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# **R E F E R A T**

**Mavzu: British and American festivals and traditions**

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# **British and American festivals and traditions**

## **Plan:**

- 1. Customs and traditions**
- 2. St. Valentine's**
- 3. November, 5 is Guy Fawkes's Day.**
- 4. Christmas.**
- 5. Easter.**
- 6. Harvest**
- 7. Halloween**

## **Customs and traditions**

English customs and traditions, first of all, concerns United Kingdom political system. In Great Britain there is no written constitution, only customs, traditions and precedents. After the English Revolution of Great Britain is a constitutional monarchy headed by King (now Queen, Elizabeth the second). Traditionally the Queen acts only on the advice of her Ministers. She reigns but she does not rule.

Englishmen have traditions not only in political, but in social life. For example, London, the capital of England, is traditionally divided into three parts: the West End, the East end, and the City. The City is a historical, financial and business center of London. The East End is the district inhabited by the workers, and the West End is a fashionable shopping and entertaining center. English people like to spend their free time in numerous pubs where they can have a glass of beer and talk about different things with their friends.

The English are traditional about their meals. They eat eggs and bacon with toasts for breakfast, pudding or apple pie for dessert. Every English family has five o'clock tea. A typical feature of an English house is a fireplace, even when there is central heating in the house.

English people like domestic animals. Every family has a pet: a dog, a cat or a bird.

Politeness is a characteristic feature of Englishmen. They often say "Thank you", "Sorry", "Beg your pardon". Russian people, I think, have to learn this good custom.

Englishmen have many traditional holidays, such as Christmas, St. Valentine's Day, Mother's day, Easter and others.

Some English customs and traditions are famous all over the world. Bowler hats, tea and talking about the weather, for example. From Scotland to Cornwall, the United Kingdom is full of customs and traditions. Here are some of them.

### **St. Valentine's**

St. Valentine's Day roots in several different legends that have found their way to us through the ages. One of the earliest popular symbols of the day is Cupid, the Roman god of Love, Who is represented by the image of a young boy with bow and arrow. Three hundred years after the death of Jesus Christ, the Roman emperors still demanded that everyone believe in the Roman gods. Valentine, a Christian priest, had been thrown in prison for his teachings. On February 14, Valentine was beheaded, not only because he was a Christian, but also because he had performed a miracle. He supposedly cured the jailer's daughter

of her blindness. The night before he was executed, he wrote the jailer's daughter a farewell letter, signing it, "from Your Valentine". Another legend tells us that this same Valentine, well-loved by all, wrote notes from his jail cell to children and friends who missed him. Whatever the odd mixture of origins, St. Valentine's Day is now a day for sweethearts. It is the day that you show your friend of loved one that you care. You can send candy to someone you think is special. Or you can send "valentines" a greeting card named after the notes that St. Valentine wrote from jail. Valentines can be sentimental, romantic, and heartfelt. They can be funny and friendly. If the sender is shy, valentines can be anonymous. Americans of all ages as other people in different countries love to send and receive valentines. Handmade valentines, created by cutting hearts out of coloured paper, show that a lot of thought was put into making them personal. Valentines can be heart-shaped, or have hearts, the symbol of love, on them. In elementary schools, children make valentines, they have a small party with refreshments. You can right a short rhyme inside the heart:

*There are gold ships  
And silver ships,  
But no ships  
Like friendship.*

Valentine cards are usually decorated with symbols of love and friendship. These symbols were devised many centuries ago. Lace symbolises a net for catching one's heart. If you get a Valentine with a piece of a lace you may understand that the person who sent it must be crazy about you. A symbol should have several meanings, so some experts maintain that lace stands for a bridal veil. A ribbon means that the person is tired up, while hearts, which are the most common romantic symbol, denote eternal love. Red roses are also often used as a love emblem. Valentine's Day grows more and more popular in many countries of the world. Some people have already begun to celebrate it in Russia. They try to imitate European Valentine customs and want to known more about their origin. St. Valentine's Day is the day when boys and girls, friends and neighbours, husbands and wives, sweethearts and lovers exchange greeting of love and affection. It is the day to share one's loving feelings with friends and family, but it is young men and girls who usually wait it with impatience. This day has become traditional for many couples to become engaged. That makes young people acknowledge St. Valentine's as the great friend and patron of lovers.

### **November, 5 is Guy Fawkes's Day.**

On the 5th of November in almost every town and village in England one can see fire burning, fireworks, cracking and lighting up the sky, small groups of children pulling round in a home made cart, a figure that looks something like a man but consists of an old suit of clothes, stuffed with straw. The children sing:"

Remember, remember the 5th of November; Gun powder, treason and plot". And they ask passers-by for "a penny for the Guy" But the children with "the Guy" are not likely to know who or what day they are celebrating. They have done this more or less every 5th of November since 1605. At that time James the First was on the throne. He was hated with many people especially the Roman Catholics against whom many sever laws had been passed. A number of Catholics chief of whom was Robert Catesby determined to kill the King and his ministers by blowing up the house of Parliament with gunpowder. To help them in this they got Guy Fawker, a soldier of fortune, who would do the actual work. The day fixed for attempt was the 5th of November, the day on which the Parliament was to open. But one of the conspirators had several friends in the parliament and he didn't want them to die. So he wrote a letter to Lord Monteagle begging him to make some excuse to be absent from parliament if he valued his life. Lord Monteagle took the letter hurrily to the King. Guards were sent at once to examine the cellars of the house of Parliament. And there they found Guy Fawker about to fire a trail of gunpowder. He was tortured and hanged, Catesby was killed, resisting arrest in his own house. In memory of that day bonfires are still lighted, fireworks shoot across the November sky and figures of Guy Fawker are burnt in the streets.

## **Christmas.**

It is certain that Christmas is celebrated all over the world. Perhaps no other holiday has developed a set of customs and symbols. This is the day when many people are travelling home to be with their families on Christmas Day, 25th December. The Christmas story comes from bible. An angel appeared to shepherds and told them that a Savior had been born to Mary and Joseph in a stable in Bethlehem. Three Wise Men from the East followed a wondrous star which led them to the baby Jesus to whom they paid homage and presented gifts of gold, frankicense and myrrh. To people all over the world, Christmas is a season of giving and receiving presents. In Scandinavian and other European countries, Father Christmas, or Saint Nicholas, comes into house at night and leaves gifts for the children. Saint Nicholas is represented as a fidly man with a red cloak and long white beard. He visited house and left giftes, dringing people happiness in the coldest months of the year. Another character, the Norse God Odin, rode on a magical flying horse across the ages to make the present day Santa Claus.

For most British families, this is the most important festival of the year, it combines the Christian celebration or the birth of Christ with the traditional festivities of winter. On the Sunday before Christmas many churches hold a carol service where special hymns are sung. Sometimes carol-singers can be heard on the streets as they collect money for charity. Most families decorate their houses with brightly-coloured paper or holly, and they usually have a Christmas tree in the corner or the front foom, glittering with coloured lights and decorations. The Christmas tree was popularized 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.

There are a lot of traditions connected with Christmas but perhaps the most important one is the giving of present. Family members wrap up their gifts and leave them bottom of the Christmas tree to be found on Christmas morning. Children leave sock or stocking at the end of their beds on Christmas Eve, 24th of December, hoping that Father Christmas will come down the chimney during the night and bring them small presents, fruit and nuts. They are usually not disappointed! At some time on Christmas Day the family will sit down to a big turkey dinner followed by Christmas pudding. Christmas dinner consists traditionally of a roast turkey, goose or chicken with stuffing and roast potatoes. Mince pies and Christmas pudding flaming with brandy, which might contain coins or lucky charms for children, follow this. (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 fruitcake with marzipan, icing and sugar frosting.

The pulling of Christmas crackers often accompanies food on Christmas Day. Invented by a London baker in 1846, a cracker is a brightly colored 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.

26th December is also a public holiday, Boxing Day, which takes its name from a former custom of giving a Christmas Box - a gift of money or food inside a box - to the deliverymen and trades people who called regularly during the year. This tradition survives in the custom of tipping the milkman, postman, dustmen and other callers of good service at Christmas time. This is the time to visit friends and relatives or watch football.

At midnight on 31st December throughout Great Britain people celebrate the coming of the New Year, by holding hands in a large circle and singing the song:

Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
And never brought to mind?  
Should auld acquaintance be forgot?  
And auld lang syne?  
  
For auld lang syne, my dear,  
For auld lang syne,  
We'll take a cup of kindness yet,  
For auld lang syne!..

New Year's Eve is a more important festival in Scotland than it is in England, and it even has a special name. It is not clear where the word 'Hogmanay' comes from, but it is connected with the provision of food and drink for all visitors to your

home on 31th December. It was believed that the first person to visit one's house on New Year's Day could bring good or bad luck. Therefore, people tried to arrange for the person or their own choice to be standing outside their houses ready to be let in the moment midnight had come. Usually a dark-complexioned man was chosen, and never a woman, for she would bring bad luck. The first footer was required to carry three articles: a piece of coal to wish warmth, a piece of bread to wish food, and a silver coin to wish wealth.

## **Easter.**

Easter is a Christian spring festival that is usually celebrated in March or April. The name for Easter comes from a pagan fertility celebration. The word "Easter" is named after Eastre, the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring. Spring is a natural time for new life and hope when animals have their young and plants begin to grow. Christian Easter may have purposely been celebrated in the place of a pagan festival. It is therefore not surprising that relics of doing and beliefs not belonging to the Christian religious should cling even to this greatest day in the Church's year. An old-fashioned custom still alive is to get up early and climb a hill to see the sun rising. There are numerous accounts of the wonderful spectacle of the sun whirling round and round for joy at our Saviour's Resurrection. So many people go outdoors on Easter morning hoping to see the sun dance. There is also a custom of putting on something new to go to church on Easter morning.

People celebrate the holiday according to their beliefs and their religious denominations. Christians commemorate Good Friday as the day that Christ died and Easter Sunday as the day that He was resurrected. Protestant settlers brought the custom of a sunrise service, a religious gathering at dawn, to the United States.

Today on Easter Sunday, children wake up to find that the Easter Bunny has left them baskets of candy. He has also hidden the eggs that they decorated earlier that week. Children hunt for the eggs all around the house. Neighborhoods and organizations hold Easter egg hunts, and the child who finds the most eggs wins a prize.

Americans celebrate the Easter bunny coming. They set out easter baskets for their children to anticipate the easter bunnys arrival which leaves candy and other stuff. The Easter Bunny is a rabbit-spirit. Long ago, he was called the "Easter Hare". Hares and rabbits have frequent multiple births, so they became a symbol of fertility.

Christians fast during the forty days before Easter. They choose to eat and drink only enough to keep themselves alive.

The day preceding Lent is known as Shrove Tuesday, or Pancake Day. Shrove Tuesday recalls the day when people went to Church to confess and be shriven before Lent. But now the day is more generally connected with relics of the traditional feasting before the fast. Shrove Tuesday is famous for pancake calebration. There is some competition at Westminster School: the pancakes are tossed over a bar by the cook and struggled for by a small group of selected boys. The boy who manages to get the largest piece is given a present. This tradition

dates from 1445. In the morning the first church bell on Orley is rung for the competitors to make pancakes. The second ring is a signal for cooking them. The third bell set rung for the copetitors to gather at the market square. Then the Pancake bell is sounded and the ladies set off from the church porch, tossing their pancakes three times as they run. Each woman must wear an apron and a hat or scarf over her head. The winner is given a Prayer Book dy the Vicar.

Mothering Sunday is the fourth Sunday in Lent. It is customary to vasit one's mother on that day. Mother ought to be given a present - tea, flowers or a simnel cake. It is possible to buy the cake, they are sold in every confectionery. But it is preferable to make it at home. The way Mothering Sunday is celebrated has much in common with the International Women's Day celebration in Russia.

Good Friday is the first Friday before Easter. It is the day when all sorts of taboos on various works are in force. Also it is a good day for shifting beers, for sowing potatoes, peas, beans, parsley, and pruning rose trees. Good Friday brings the once sacred cakes, the famous Hot Cross buns. These must be spiced and the dough marked with a cross before baking.

Eggs, chickens, rabbits and flowers are all symbols of new life. Chocolate and fruit cake covered with marzipan show that fasting is over. Wherever Easter is celebrated, there Easter eggs are usually to be found. In England, just as in Russia, Easter is a time for giving and receiving of presents that traditionally take the form of an Easter egg. Easter egg is a real hard-boiled egg dyed in bright colors or decorated with some elaborate pattern. Coloring and decorating eggs for Easter is a very ancient custom. Many people, however, avoid using artificial dyes and prefer to boil eggs with the outer skin of an onion, which makes the eggs shells yellow or brown. In fact, the color depends on the amount of onion skin added. In ancient times they used many different natural dyes fir the purpose. The dyes were obtained mainly from leaves, flowers and bark.

At present Easter eggs are also made of chocolate, sugar, metals, wood, ceramics and other materials at hand. They may differ in size, ranging from enormous to tiny, no bigger than a robin's egg. Easter Sunday is solemnly celebrated in London. Each year the capital city of Britain greets the spring with a spectacular Easter Parade in Battersea Park. The great procession, or parade, begins at 3 p.m. The parade consists of many decorated floats, entered by various organizations in and outside London. Some of the finest bands in the country take part in the parade. At the rear of the parade is usually the very beautiful float richly decorated with flowers. It is called the Jersey one because the spring flowers bloom early on the Island of Jersey.

In England, children rolled eggs down hills on Easter morning, a game has been connected to the rolling away of the rock from Jesus Christ's tomb then He was resurrected. British settlers brought this custom to the New World. It consists of rolling coloured, hardboiled egg down a slope until they are cracked and broken after whish they are eaten by their owners. In some districts this is a competitive game, the winner being the player whose egg remains longest undamaged, but more usually, the fun consists simply of the rolling and eating.

## Harvest

### Corn Dollies

Many countries seem to have had a similar custom to the British one of making a design from the last sheaf of corn to be harvested. In Britain a corn dolly is created by plaiting the wheat stalks to create a straw figure. The corn dolly is kept until the Spring. This is because people believed that the corn spirit lived in the wheat and as the wheat was harvested, the spirit fled to the wheat which remained. By creating the corn dolly the spirit is kept alive for the next year and the new crop. Sometimes the corn dolly is hung up in the barn, sometimes in the farmhouse, and sometimes in the church. In Spring the corn dolly would be ploughed back into the soil. There are many types of corn dolly.

### The story of John Barleycorn

A story to the corn dolly is to be found in the folksong John Barleycorn. Three men swear that John Barleycorn must die. They take a plough and bury him alive. But the Spring comes and John rises through the soil. After a while he grows big and strong, even growing a beard, so the three men cut him down at the knee, tie him on to a cart, beat him, strip the flesh off his bones and grind him between two stones. But at the end it is John Barleycorn who defeats his opponents, proving the stronger man, by turning into beer.

### Harvest Festivals

In churches all over Britain there are services to thank God for the Harvest. As part of these services local people bring baskets of fruit and vegetables to decorate the church. The produce is then distributed to the poor.

## Halloween

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 Hallows 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 paraded around the neighborhood, being as destructive as possible in order to frighten away spirits looking for bodies to possess.

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, at Usinach.

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. 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.

The Irish used turnips as their "Jack's lanterns" originally. But when the immigrants came to America, they found that pumpkins were far more plentiful than turnips. So the Jack-O-Lantern in America was a hollowed-out pumpkin, lit with an ember.

So, although some pagan groups, cults, and Satanists 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.

Fire has always played an important part in Halloween. Fire was very important to the Celts as it was to all early people. In the old days people lit bonfires to ward away evil spirits and in some places they used to jump over the fire to bring good luck. Now we light candles in pumpkin lanterns.

Halloween is also a good time to find out the future. Want to find out who you will marry? Here are two ways you might try to find out:

- Apple-bobbing - Float a number of apples in a bowl of water, and try to catch one using only your teeth. When you have caught one, peel it in one unbroken strip, and throw the strip of peel over your left shoulder. The letter the peel forms is the initial of your future husband or wife.
- Nut-cracking - Place two nuts (such as conkers) on a fire. Give the nuts the names of two possible lovers and the one that cracks first will be the one.

There are several unusual traditions:

#### "Wrong side of the bed"

When people are bad tempered we say that they must have got out of bed on the wrong side. Originally, it was meant quiet literally. People believe that the way they rose in the morning affected their behavior throughout the day. The wrong side of the bed was the left side. The left always having been linked with evil.

#### "Blowing out the candles"

The custom of having candles on birthday cakes goes back to the ancient Greeks. Worshippers of Artemis, goddess of the moon and hunting, used to place honey cakes on the altars of her temples on her birthday. The cakes were round like the full moon and lit with tapers. This custom was next recorded in the middle ages when German peasants lit tapers on birthday cakes, the number lit indicating the person's age, plus an extra one to represent the light of life. From earliest days burning tapers had been endowed with mystical significance and it was believed that when blown out they had the power to grant a secret wish and ensure a happy year ahead.