



Interesting things you might not know about the history (and mystery) of Halloween

What is the history of Halloween and when was it first celebrated? Why do we trick or treat? Why do we carve pumpkins? Every year Halloween provokes controversy and divides opinions: most people see it as just as a bit of harmless fun, while others say it marks an ancient pagan festival – and some evangelical Christians claim it is a celebration of dangerous occult forces. So what are the facts? Here are some of the origins of Halloween and its traditions.

1 - Today's Halloween is a cultural mashup

The Halloween holiday is a combination of several different celebrations from different cultures and religions at different times in history. The ancient Celtic people celebrated Samhain, marking the end of harvest season and a time when the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead became blurred and ghosts visited the earth. The celebration was marked by the lighting of large bonfires and the wearing of costumes to ward off roaming ghosts. The Celts believed that, as we moved from one year to the next, the dead and the living would overlap, and demons would roam the earth again. So dressing up as demons was a defense mechanism. If you encountered a real demon roaming the Earth, they would think you were one of them.

After the Roman Empire conquered the Celtic peoples, their festivals of Feralia, a day in late October when the Romans honored the passing of the dead, and a day to honor Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruit and trees, were combined with Samhain. Feralia fell on a day in late October and was intended as a commemorative festival for the dead. Pomona, on the other hand, was the goddess of fruit and trees. Her symbol was the apple, which some link to the contemporary tradition of bobbing for apples!

In 1000 A.D., November 2 was made All Souls' Day, which became a day to honor all who have died but have not yet reached heaven. Incorporating some of the traditions of Samhain, All Souls' Day was also celebrated with bonfires, parades, and dressing in costume as saints, angels, and devils. The All Saints Day celebration on November 1 was also called All Hallows, and the evening before—the traditional night of Samhain—was known as All Hallows' Eve. All Saints' Day celebrates all those who have gone to heaven.

2 - We didn't 'trick or treat' in England until the 1970s

The custom of trick-or-treating is thought to have Irish origins, possibly from a practice of going door to door to collect money and cake or another custom begging for soul cakes or offerings for one's dead relatives. Failure to supply a treat would result in a practical joke. Much of the modern supernatural lore surrounding Halloween was invented as recently as the 19th century. It wasn't until the second half of the 19th century when North America was flooded with immigrants that Halloween became widely celebrated. In particular, the arrival of millions of Irish fleeing the potato famine in 1846 helped popularize Halloween, as it was more commonly celebrated in Ireland, the home of the Celts. During this same time, however, there was also a general shift towards making Halloween a holiday about community rather than about ghosts and magic. Scots and Irish settlers brought the custom of Mischief Night visiting to North America, where it became known as 'trick or treat'.

3 - Halloween wasn't always about the supernatural

There is no evidence the pagan Anglo-Saxons celebrated a festival on 1 November, but the Venerable Bede says the month was known as 'Blod-monath' (blood month), when surplus livestock were slaughtered and offered as sacrifices. The truth is there is no written evidence that 31 October was linked to the supernatural in England before the 19th century.

4 - A festival of the dead?

In pre-Christian Ireland, 1 November was known as 'Samhain' (summer's end). This date marked the onset of winter in Gaelic-speaking areas of Britain. It was also the end of the pastoral farming year, when cattle were slaughtered and tribal gatherings such as the Irish Feis of Tara were held. In the 19th century the anthropologist Sir James Frazer popularized the idea of Samhain as an ancient Celtic festival of the dead, when pagan religious ceremonies were held.

In Mexico, people celebrate *Día de los Muertos*, which originated in central and southern Mexico. Those who celebrate it believe that at midnight on October 31, the souls of all deceased children come down from heaven and reunite with their families on November 1, and the souls of deceased adults come visit on November 2. The tradition dates back 3,000 years, during the time of the Aztecs and evolved to incorporate elements of Christianity, such as celebrating it on November 1 and 2 instead of on its original summer observance to coincide with All Saints' or All Souls' Day, a time to pray for departed souls.

5 - Prayers, not pumpkins

The Catholic tradition of offering prayers to the dead, the ringing of church bells and lighting of candles and torches on 1 November provides the link with the spirit world. In medieval times, prayers were said for souls trapped in purgatory on 1 November. This was believed to be a sort of 'halfway house' on the road to Heaven, and it was thought their ghosts could return to earth to ask relatives for assistance in the journey.



6 - Jack-o-lanterns

In a traditional Celtic story, a man named Jack tricked the Devil, so after Jack died the Devil made him roam the night with only a burning coal to light his way. Jack put the piece of coal in a carved-out turnip, a common vegetable there, and became known as Jack of the Lantern. Irish and Scottish people would carve their own versions of Jack's lantern with scary faces out of turnips, potatoes, or beets and place them near windows or doors to frighten away Jack or other evil spirits. When immigrants brought the tradition to America, the native pumpkin was more available than turnips, and today's jack-o-lanterns were born.

7 - Trick-or-treating likely evolved from the medieval custom of "souling"

In 19th century Scotland and Ireland, there is some record of children travelling door-to-door praying for souls or performing for money or cakes on All Hallows Eve. However, the tradition is a short step from the medieval practice of souling, in which poor people went door to door on All Souls' Day asking for food in exchange for saying prayers for the home's dead relatives. Souling was common in parts of Cheshire, Shropshire, Lancashire and Yorkshire on 1 and 2 November. In parts of northern England, special cakes were baked and left in churchyards as offerings to the dead.

8 - Dressing up in costumes was once a way to hide from ghosts

The tradition originated as a way for the Celtic and other European people to hide from the spirits who returned at this time of year. People wore masks when they left their homes after dark so the ghosts would think they were fellow spirits. To keep the ghosts out of their houses, people would place bowls of food outside to make them happy.



9 - Cats have been part of the history for centuries.

Black cats have long served as objects of superstition. Egyptians revered cats, keeping them in a sanctuary where they were watched by priests who interpreted their every movement as a prophecy. Egyptians also had a cat-headed goddess named Bastet, also called Bast. The goddess and her temple cats were associated with nighttime. Bast was thought to have a nightly battle with the Serpent of Darkness, the sun's enemy. Every day when the sun rose, it symbolized that Bast had won. The Egyptians' association of cats and nighttime might have bled into our current association with cats and Halloween night.

The most direct connection between cats and Halloween came from the idea of Cait Sidhe and the Samhain holiday. In ancient Ireland and Scotland, the Celts told stories about Cait Sidhe (also spelled Cat Sidhe or Cait Sith), which translates to "fairy cat". The Cait Sidhe was supposedly as large as a dog and all black with a patch of white on its chest. During Samhain, a saucer of milk was left out. Cait Sidhe, upon visiting, would bless the home for leaving the treat. If the home did not leave a saucer for Cait Sidhe, the fairy cat would curse the household.

10 - Bonfires on Halloween

During Samhain, priests lit large fires to represent the sun returning after the hard winter. They would throw the bones of cattle into the flames, creating a "bone fire." Until the 19th century, bonfires were lit on Halloween in parts of northern England and Derbyshire.

11 - Halloween was once romantic

Scottish girls hung wet sheets in front of the fire on the holiday to see images of their future husband. Young women would also peel an apple, often at midnight, in one strip and throw it over their shoulder. The strip was supposed to land in the shape of the first letter of her future husband's name.

Love divinations on Halloween spread to England from Scotland. One love divination includes placing hazelnuts in the fire, naming one for yourself and the other for your partner. If they burned gently and then went out, this indicated a long and harmonious life together; if they coughed and spluttered or exploded, this was a sign of problems ahead. In colonial America, Halloween's bobbing for apples was a fortune-telling game: the first person to get the apple without using his or her hands would be the first to marry. People also used to bake Halloween cakes with a ring and a thimble inside. Get the slice with the ring and you would be married within the year. The thimble? You'd be unlucky in love.



31 October 1886: Irish Halloween celebrations, including the party game 'bobbing for apples'. (Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

12 - The custom of decorating with black and orange for Halloween

Although the ancient precursor to Halloween began with the Celts, they didn't necessarily decorate with black and orange to mark the occasion. Roughly 2,000 years ago, the Celts' calendar year began on November 1, coinciding with the end of harvest season and the beginning of winter. They believed their new year's eve (Samhain) was a time when spirits of the departed returned and priests could make more accurate predictions about the future. People also wore black clothing to the bonfires, traditionally a sign of mourning, to honor their late relatives.

Beginning with the most obvious association, black represents death, darkness, and the longer nights that winter brings. Much like Mexico's Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), Celts relished the opportunity for contact with their departed ancestors. Black was a natural choice to represent the temporarily open doors of communication between the dead and the living. Orange is the color of another Halloween staple, the Jack-o'-lantern, but pumpkins originated in North America, and All Hallows' Eve wasn't celebrated here until the 1800s. Orange was likely chosen as the dominant color of fall, when leaves exhibit shades of orange and red not typically seen in nature during the rest of the year. It's also a tone associated with fire.