

# Traditions, Holidays and Feastdays

The British are said to be conservative. In addition to the well-known fact that they still use their traditional system of weights and measures (they changed their currency into decimal as late as in 1971), they drive on the left and they still wear traditional school uniforms at some schools, it is important to know that Britain is the oldest democracy in the world and that they consider the monarchy an inseparable part of their government. The British are renowned for their politeness and good table manners. Unlike the Slovaks, they like to converse at table. The English word "gentleman" means an honest man with good manners.

They do not shake hands and kiss hello so often as we do and are famous for their dry humour. Everybody knows the English saying "My house is my castle" which demonstrates their right to privacy. They are proud of their isles which have given them a feeling of security. They call the strait between Britain and France the English Channel and the rest of Europe the Continent. The British are fond of pets (dogs, cats, caged birds) and children. Their mania for tea at any time of the day is world famous. Their country is notorious for rainy weather but on the other hand probably this wet and mild climate makes the English lawns so green and fresh all the year round. People in Britain are allowed to walk on the grass and you can often see them picnicking on it.

On the other hand the British are much advanced in science and technology. Many sports and games originated or were perfected in Britain.

The Americans are far from having the reputation of being conservative. The saying "Time is money" and stories about self-made men show that they value progress, success and prosperity. The Americans are not so reserved as many British people are.

The Americans have a fondness for grandiosity, probably because they are such a vast country. Skyscrapers in many American cities and the way they competed in height may be a good example.

Both the British and the Americans observe holidays and feasts in which many of the national customs and traditions have been preserved. In addition to various personal occasions such as a christening, birthday (also nameday in our country) or a wedding, the holidays and feasts are a good opportunity for merrymaking, having fun and a good time.

## Great Britain

### New Year's Day

January 1st – Titles and decorations are conferred by the sovereign.

### St. Valentine's Day

February 14th – It is lovers' day. On this day young people send Valentine cards to a person of the opposite sex, usually anonymously, and exchange gifts. The cards have funny, loving or serious contents such as "I'll be your sweetheart, if you will be mine, all of my life I'll be your Valentine."

Originally this day commemorated the Roman priest who gave aid and comfort to the persecuted Christians before he was put to death.

### St. David's Day

March 1st (the patron saint of Wales)

### St. Patrick's Day

March 17th (the patron saint of Ireland). It is a public holiday in Ireland. People often wear shamrocks on that day.

### All Fools' Day

April 1st – It is named after the custom of playing practical jokes and tricks on people and then you can shout "April Fool!"

### Easter

April. Spring feast of the Christian Church. Good Friday commemorates Jesus' crucifixion while Easter Sunday commemorates the Resurrection of Jesus. It is connected with pre-Christian (Teutonic and Celtic) tradition, originally it was a festival celebrating the spring equinox. Easter eggs, dyed and decorated or made of confectionery, symbolizing new life, are given as presents. It is celebrated on Easter Sunday in Britain.

### St. George's Day

April 23rd (the patron saint of England)

### May Day

May 1 – political parties of the left hold processions and public meetings

### Mother's Day

2nd Sunday in May – honours all mothers

### Spring Bank Holiday

Last Monday in May. Bank Holidays in England are also public holidays when banks and shops are closed. People spend Bank Holidays going for excursions, to the coast if possible. Londoners (real Cockneys) take their families to a big fair on Hampstead Heath

### The Queen's Official Birthday

June (Saturday after June 9). There are various ceremonies associated with it, such as the ceremony of Trooping the Colour (a ceremonial mounting of the guard in the presence of the sovereign) at the Horse Guards Parade in London

## **Father's Day**

3rd Sunday in June – honours all fathers

## **Summer Bank Holiday** – last Monday in August

## **Halloween**

October 31. Among the old Celts it was the last day of the year and the beginning of winter when witches and ghosts were supposed to celebrate their rites. When the pagans were Christianized, the holiday was converted to the Eve of All Saints' Day when the Christian Church honours the memory of the dead. In Britain it is celebrated only in the North of England and in Scotland, but it is generally celebrated in the USA and Canada. Children celebrate it by dressing up in Halloween costumes with masks over their faces. Carrying baskets or bags they go to their friends' and neighbours' houses and they knock at the door or ring the bell. When people come to the door, children say "Trick or treat" which means "Give us a treat or we will play a trick on you". The people treat the children with sweets, fruit or money. The most common trick is soaping the windows of houses and cars (i.e. drawing pictures on the windows with soap). A favourite custom is to make a jack-o'-lantern from a pumpkin which is scraped out and in which eyes, a nose and a mouth are cut and then a candle is lit inside. People sometimes give parties on Halloween. The guests wear fancy costumes and masks and the rooms are decorated with paper moons, witches and ghosts.

## **Guy Fawkes Day**

November 5th. The anniversary of the Gunpowder plot in 1605 is celebrated with bonfires, fireworks and the burning of guys (effigies of Guy Fawkes (1570 – 1606), an English conspirator who, with other Catholics, attempted to blow up James I and Parliament). The plot was discovered and the conspirator executed.

## **Remembrance Day**

November 11. There is a ceremony at the Cenotaph in Whitehall, London, in which two minutes' silence honours those killed in the two world wars.

## **St. Andrew's Day**

November 30 (the patron saint of Scotland)

## **Christmas**

December 24 – Unlike the Continentals, the English have no traditional celebration on **Christmas Eve**. December 24 has never been a holiday but on the other hand it is the only day of the year reserved for the "office party". A lot of people spend the day shopping. Before English children go to bed on Christmas Eve, they hang up Christmas stockings at the end of their beds and believe that Santa Claus or Father Christmas rides through the air on a sledge drawn by reindeer and comes down the chimney and fills up the stockings with presents and toys. Larger things are found at the foot of their beds or under the Christmas tree. There is also a custom of leaving out mince pies for Father Christmas to eat when he comes down with presents. Christmas trees (conifers) in Britain are often decorated with fairy lights and bright coloured ornaments. Sweets and fruit or sparklers are not hung on the tree. In the rooms holly and ivy is hung as a decoration. It is supposed to date back to Teutonic times when evergreens were hung to allow wood spirits to shelter from the cold. A sprig of mistletoe is hung in a central position or over the door. If you catch a girl under it, you are allowed to kiss her.

December 25 – The most festive day of Christmas is **Christmas Day** – In the morning children enjoy unwrapping presents and at midday Christmas dinner is a great occasion. It consists of roast turkey with chestnut stuffing and roast potatoes and Christmas pudding. This is a special rich pudding made with lots of dried fruit, eggs, suet and very little flour. It is made well ahead before Christmas, boiled in a basin for hours and then heated again on Christmas Day. It will keep for a long time. Sometimes brandy is poured over it and set alight and the pudding is served surrounded with blue flames.

There is also an old custom of stirring into the pudding, when it is being prepared, a coin, a thimble and a ring to bring wealth, work and a wedding to those who find it. There are plenty of carols on the radio and TV and various professional choirs sing carols in old people's homes, hospitals or outside churches. At teatime a huge fruit cake appears encrusted with marzipan and decorated with white icing. Mince-pies, a special Christmas sweet, are served as well, but there is no minced meat in them. These pies are small and round, containing a mixture of dried fruits soaked in lemon juice and brandy and covered with pastry and baked. They are served hot. On Christmas Day the monarch addresses the nation and the Commonwealth on radio and television.

December 26 is called **Boxing Day** from the custom in earlier times of giving postmen, milkmen, dustmen, newspaper boys and the like small sums of money, which they collected in their Christmas boxes. For children it marks the beginning of the pantomime season which ends at Easter. A pantomime is a traditional Christmas-time entertainment but it is not a play without words. A pantomime is a theatre show based on a fairy tale or traditional story with music, dancing, acrobatics and clowning. Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Peter Pan and Dick Whittington are the favourite fairy tales for dramatization. Lots of people go visiting on Boxing Day or to parties in the evening.

December 31 – Some nations celebrate **New Year's Eve** but for the English the most important holiday is Christmas. On New Year's Eve the English people stay up till midnight to see the old year out and drink a toast to the New Year. In London some people gather in Trafalgar Square and celebrate the coming of the New Year with singing and dancing.

**Hogmanay** – is the Scottish name for New Year's Eve which is more celebrated than Christmas. It begins with the arrival of the guests who have been invited to join the family to see in the New Year. They sit down to dinner which begins with haggis, Scotland's national dish (minced heart, lungs and liver of a sheep, boiled in a sheep's stomach with oatmeal). Before midnight many townsfolk gather in the square, they sing and dance in the Scottish style. At midnight

there is a great cheer, people cross arms, link hands for a traditional song, "Auld Lang Syne". The „First Foot“ then sets out. In Scotland it is a common custom. It is considered lucky if a dark-haired man is the first to set foot in the house after midnight on New Year's Eve, bringing a coin, a piece of bread, and coal as a symbol of plenty in the coming year.

## United States

There are no national holidays in the USA since each state has the right to decide about its own holidays. In practice, however, most states observe the federal public holidays (marked F in the text). It is also important to know that the American people are not only descendants of the British immigrants, there are many ethnic groups. These ethnic groups have brought their own customs and traditions which may be quite different from those mentioned above. Their customs differ especially about the holidays which were originally connected with religious feasts, such as Easter or Christmas.

### **Martin Luther King's Day**

3rd Monday in January (F). M. L. King (1929 – 1968) was a black leader and civil-rights campaigner. He demanded racial equality. As an advocate of nonviolence he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. He was assassinated in 1968.

### **Lincoln's birthday**

February 12 – some states still celebrate it instead of the Presidents' Day.

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

February 14

### **Washington's birthday**

February 22 – commemorated by public ceremonies. Some states still celebrate it instead of the Presidents' Day.

### **The Presidents' Day**

3rd Monday in February (F) – on this day all presidents of the USA are honoured.

### **Easter**

is not a national holiday. Most Americans spend Easter Sunday with the family. Many people give children dyed eggs and sweets. In some families they organize an egg hunt – children look for eggs which the adults hid somewhere in the house, yard or garden. There is a traditional Easter Egg Roll in front of the White House in Washington on Easter Monday.

### **Mother's Day**

2nd Sunday in May

### **Memorial Day**

4th Monday in May (F). It honours Americans killed in all the past wars and most recently all the dead. Flowers and flags are placed on the graves of the (war) dead. It also marks the beginning of the summer season.

### **Father's Day**

3rd Sunday in June

### **Independence Day**

July 4 (F). Each city has its own ceremony and parades, band concerts and firework displays in the evening. This day commemorates the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, thus establishing the USA.

### **Labor Day**

1st Monday in September (F) – honours all the working people. It is celebrated by a day of rest. It marks the end of the summer season.

### **Columbus Day**

October 12 (F). It is the anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus in 1492.

### **Halloween** – October 31

### **Veterans' Day**

November 11 (F) – honours the veterans of all wars.

### **Thanksgiving**

4th Thursday in November (F) – national holiday in the USA and Canada (in October), first celebrated in 1621 by the Pilgrim settlers of Plymouth Colony, Massachusetts, on their first harvest. Now it is an occasion for the whole family to be together. It is celebrated by a traditional dinner whose main course is roast turkey.

### **Christmas**

is not a national holiday in the USA but since most Americans are Christians, almost all shops are closed and people have a rest day on Christmas Day and New Year's Day. Americans of British origin follow the same traditions as their ancestors. Unlike Christmas in our country, Christmas in the USA is not a family holiday, families invite friends to join them at Christmas dinner and often give parties at Christmas-time. On Boxing Day most shops are open although people have a day off. Besides the Christmas tree the Americans also decorate their houses with garlands and wreaths and electric coloured lights inside and outside the house or on the trees in their gardens.

The January sales begin just after Christmas both in the USA and in Britain. Most large shops sell off their old stock at low or "bargain" prices.