

Tudor holidays

The word “holiday” originates from “holy day”. During Tudor times there were limited opportunities for leisure time, so these holy days or holidays offered a chance for music, dancing and festivities.

The holy days were set by the church but some old pagan traditions continued to be celebrated. Every month offered a different holy day and Shakespeare references some in his plays.

Twelfth Night

Twelfth Night was one of the church holy days the Tudors celebrated in January, along with Plough Monday which marked the return to work after the Christmas celebrations.

Twelfth Night, also known as “Epiphany Eve” is celebrated on the night of 5 January. Epiphany on 6 January marks the day when the wise men visited baby Jesus according to the nativity story.

It marked the end of the extended twelve-day Christmas celebrations, when all work would stop except for looking after the animals. It was also a final chance for merriment ahead of the harsh winter days to follow.



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Twelfth Night festivities included singing, dancing, playing games and performing plays.

A communal wooden drinking bowl of hot spiced ale or wine was passed around the partygoers to the toast of "Wassail". "Wassail" is derived from the Anglo-Saxon "Waes-hael" meaning "be of good health". Traditionally a crust of bread was placed at the bottom of the Wassail bowl and offered to the most important person in the room.

A special spiced cake containing fruit was baked. It also contained a dried bean and a dried pea. Whoever found one of these in their slice became the "rulers" of the festivities. The bean identified who would be king and the pea who would be queen for the night. If, however, the bean was found by a woman, she could choose the king and if a man found the pea, he chose the queen.



The "rulers" of the festivities would select the music and songs and give out gifts to children while making sure everyone enjoyed themselves until the celebrations ceased on the chime of midnight.

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The recipe below for Twelfth Night Cake comes from 'Lady Elinor Fettiplace's Receipt Book', dated 1604, and produces a cake that would cut up into about 160 slices!

"Take a peck of flower, and fower pound of currance, on ounce of Cinamon, half an ounce of ginger, two nutmegs, of cloves and mace two peniworth, of butter one pound, mingle your spice and flower & fruit together, put as much barme* as will make it light, then take good Ale, & put your butter in it, all saving a little, which you must put in the milk, & let the milk boyle with the butter, them make a posset with it, & temper the Cake with the posset drink, & curd & all together, & put some sugar in & so bake it."*

* A peck is the equivalent of 12½ pounds or around 5.6 kg. 'Barme' is yeast.

Modern equivalent recipe

Mix 1 lb 10 oz plain flour with ½ lb currants, 2 level teaspoons of cinnamon and 1 level teaspoon of ground ginger, a generous grating of nutmeg and 4 ground cloves. Make a posset by warming equal amounts of milk and ale to make ¾ pint. Then add 2 oz butter and 1 rounded teaspoon of light brown sugar.

Take a cupful of the posset and dissolve 1 oz fresh yeast, or ½ oz of dried yeast into it before adding the contents of the cup back to the posset.

Gradually add the posset to the dry ingredients until the mixture comes together to form a firm, but pliable dough. Knead until it becomes springy to the touch.

Place in a bowl with a cloth to cover it for an hour or so until it has doubled in size. Knock the dough down and knead it again. Then divide the mixture in half and place into two well greased loaf tins. Leave for a further 40 minutes or so to rise again.

Bake in a hot oven, 200°C, for 25 to 30 minutes. Turn out whilst still hot and glaze with a mixture of rosewater and icing sugar.

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Other holidays include:

Valentine's Day (February)

"To-morrow is Saint Valentine's day"

[Hamlet Act 4 Scene 5]

Giving gifts to one another on this day was a pagan tradition that still continues today.

Michaelmas (September)

"... why, did you not lend it to Alice Shortcake upon All-hallowmas last, a fortnight afore Michaelmas?"

[The Merry Wives of Windsor Act 1 Scene 1]

Michaelmas celebrated St Michael and included a feast of goose or chicken.

St Crispin's Day (October)

"... whiles any speaks that fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day."

[Henry V Act 4 Scene 3]

St Crispin's day was celebrated with bonfires, drinking and dancing, and someone was chosen to be "King Crispin" for the festivities.