 occasions, when it has been wet on St. Swithin's Day and 40 days of rain did not follow.

Yours In Sherlock, PFL David