Holidays are the part of the culture in every country. If you want to know the other nation, it’s very important to learn about its history and culture. Let’s know more about the holidays in England.

**Christmas**

Christmas is Britain's most popular holiday and is characterized by traditions which date back hundreds of years. Many Christmas customs which originated in Britain have been adopted in the United States.

The Word Christmas comes from the Old English name **'Cristes Maesse'** and is the celebration of the birth of Jesus. The first recorded observance occurred in Rome in AD360, but it wasn't until AD440 that the Christian Church fixed a celebration date 25th of December.

Christmas decorations in general have even earlier origins. Holly, ivy and mistletoe are associated with rituals going back beyond the Dark Ages. The custom of kissing beneath a sprig of mistletoe is derived from an ancient pagan tradition.

The Christmas tree was popularised by Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, who introduced one to the Royal Household in 1840. Since 1947, the country of Norway has presented Britain annually with a large Christmas tree which stands in Trafalgar Square in commemoration of Anglo-Norwegian cooperation during the Second World War.

The first ever Christmas card was posted in England in the 1840s, and the practice soon became an established part of the build-up to Christmas. Over a billion Christmas cards are now sent every year in the United Kingdom, many of them sold in aid of charities.

Popular among children at Christmas time are pantomimes: song and dance dramatizations of well-known fairy-tales which encourage audience participation.

Carols are often sung on Christmas Eve by groups of singers to their neighbors, and children hang a stocking on the fireplace or at the foot of their bed for Santa Claus (also named Father Christmas) to fill. Presents for the family are placed beneath the Christmas tree.

On Christmas Day many families attend Christmas services at church.

The Christmas Dinner is the main Christmas meal and is traditionally eaten at mid-day or early afternoon on Christmas Day. Christmas dinner consists traditionally of a roast turkey, goose or chicken with stuffing and roast potatoes, brussels, sprouts, roast potatoes, cranberry sauce, rich nutty stuffing, tiny sausages wrapped in bacon (pigs in a blanket). This is followed by mince pies and a rich Christmas fruity pudding flaming with brandy to ward off evil spirits, which might contain coins or lucky charms for children. The pudding is usually prepared weeks beforehand and is customarily stirred by each member of the family as a wish is made. Later in the day, a Christmas cake may be served - a rich baked fruit cake with marzipan, icing and sugar frosting.

A Christmas tradition involving the turkey is to pull its wishbone. This is one of the bones of the turkey which is shaped like the letter 'Y'. Two people will each hold an end and pull. The person left with the larger piece of the bone makes a wish.

The pulling of Christmas crackers often accompanies food on Christmas Day. Invented by a London baker in 1846, a cracker is a brightly coloured paper tube, twisted at both ends, which contains a party hat, riddle and toy or other trinket. When it is pulled by two people it gives out a crack as its contents are dispersed.

Another traditional feature of Christmas afternoon is the Queen's Christmas Message to the nation, broadcast on radio and television.

**Boxing Day**

In Britain, Boxing Day is usually celebrated on the following day after Christmas Day, which is 26 December. However, strictly speaking, Boxing Day is the first weekday after Christmas. Like Christmas Day, Boxing Day is a public holiday. This means it is typically a non working day in the whole of Britain. When Boxing Day falls on a Saturday or Sunday the following Monday is the public holiday. Traditionally, 26 December was the day to open the Christmas Box to share the contents with the poor.

Christmas boxes were used in different ways. For example, to protect ships. During the Age of Exploration, when great sailing ships were setting off to discover new land, A Christmas Box was used as a good luck device. It was a small container placed on each ship while it was still in port. It was put there by a priest, and those crewmen who wanted to ensure a safe return would drop money into the box. It was then sealed up and kept on board for the entire voyage.

If the ship came home safely, the box was handed over to the priest in the exchange for the saying of a Mass of thanks for the success of the voyage. The Priest would keep the box sealed until Christmas when he would open it to share the contents with the poor.

Christmas boxes were used to help the poor. An 'Alms Box' was placed in every church on Christmas Day, into which worshippers placed a gift for the poor of the parish. These boxes were always opened the day after Christmas, which is why that day became know as Boxing Day.

A present for the workers. Many poorly paid workers were required to work on Christmas Day and took the following day off to visit their families. As they prepared to leave, their employers would present them with Christmas boxes.

During the late 18th century, Lords and Ladies of the manor would "box up" their leftover food, or sometimes gifts and distribute them the day after Christmas to tenants who lived and worked on their lands.

And the tradition still continues today. It is customary for householders to give small gifts or monetary tips to regular visiting trades people (the milkman, dustman, coalman, paper boy etc.) and, in some work places, for employers to give a Christmas bonus to employees.

Traditionally, Boxing Day is the day when families get together. It is a day of watching sports and playing board games with the family.

**New Year’s Day**

The celebration of New Year's day varies according to the district. In the south of England, the festival of Christmas, lasting 12 days from December 25th, runs on well into the New Year. The decorations of coloured streamers and holly, put up round the walls, and of course the fir-tree, with its candles or lights, are not packed away until January 5th. On the evening of December 31st, people gather in one another's homes, in clubs, in pubs, in restaurants, and hotels, in dance halls and institutes, to "see the New Year in". There is usually a supper of some kind, and a cabaret, or light entertainment. The bells chime at midnight. The people join crossed hands, and sing "Auld lang syne", a song of remembrance, which means "the good old days," was written by Robert Burns in 1788.

There is also a very interesting tradition of the “first guest”. The British people let in every person who knock in the door after the clock struck 12, and if it is a tall black-haired man, the year will be successful. This first guest brings some coal, some bread and some salt, that mean wellness and happiness. He silently comes to the fireplace which consider to be the heart of the house and throw there coal there. Then he may be talked to, and congratulated.

Making New Year's resolutions – pledges to change for the better in the coming year – is a common activity associated with this holiday. It is traditional to make toasts on New Year's Eve as well. Typically, the old year is represented by "Father Time," an elderly man with a flowing gray beard, and the new year is represented by an infant.

The celebration of the new year is the oldest of all holidays. It was first observed in ancient Babylon about 4000 years ago. In the years around 2000 BC, the Babylonian New Year began with the first New Moon after the first day of spring. The beginning of spring is a logical time to start a new year. After all, it is the season of rebirth, of planting new crops, and of blossoming.

The Romans continued to observe the new year in late March, but their calendar was continually tampered with by various emperors so that the calendar soon became out of synchronization with the sun. In order to set the calendar right, the Roman senate, in 153 BC, declared January 1 to be the beginning of the new year.

During the Middle Ages, the Church remained opposed to celebrating New Years. January 1 has been celebrated as a holiday by Western nations for only about the past 400 years.

Traditionally, it was thought that one could affect the luck they would have throughout the coming year by what they did or ate on the first day of the year. For that reason, it has become common for folks to celebrate the first few minutes of a brand new year in the company of family and friends.

Traditional New Year foods are also thought to bring luck. Many cultures believe that anything in the shape of a ring is good luck, because it symbolizes "coming full circle," completing a year's cycle, For example, donuts.

**St. Valentine’s Day**

February 14 is Valentine's Day. Although it is celebrated as a lovers' holiday today, with the giving of candy, Valentine flowers, or other gifts between couples in love, it originated in 5th Century Rome as a tribute to St. Valentine, a Catholic bishop.

For eight hundred years prior to the establishment of Valentine's Day, the Romans had practiced a pagan celebration in mid-February commemorating young men's rite of passage to the god Lupercus. The celebration featured a lottery in which young men would draw the names of teenage girls from a box. The girl assigned to each young man in that manner would be his companion during the remaining year.

In an effort to do away with the pagan festival, Pope Gelasius ordered a slight change in the lottery. Instead of the names of young women, the box would contain the names of saints. Both men and women were allowed to draw from the box, and the game was to emulate the ways of the saint they drew during the rest of the year. Needless to say, many of the young Roman men were not too pleased with the rule changes.

Instead of the pagan god Lupercus, the Church looked for a suitable patron saint of love to take his place. They found an appropriate choice in Valentine, who, in AD 270 had been beheaded by Emperor Claudius.

Claudius had determined that married men made poor soldiers. So he banned marriage from his empire. But Valentine would secretly marry young men that came to him. When Claudius found out about Valentine, he first tried to convert him to paganism. But Valentine reversed the strategy, trying instead to convert Claudius. When he failed, he was stoned and beheaded.

During the days that Valentine was imprisoned, he fell in love with the blind daughter of his jailer. His love for her, and his great faith, managed to miraculously heal her from her blindness before his death. Before he was taken to his death, he signed a farewell message to her, "From your Valentine.” The phrase has been used on this day ever since.

Although the lottery for women had been banned by the church, the mid-February holiday in commemoration of St. Valentine was still used by Roman men to seek the affection of women. It became a tradition for the men to give the ones they admired handwritten messages of affection, containing Valentine’s name.

The first Valentine card grew out of this practice. The first true Valentine card was sent in 1415 by Charles, duke of Orleans, to his wife. He was imprisoned in the Tower of London at the time.

Cupid, another symbol of the holiday, became associated with it because he was the son of Venus, the Roman god of love and beauty. Cupid often appears on Valentine cards.

**April Fool’s Day**

Unlike most of the other nonfoolish holidays, the history of April Fool's Day, sometimes called All Fool's Day, is not totally clear. It is not like Halloween, where despite an interesting history, most people just put on Halloween costumes, get candy, and leave it at that. There really wasn't a "first April Fool's Day" that can be pinpointed on the calendar. Some believe it sort of evolved simultaneously in several cultures at the same time, from celebrations involving the first day of spring.

The closest point in time that can be identified as the beginning of this tradition was in 1582, in France. Prior to that year, the new year was celebrated for eight days, beginning on March 25. The celebration culminated on April 1. With the reform of the calendar under Charles IX, the Gregorian Calendar was introduced, and New Year’s Day was moved to January 1.

However, communications being what they were in the days when news traveled by foot, many people did not receive the news for several years. Others, the more obstinate crowd, refused to accept the new calendar and continued to celebrate the new year on April 1. These backward folk were labeled as "fools" by the general populace. They were subject to some ridicule, and were often sent on “fools errands” or were made the butt of other practical jokes.

This harassment evolved, over time, into a tradition of prank-playing on the first day of April. The tradition eventually spread to England and Scotland in the eighteenth century. It was later introduced to the American colonies of both the English and French. April Fool's Day thus developed into an international fun fest, so to speak, with different nationalities specializing in their own brand of humor at the expense of their friends and families.

In Scotland, for example, April Fool's Day is actually celebrated for two days. The second day is devoted to pranks involving the posterior region of the body. It is called Taily Day. The origin of the “kick me” sign can be traced to this observance.

Pranks performed on April Fool's Day range from the simple, (such as saying, "Your shoe's untied, or I accidentally stepped on your glasses!), to the elaborate. Setting a roommate's alarm clock back an hour is a common gag. Whatever the prank, the trickster usually ends it by yelling to his victim “April Fool!”

Practical jokes are a common practice on April Fool's Day. Sometimes, elaborate practical jokes are played on friends or relatives that last the entire day. The news media even gets involved. For instance, a British short film once shown on April Fool's Day was a fairly detailed documentary about “spaghetti farmers” and how they harvest their crop from the spaghetti trees.

April Fool's Day is a "for-fun-only" observance. Nobody is expected to buy gifts or to take their "significant other" out to eat in a fancy restaurant. Nobody gets off work or school. It's simply a fun little holiday, but a holiday on which one must remain forever vigilant, for he may be the next April Fool!

**Easter**

As with almost all "Christian" holidays, Easter has a secular side as well. The dichotomous nature of Easter and its symbols, however, is not necessarily a modern fabrication.

Easter has always had its non-religious side. In fact, Easter was originally a pagan festival. It was co-opted by Christian missionaries starting in the second century CE.

The ancient Saxons celebrated the return of spring with an uproarious festival commemorating their goddess of offspring and of springtime, Eastre. When the second-century Christian missionaries encountered the tribes of the north with their pagan celebrations, they do what Christian missionaries have always done; they attempted to convert them to Christianity. They did so, however, in a clandestine manner.

It would have been dangerous for the very early Christian converts to celebrate their holy days with observances that did not coincide with celebrations that already existed. To save lives, the missionaries decided to spread their dogma slowly throughout the populations by allowing them to continue to celebrate pagan feasts, but to do so in a Christian manner.

As it happened, the pagan festival of Eastre occurred at the same time of year as the Christian observance of the Resurrection of Christ. It made sense, therefore, to alter the festival itself, to make it a Christian observance as pagans were slowly indoctrinated. The early name, Eastre, was eventually changed to its modern spelling, Easter.

The date of Easter. Prior to A.D. 325, Easter was variously celebrated on different days of the week, including Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. In that year, the Council of Nicaea was convened by emperor Constantine. It issued the Easter Rule which states that Easter shall be celebrated on the first Sunday that occurs after the first full moon on or after the vernal equinox. The "full moon" in the rule is the ecclesiastical full moon, which is defined as the fourteenth day of a tabular lunation, where day 1 corresponds to the ecclesiastical New Moon. It does not always occur on the same date as the astronomical full moon. The ecclesiastical "vernal equinox" is always on March 21. Therefore, Easter must be celebrated on a Sunday between the dates of March 22 and April 25.

The Lenten Season. Lent is the forty-six day period just prior to Easter Sunday. It begins on Ash Wednesday. Mardi Gras (French for "Fat Tuesday") is a celebration, sometimes called "Carnival," practiced around the world, on the Tuesday prior to Ash Wednesday. It was designed as a way to "get it all out" before the sacrifices of Lent began.

Lent. The highlight of the year for Christians is Easter, the day when they believe that Jesus rose from the dead. Lent is a forty-day season of preparation for Easter. Lent always begins on a Wednesday, called Ash Wednesday.

Why 40 days? Because, of the bible story that tells of how Jesus fasted and was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days. Lent, then, is a time of fasting, prayer, temptation and repentance for believers. Lent is not required anywhere in scriptures, but it has been a custom, which Christians have practiced for most of the last two thousand years.

The Easter Bunny. The Easter Bunny is not a modern invention. The symbol originated with the pagan festival of Eastre. The goddess, Eastre, was worshipped by the Anglo-Saxons through her earthly symbol, the rabbit.

The Easter Egg. As with the Easter Bunny and the holiday itself, the Easter Egg predates the Christian holiday of Easter. The exchange of eggs in the springtime is a custom that was centuries old when Easter was first celebrated by Christians.

From the earliest times, the egg was a symbol of birth in most cultures. Eggs were often wrapped in gold leaf or, if you were a peasant, colored brightly by boiling them with the leaves or petals of certain flowers. Today, children hunt colored eggs and place them in Easter baskets along with the modern version of real Easter eggs – those made of plastic or chocolate.

**Mother’s Day**

Mother's Day in Great Britain (or Mothering Sunday) is similar to the March 8th in Russia. It is celebrated on 14th of March. It refers to Victorian times when children in an early age worked away from home, and the money earned by them, remitted to the family budget. One day a year the children were allowed to spend at home with their parents. Usually they brought mothers and grandmothers small gifts - bouquets of flowers or fresh eggs. Today the British children in this day give mothers flowers and do all the housework by themselves.

In the early 17th century in England, people began to celebrate mother's Sunday (Mothering Sunday) in the fourth Sunday of Lent. This was a celebration of all mothers of England. With the spreading of Christianity in Europe, this Sunday was the feast of the Mother Church - the spiritual force that gives life and protect from evil.

Over time the church festival blended together with a secular holiday. Since it was a time of rich aristocrats and huge mansions, most of the workers worked and lived in the homes of their owners. On Mother’s Sunday all the servants got a day off, they returned to their families to spend the day with their mothers. The atmosphere of that day gave a special cake, called the "mother’s pie." This day was supposed to visit mothers and bring them a gift of a cake to exchange it for a mother's blessing.

Today, Mother's Day is very pleasant. Women have a rest, and their men do housework and cook dinner.

Sometimes husbands take their wives to restaurants to celebrate the holyday. Children present flowers, cards and other gifts to moms. Congratulations to your mom is necessary in whatever part of the world may she be located in this day.

**Halloween**

Most holidays commemorate or celebrate something. But what about Halloween? What is Halloween actually a celebration of? And how did this peculiar custom originate? Is it, as some claim, a kind of demon worship? Or is it just a harmless vestige of some ancient pagan ritual where folks get together for parties, dress up in Halloween costumes and bob for apples?

The word itself, "Halloween," actually has its origins in the Catholic Church. It comes from a contracted corruption of All Hallows Eve. November 1, "All Hollows Day" (or "All Saints Day"), is a Catholic day of observance in honor of saints. But, in the 5th century BC, in Celtic Ireland, summer officially ended on October 31. The holiday was called Samhain (sow-en), the Celtic New Year.

One story says that, on that day, the disembodied spirits of all those who had died throughout the preceding year would come back in search of living bodies to possess for the next year. It was believed to be their only hope for the afterlife. The Celts believed all laws of space and time were suspended during this time, allowing the spirit world to intermingle with the living.

Naturally, the still-living did not want to be possessed. So on the night of October 31, villagers would extinguish the fires in their homes, to make them cold and undesirable. They would then dress up in all manner of ghoulish costumes and noisily parade around the neighborhood, being as destructive as possible in order to frighten away spirits looking for bodies to posses.

Probably a better explanation of why the Celts extinguished their fires was not to discourage spirit possession, but so that all the Celtic tribes could relight their fires from a common source, the Druidic fire that was kept burning in the middle of Ireland.

Some accounts tell of how the Celts would burn someone at the stake who was thought to have already been possessed, as sort of a lesson to the spirits. Other accounts of Celtic history debunk these stories as myth.

The Romans adopted the Celtic practices as their own. But in the first century AD, Samhain was assimilated into celebrations of some of the other Roman traditions that took place in October, such as their day to honor Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruit and trees. The symbol of Pomona is the apple, which might explain the origin of our modern tradition of bobbing for apples on Halloween.

In Greek mythology, goddesses of the underworld were often used to invoke the Samhain. Popular Greek Goddess costumes portray Hecate and Medusa. Hecate was the most favored goddess by Zeus, and wandered the emptiness between the worlds of life and death looking for souls of the dead. Both were considered serpent goddesses, and their ancient dark legends spawned myths such as vampires, who fed off the living using venom and snake-like fangs. Ritualistic dress includes snake adornments and three headed masks. Today, Hecate is often referred to as the goddess of witches.

The thrust of the practices also changed over time to become more ritualized. As belief in spirit possession waned, the practice of dressing up like hobgoblins, ghosts, and witches took on a more ceremonial role.

The custom of Halloween was brought to America in the 1840's by Irish immigrants fleeing their country's potato famine. At that time, the favorite pranks in New England included tipping over outhouses and unhinging fence gates.

The custom of trick-or-treating is thought to have originated not with the Irish Celts, but with a ninth-century European custom called souling. On November 2, All Souls Day, early Christians would walk from village to village begging for "soul cakes," made out of square pieces of bread with currants. The more soul cakes the beggars would receive, the more prayers they would promise to say on behalf of the dead relatives of the donors. At the time, it was believed that the dead remained in limbo for a time after death, and that prayer, even by strangers, could expedite a soul’s passage to heaven.

The Jack-o-lantern custom probably comes from Irish folklore. As the tale is told, a man named Jack, who was notorious as a drunkard and trickster, tricked Satan into climbing a tree. Jack then carved an image of a cross in the tree's trunk, trapping the devil up the tree. Jack made a deal with the devil that, if he would never tempt him again, he would promise to let him down the tree.

According to the folk tale, after Jack died, he was denied entrance to Heaven because of his evil ways, but he was also denied access to Hell because he had tricked the devil. Instead, the devil gave him a single ember to light his way through the frigid darkness. The ember was placed inside a hollowed-out turnip to keep it glowing longer.

So, although some cults may have adopted Halloween as their favorite "holiday," the day itself did not grow out of evil practices. It grew out of the rituals of Celts celebrating a new year, and out of Medieval prayer rituals of Europeans. And today, even many churches have Halloween parties or pumpkin carving events for the kids. After all, the day itself is only as evil as one cares to make it.

**Guy Fawkes Day**

After Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603, English Catholics who had been persecuted under her rule had hoped that her successor, James I, would be more tolerant of their religion. James I had, after all, had a Catholic mother. Unfortunately, James did not turn out to be more tolerant than Elizabeth and a number of young men, 13 to be exact, decided that violent action was the answer.

A small group took shape, under the leadership of Robert Catesby. Catesby felt that violent action was warranted. Indeed, the thing to do was to blow up the Houses of Parliament. In doing so, they would kill the King, maybe even the Prince of Wales, and the Members of Parliament who were making life difficult for the Catholics. Today these conspirators would be known as extremists, or terrorists.

To carry out their plan, the conspirators got hold of 36 barrels of gunpowder - and stored them in a cellar, just under the House of Lords.

But as the group worked on the plot, it became clear that innocent people would be hurt or killed in the attack, including some people who even fought for more rights for Catholics. Some of the plotters started having second thoughts. One of the group members even sent an anonymous letter warning his friend, Lord Monteagle, to stay away from the Parliament on November 5th.

The warning letter reached the King, and the King's forces made plans to stop the conspirators.

Guy Fawkes, who was in the cellar of the parliament with the 36 barrels of gunpowder when the authorities stormed it in the early hours of November 5th, was caught, tortured and executed.

It's unclear if the conspirators would ever have been able to pull off their plan to blow up the Parliament even if they had not been betrayed. Some have suggested that the gunpowder itself was so old as to be useless. Since Guy Fawkes and the other conspirators got caught before trying to ignite the powder, we'll never know for certain.

Even for the period which was notoriously unstable, the Gunpowder Plot struck a very profound chord for the people of England. In fact, even today, the reigning monarch only enters the Parliament once a year, on what is called "the State Opening of Parliament". Prior to the Opening, and according to custom, the Yeomen of the Guard search the cellars of the Palace of Westminster. Nowadays, the Queen and Parliament still observe this tradition.

On the very night that the Gunpowder Plot was foiled, on November 5th, 1605, bonfires were set alight to celebrate the safety of the King. Since then, November 5th has become known as Bonfire Night. The event is commemorated every year with fireworks and burning effigies of Guy Fawkes on a bonfire.

Some of the English have been known to wonder, in a tongue in cheek kind of way, whether they are celebrating Fawkes' execution or honoring his attempt to do away with the government.

**Catholic Good Friday**

This Friday is on the eve of Easter Sunday, when Christians remember the day of the crucifixion of Jesus. Date of Good Friday varies from year to year. Anglo-Saxon name of the Holy Friday (Good Friday) was “Long Friday”, because of the hard post, that was on that day, so the day seemed very long.

On this day Jesus was crucified and died for our sins.

Good Friday is a statutory holiday in most of the United Kingdom. This means that people do not work, many institutions and companies do not work too. In the churches a special three-hour service and prayer is hold, especially at 3 o'clock, which is considered an hour of Jesus' death. Some churches hold a dramatic reading. Church is not decorated at Good Friday, because it’s a day of mourning.

People traditionally eat «hot cross buns» - warm buns with a cross, sweet and fragrant. There is even a special ceremony for «hot cross buns». Also traditionally people eat fish instead of meat on this day.

A child born in the Good Friday or Easter Sunday, blessed with invulnerability.

Many fishermen do not go to sea in a Good Friday. On this day people do not work in the field or garden.

Soaked in milk baked in the Good Friday bun treat stomach pains. Bread which is made on this day, do not stale. The bun from Good Friday will save the house from fire.

**May Day**

The first day of the month of May is known as **May Day**. It is the time of year when warmer weather begins and flowers and trees start to blossom. It is said to be a time of love and romance. It is when people celebrate the coming of summer with lots of different customs that are expressions of joy and hope after a long winter. Traditional English May Day celebrations include Morris dancing, crowing a May Queen and dancing around a Maypole.

Although summer does not officially begin until June, May Day marks its beginning. May Day celebrations have been carried out in England for over 2000 years. The Romans celebrated the **festival of Flora**, goddess of fruit and flowers, which marked the beginning of summer. It was held annually from April 28th to May 3rd.

The month of May has many traditions and celebrations. For the convenience of the general public, many May Day activities have now been moved to the new May Day holiday (from 1978) on the first Monday of the month. This Monday is a bank holiday, a day off school and work.

Many of the May Day celebrations take place at the weekend as well as on the 'May Day' Monday. The weekend is known as bank holiday weekend because it comes with the extra day holiday on the Monday.

On May Day, people used to cut down young trees and stick them in the ground in the village to mark the arrival of summer.

People danced around the tree poles in celebration of the end of winter and the start of the fine weather that would allow planting to begin.

Maypoles were once common all over England and were kept from one year to the next. Schools would practice skipping round the pole for weeks before the final show on the village greens.

The end results would be either a beautiful plaited pattern of ribbons round the pole or a tangled cat’s cradle, depending on how much rehearsing had been done.

A traditional dance seen throughout the month of May is Morris Dancing. It is a traditional English form of folk dancing, performed by groups of men and women.

Morris Dancing has been danced for hundreds of years, and passed down through the generations in the villages of rural England. The dances are usually performed at festivals such as May Day, Whitsun and Christmas.

There are several thoughts to the origins of Morris Dancing. The name may refer to the possibility of the form of dancing coming to England from the Moors of North Africa; or it may have been called 'Moorish' simply because the dancers sometimes painted their faces black, and people compared this to the dark-skinned Moors.

May Day began early in the morning. People would go out before sunrise in order to gather flowers and greenery to decorate their houses and villages with in the belief that the vegetation spirits would bring good fortune.

Girls would make a special point of washing their faces in the dew of the early morning. They believed this made them very beautiful for the following year.

The rest of the day was given over to various festivities. There was dancing on the village green, archery contest and exhibitions of strength. The highlight of the day was the **crowning of the May Queen**, the human replica of Flora. By tradition she took no part in the games or dancing, but sat like a queen in a flower-decked chair to watch her “subjects”.

Young girls would make May Garlands. They covered two hoops, one at right angles inside the other, with leaves and flowers, and sometimes they put a doll inside to represent the goddess of Spring.

In the North of England, the first of May was a kind of late 'April Fooling' when all sorts of pranks would take place and “May Gosling” was the shout if you managed to trick someone.