

The Meaning of the May.

From ancient times May Day has been celebrated as a Spring Festival throughout Europe. With the end of winter, the start of Spring is here... as evidenced by primroses and bluebells in our hedgerow and woods, new-born lambs in the fields, new green leaves sprouting from every branch and birds everywhere nesting and mating – no better time then for human kind to celebrate the time of renewal!

"When you can put your foot on nine daisies at once, spring has come" - old English saying.

May Eve and the "Rites of Spring".

In times past young men and women went "a-maying" to the seclusion of local woods on May Eve, to participate in the rites of the renewal of life. Returning at dawn on May Day carrying with them freshly cut green boughs bursting into leaf – symbolic representations of their oneness with nature in the process of rebirth and renewal happening all around them.

Garland Day

Other local customs involved young girls parading through the streets bedecked in garlands of flowers and greenery. Often they would carry a similarly bedecked stick supporting a small bag, into which friends, neighbours and fellow town's folk would place a small gift.

In parts of central England floral garlands were carried, which often took the form of crosses and were decorated with green leaves, bluebells and primroses. These tended to be carried by young boys rather than girls.

In fact, another name for May Day is Garland Day!

The Queen (and King) of the May.

The selection and crowing of the May queen, traditionally with a crown of blossoming hawthorn, was the climax of the May Day celebrations. The May Queen was often accompanied on her procession around town by a retinue of small children, all bedecked in floral garlands and greenery. In some villages children would carry a basket that was filled or decorated with green boughs and flowers in the expectation of receiving a small gift from onlookers for their trouble.

In early days the May Queen also shared "her throne" with a May King – but for reasons lost to time, the role of the May King has long been discontinued.

Jack-in-the-Green.

Other characters traditionally involved with our May Day celebrations were Jack o' the Green, alternatively known as Jack-in-the-Green. This character was almost entirely covered in freshly cut green boughs and is thought to symbolised spring itself. Jack-in-the-Green was also in some places known as Jack-in-the-Bush and wore a pyramid shape of greenery crowned with spring flowers. Jack-in-the-Green is almost certainly the same folk character as the Green Man – a reoccurring figure in the mythology of these, our British Isles, whose folk memory stretches way back into the mists of time.

The Maypole.

Traditionally the Maypole was made from a hawthorn tree but oak, birch and elm was also frequently used. Sometimes they were painted with spiralling stripes of bright vibrant colours, and sometimes elaborately decorated with streamers of all colours dangling from the top to the ground.

A commonly accepted theory is that the Maypole was a phallic symbol – which ties in nicely with May Day being a festival of rejuvenation and rebirth.

When dancing round the Maypole custom dictated that the participants held the end of a single streamer each and weaved in and out around each other, until a colourful pattern formed around the pole culminating in a point at the top.

Folklore suggests that the radiating streamers represented sunrays striking down from sky to earth – the sun's energy warming the soil to facilitating an abundant harvest in the months to come.

Some Maypoles were enormous. One erected in London's Strand in 1661 was reputedly no less than 134 feet in height!

Sometimes local custom required that the Maypoles stood till it rotted away – it being considered bad luck to remove this symbol of fertility and spring, and was subsequently in use for many years.

Morris Dancers.

Morris dancers traditionally performed around the Maypole and wore white shirts and knee-breeches. They bedecked themselves with ribbons and small bells, with wore flowers in their hats. They carried white handkerchiefs and sometimes wore wooden clogs. The music that accompanied them in their dancing was provided in latter years with accordion or concertina, whereas whistles and drums sufficed in earlier times.

May Dew.

In some areas in England it was a customary for young people on May Day morning to bathe their faces in May dew gathered from the meadows. No-one quite knows why, although some speculate that it was believed that the dew had beneficial cosmetic and medical properties on that one particular morning of the year. In fact this quaint old custom persisted until at least the late eighteenth century. A London Newspaper of 1791 reported that -

"Yesterday, being the first of May, a number of persons went into the fields and bathed their faces with the dew on the grass, with the idea that it would render them beautiful."

Did it work? Who knows – but what a wonderfully quaint old English custom!

May Eve and May Day – ancient and precious fragments of our folk culture that we are determined to protect and perpetuate.