

British and American Festivities

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Columbus Day

The second Monday of October is Columbus Day! This festivity is celebrated only in the United States of America. Why?

During Christopher Columbus' time people thought the world was flat. Columbus was born in Genoa, a beautiful Italian city on the north-west coast. For many years he watched ships leave the port of Genoa. He noticed that these ships seemed to go under the horizon. He was convinced that the world was round, but no one believed him. He wanted to reach the East by sailing to the West. Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain believed Columbus' theory. They gave him three ships, the Santa Maria, the Nina and the Pinta to travel and test this theory.

Columbus was an expert navigator. After a long and difficult voyage, he and his men reached the North American continent on 12 October, 1492! The famous Italian explorer

discovered the New World! After his great discovery a new era of exploration began and America was born.

Today most Americans celebrate Columbus Day with colourful parades and they elect a Columbus Day Queen. The parade is usually long with big floats dedicated to Columbus and there are other multi-cultural floats too. After the parade there is usually a dinner and dance.

In San Francisco, California, there is also a re-enactment of Columbus' discovery. A man dresses up as Columbus and several other men dress up as his sailors. They get into a boat and row to the beach. When they get out of their boat they kneel on the beach and thank God.

Americans enjoy remembering the great navigator!

CHAPTER TWO

Halloween

Halloween is celebrated on 31 October. It is an exciting event in the United States and in Great Britain. Every American calendar has Halloween marked on it. Halloween has ancient Celtic origins. On the Celtic calendar Samhain was the last day of summer and the last day of the year, 31 October.

The Celtic priests, called Druids, practised religious rituals and magic on Samhain. They also predicted the future.

On this day the Celts made big fires and dressed in scary costumes. They wanted to frighten the evil spirits. They dressed as ghosts, skeletons and witches. They believed that ghosts came out of their tombs on the night of 31 October.

Samhain also became a harvest festival after the Roman invasion of Britain in 43 AD. Christian practices replaced pagan practices. The Christians called 1 November All Hallows' Day, the day of All Saints. The evening of 31 October was called All Hallows' Eve. This became Halloween.

At Halloween American children in elementary schools take their costumes and masks to school. Typical Halloween costumes are the witch, ghost, skeleton, monster, vampire or alien. Young people have fun making their own costumes,

but some prefer to buy them. In the afternoon the children put on their costumes and have a Halloween party at school. Schools are decorated with pumpkins, ghosts, witches and bats.

It is a popular tradition to make jack o'lanterns out of pumpkins. People put them in front of the windows of their homes. The jack o'lantern is of Celtic origin too. There are funny Halloween games such as 'bobbing for apples'. Favourite Halloween foods are candied apples, nuts, liquorice, popcorn and pumpkin pie.

American teenagers have a Halloween party in the evening.

The party is usually in the school gymnasium and everyone wears a costume and mask. The best costume usually wins a prize.

In the 19th century Irish immigrants took their Halloween customs to the United States. They introduced the custom of 'trick-or-treating'. American and British children and teenagers go 'trick-or-treating' on Halloween evening. They go from house to house in their costumes and ring doorbells. When the door opens they shout, 'Trick or treat?' People usually give them sweets or money. If not, the children play a trick! They write on windows with soap or spray shaving cream on cars and people!

CHAPTER THREE

Guy Fowkes' Night

The fifth of November is Guy Fawkes' Night or Bonfire Night. This is a British festivity.

The story of Guy Fawkes goes back to the early 1600's. During this period there were religious problems between Protestants and Catholics in Britain. King James I was a Protestant and he passed severe laws against Catholics. They were not permitted to have religious services.

A group of 12 Catholics decided to kill King James First and destroy the Parliament Building! They planned to blow up the Houses of Parliament on 5 November 1605, when the King was present. This was called the Gunpowder Plot.

The leader of the plot was Robert Catesby. The plotters put 30 barrels of explosives in the cellars under the Parliament Building.

Guy Fawkes was an expert with explosives. His responsibility was to guard the barrels of explosives and light the fuse on 5 November.

The King's soldiers discovered the plot! Guy Fawkes was immediately arrested and tortured. The other plotters were found three days later. Guy Fawkes and the others were hanged.

On the night of 5 November 1605 many people in London were happy because the plot was discovered. To

celebrate they started bonfires in the street. Someone made an effigy of Guy Fawkes and burned it.

Ever since that day the British have celebrated Guy Fawkes' Night. Today young people in Britain make a Guy with old clothes and fill him with newspaper. Then they go around the streets with the Guy and ask for 'a penny for the Guy?' With this money they buy fireworks.

On the night of 5 November there are fireworks and big bonfires to burn the Guy. Some people have bonfires in their back gardens. Young people love the noise, excitement and colourful fireworks.

On this night they eat toffee apples.

In Lewes, Sussex, there is a big public festival on Guy Fawkes' Night. People dress in historic costumes. The Guy is burned on top of a hill on an enormous bonfire. There are also brilliant fireworks.

Here is a rhyme about Guy Fawkes:

Remember, remember The fifth of November
Gunpowder, treason and plot. I see no reason why
gunpowder and treason Should ever be forgot.

CHAPTER FOUR

Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is a very important American festivity and it is celebrated on the last Thursday of November. However, schools and many shops and offices are closed for four days: Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

Thanksgiving is a special day for families to be together and to thank God for all they have. Americans travel great distances to be with their families on this occasion.

Why is Thanksgiving such an important day? The tradition started with the Pilgrims, the founders of America. The Pilgrims left Great Britain in 1620 because of religious persecution. They wanted to start a new life in America and practise their religion in freedom.

One hundred men, women and children left Britain on a small ship called the Mayflower. Their sea voyage was very difficult. Many Pilgrims died during the voyage.

They arrived on the north-east coast of North America in December 1620 and founded Plymouth. The area was a wilderness. It was almost winter and they had no homes and little food. They immediately built small homes, but it was too late to cultivate crops.

The winter was very cold and harsh.

Almost half of the Pilgrims died because their living conditions were very bad.

The friendly Wampanoag Indians helped them during the long winter.

In the spring the Pilgrims met an Indian called Squanto. He explained how to grow corn, hunt and live in the wilderness.

Soon the Pilgrims and the Indians became good friends.

The Pilgrims worked hard and cultivated crops. The summer harvest was excellent. By November 1621 everyone had food and a home. There was hope for the future.

Governor William Bradford, the Pilgrim leader, decided to celebrate with a dinner for the Pilgrims and the Indians. He wanted to give thanks to God. This was the first Thanksgiving dinner and it lasted for three days!

Today the traditional Thanksgiving meal is similar to the first.

People eat roast turkey, sweet potatoes, corn, cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie. Most families start the meal with a prayer.

The long Thanksgiving weekend is the perfect time to start Christmas shopping! Big stores and shops are open on Friday, Saturday and Sunday for the Christmas shoppers.

CHAPTER FIVE

Christmas

On 25 December Great Britain and the United States (and many other countries) celebrate Christmas. The word Christmas comes from the Old English 'Cristes maesse', Christ's mass. On this day Christians celebrate the birth of Christ.

Kindness and giving are the spirit of Christmas. Charles Dickens, the famous British writer, wrote *A Christmas Carol*, a story about the true meaning of Christmas.

Why is Christmas celebrated on 25 December?

Christmas comes from two pagan festivals. People celebrated the winter solstice on 21 or 22 December. The Roman emperors chose 25 December as the birthday of the sun (*natalis solis*).

After the winter solstice, the days become longer and the sun is higher in the sky. In ancient Rome this was the season of Saturnalia. Saturnalia was a time of merrymaking. During Saturnalia the Romans exchanged presents.

The pagan tribes of northern Europe enjoyed a 12-day winter festival called Yule. Yule had its own traditions of Yule cakes, fir trees, holly, mistletoe and presents. Fir trees and holly are still a symbol of Christmas. Today a branch of mistletoe in the house has another meaning: when a boy and

girl meet under the mistletoe they usually kiss! The custom of kissing under the mistletoe is an ancient Celtic rite.

Medieval Christmas was a long event. It lasted twelve days like the Yule festival. Celebrations started on 25 December and ended on the night of 6 January.

Christmas is the biggest holiday on the American and British calendar. However, in Scotland, New Year is more important. In Great Britain and the United States people prepare for Christmas weeks before 25 December.

Cities and towns are beautifully decorated with Christmas symbols: the Christmas tree, Santa Claus, colourful lights and much more. Shop windows are full of presents for everyone. People are busy buying presents. There are Santa Clauses everywhere. On street corners people sing Christmas carols. In Britain many children go carol singing with an adult. They go from house to house and sing. They usually receive money for their singing. They use this money to buy presents. There is a joyous atmosphere.

Christmas today respects many of the old traditions and has added new ones.

The modern Christmas tree originated in western Germany long ago. The Germans put up a fir tree in their homes and decorated it with biscuits and candles. German settlers took this tradition to North America in the 17th century. By the 19th century Christmas trees were very popular in the United States.

In Britain the Christmas tree became popular after 1840. The German Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband,

took the Christmas tree to the British Royal Family. Soon the Christmas tree became popular all over Great Britain. There is a big tree every year in Trafalgar Square, London.

Today America's most famous Christmas tree is in the Rockefeller Center, New York City.

The Empire State Building in New York City is one of the tallest buildings in the world. At Christmas the top of the building is illuminated with red and green lights!

Today almost every Christian family has a decorated Christmas tree at home or in the garden. Some families put up the tree on Christmas Eve and others put it up at the beginning of December. Many families put a Nativity scene under the Christmas tree. St. Francis of Assisi created the first Nativity scene in the 1200's!

Many Americans wear 'Christmas clothes' during the Christmas season. These are clothes with Christmas colours and symbols.

Christmas crackers are an old tradition. They were invented in London. Two people pull the cracker until it 'bangs' and opens. Inside there is usually a small present, a paper hat and a joke.

In the United States there are 'Christmas shops' in many cities. They sell all types of Christmas trees, ornaments and other decorations for the home. 'Christmas shops' are open all year long, so you can buy your Christmas tree in June!

It is usual to send Christmas cards to relatives and friends. The first Christmas card was designed in Britain by

John Callcott Horsley in 1843. A thousand copies of the card were printed in London. The design was a family party with the words 'A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you.'

In the mid-19th century a shop owner in Albany, New York, made a card that said, 'Christmas greetings from Pease's Great Variety Store.'

This was the beginning of the big Christmas card industry.

The figure of Santa Claus comes from St. Nicholas, a 4th century Christian bishop of Asia Minor. He was famous for his generosity and kindness. The Dutch settlers of New York brought the tradition of Sinterklaas (Santa Claus) to America.

Father Christmas, or Santa Claus, is an important part of the Christmas tradition. Children write letters to him and ask for special presents.

Today we see Santa Claus as an old man with a white beard, dressed in a red suit. He drives a sleigh pulled by reindeer and comes down the chimney with toys for the children. This image of Santa Claus was created by the American cartoonist Thomas Nast in 1863.

American and British children put out a stocking on Christmas Eve because they hope to receive presents from Santa Claus. Then they go to bed early because they want Santa Claus to come. Many Christians go to church services at midnight and others go on Christmas morning. Christmas presents are usually opened on Christmas morning. After

Christmas dinner many families listen to the traditional Queen's Speech in Britain and watch special Christmas television programmes. Children play with their new toys.

In Britain some people go for a Christmas Day swim in the sea or in a lake. In Hyde Park in London some courageous people swim in the Serpentine!

CHAPTER SIX

New Years Eve

On 31 December everyone celebrates the end of the old year and the beginning of the new.

In Scotland New Year's Eve is called Hogmanay. It is the most important celebration of the year. In Edinburgh there is an immense street celebration on New Year's Eve.

In America and Britain many people like going to parties or organising them in their homes. Some people prefer to celebrate in restaurants or night clubs. Young people celebrate at home or at a disco. Others go to masked balls in costumes and masks. Everyone takes off their mask at midnight.

Cheers, noise, music, dancing, colourful decorations, festive food and drink are all part of New Year's Eve. People like throwing confetti on the last night of the year.

People wear their best party clothes on this exciting night. At parties everyone wears funny paper hats and blows toy horns. Parties usually begin after 9 pm and continue until the next morning. At midnight everyone joins hands and sings the old Scottish song 'Auld Lang Syne.'

SHOULD auld acquaintance be forgot,

And never brought to min?

Should auld acquaintance be forgot,

And auld lang syne?

For auld lang syne, my dear.
For auld lang syne,
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.

In New York City a favourite place to go on New Year's Eve is Times Square. At midnight the words 'Happy New Year' appear on an electronic sign. Bells and sirens ring, people cheer and there is a lot of noise!

In London many people go to celebrate in Trafalgar Square. Everyone in Britain waits for Big Ben to strike midnight. Then there is a lot of noise. People sing 'Auld Lang Syne', kiss each other and cheer.

When we make a lot of noise on New Year's Eve we are following ancient traditions. Ancient civilizations made noise to frighten evil spirits of the past year.

On New Year's Eve the Americans and the British make New Year's resolutions or promises. They promise to get rid of bad habits during the new year. Some typical children's resolutions are: 'I resolve to do my homework' or 'I resolve to clean my room every day'. Children write down their New Year's resolutions, sign their name and give the paper to their parents.

Some typical adult's resolutions are:

'I resolve to stop smoking' or 'I resolve to go on a diet'. Most people don't keep their promises, but a few do! In some

American cities office workers throw their old calendars out of the office windows on 31 December. They are throwing the old year away! It is incredible to see so much paper flying about. By 5:30 p.m. the streets are covered with office calendars.

At the end of the year astrologists predict the future for all the signs of the zodiac.

Some astrologists predict catastrophic events!

CHAPTER SEVEN

New Year's Day

Happy New Year!

'The same to you and many more.' This familiar greeting is heard throughout Britain and the United States on 1 January.

People have always celebrated the New Year. In ancient civilizations the calendar was based on the seasons. The Egyptian New Year began when the Nile River overflowed. For the early Britons and the Romans the New Year began on the first day of spring.

In 45 BC the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar created a calendar with 1 January as the first day of the new year. This calendar is still used today. January comes from 'Janus,' the Roman god of beginnings and endings.

New Year's traditions come from different cultures. Many people give presents and send cards on New Year's Day. This was part of a Roman and old English tradition. Shops and offices give calendars and small presents to their clients.

In Britain most families have a big lunch and spend a quiet day at home.

In the United States many families have 'Open House' on New Year's Day. It is a custom introduced by George Washington, the first President of the United States.

During 'Open House' the front door of your home is open all day long.

Friends and relatives come to say 'Happy New Year!' They eat and drink something and then leave. Many clubs and organisations have 'Open House' too.

On New Year's Day most of the United States is covered with snow. However, in California and in the southern states it is warm and sunny. In these sunny places there are parades and football games. These football games are called Bowl Games.

The Pasadena 'Tournament of Roses' parade is the biggest and oldest New Year's Day event. In Pasadena more than three million people go to watch the parade! More than 70 million Americans watch it on television.

Every year there are about 60 spectacular floats made of fresh flowers. The floats show favourite storybook characters and animals. The queen of the parade is called the Citrus Queen, because so many citrus fruits grow in southern California.

It takes about a year to organise the Pasadena 'Tournament of Roses' parade! The entire city participates in this extraordinary event.

When the parade ends everyone goes to the football stadium to watch the Rose Bowl game, the biggest sports event of the year.

Another famous New Year's Day parade is the Macy's Day Parade in New York City.

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Many Americans watch this parade on television in the morning and in the afternoon they watch a football game.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Chinese New Year

Chinese New Year is the most important festivity for the Chinese people in America and Great Britain. It is also called the Spring Festival or the Lunar New Year.

The exact date on the Western calendar changes from year to year. However, Chinese New Year takes place between 1 January and 19 February. On the Chinese lunar calendar every month begins with the new moon.

Every year has an animal's name. These animals are the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, ram, monkey, rooster, dog and pig. A Chinese legend says that these twelve animals had a race. The first year was named after the rat, the winner. The other eleven years were named after the order in which the animals arrived in the race. The clever rat jumped onto the ox's back then at the end jumped over the ox's head to arrive first!

The Chinese believe that a person born in a particular year has some of the characteristics of that animal.

Celebrations in Chinese families last for about two weeks. The celebrations begin with traditional house cleaning. The Chinese get rid of old and useless things. They do this to throw away the misfortunes of the past year.

On Chinese New Year's Eve all family members enjoy a big, delicious meal. It is very important for the Chinese to

be with their families on this occasion. Fish is always part of the dinner because it represents abundance.

On New Year's Day all Chinese children wear new clothes with bright colours. Red is considered a lucky colour. Parents and relatives give children the traditional New Year's gift called 'Lai see' (lucky money). This money is put into bright red and gold envelopes. Red is a traditional colour for festivals, celebrations, weddings and birthdays.

In Britain a parade takes place in Soho, London. This is one of the biggest parades in an English-speaking country. Dragon or lion dancers often lead the parade. In Chinatown, Soho there are many Chinese restaurants. It is possible to stop and eat typical Chinese food.

Chinese New Year was celebrated on 21 February, 1851 for the first time in San Francisco! This was during the California Gold Rush. A lot of Chinese immigrants worked in California during the Gold Rush.

In big American cities such as San Francisco, New York, Honolulu and Houston, Chinese New Year is a major event with wonderful parades.

San Francisco, California, has the biggest Oriental community outside of Asia. This area of San Francisco is called Chinatown. There are many Chinese shops, restaurants and libraries in Chinatown. All street and shop signs are written in Chinese! During the Chinese New Year, Chinatown is decorated with beautiful ornaments.

Most of the costumes and masks come from Hong Kong. Every year there is a Miss Chinatown USA beauty and talent contest.

The lion dancers are always part of the festivities. The lion has a big head and long body made of cloth. The lion dance is accompanied by drums, cymbals and noisy firecrackers. According to ancient traditions the great noise frightens away evil spirits.

The dragon is the most important figure of the Chinese New Year festivities and parades. The dragon is considered a lucky figure. A parade dragon can be 20 to 30 metres long! Sixty or more men move under a long cloth that represents the dragon's tail.

During the parade children represent the animals of the Chinese calendar. There are also acrobats and musicians in beautiful costumes.

Every year the San Francisco parade attracts thousands of spectators. It is a magnificent event.

CHAPTER NINE

Valentine's Day

Valentine's Day, 14 February, is dedicated to people in love! On 14 February sweethearts celebrate Valentine's Day with cards and presents. Cards can be funny, romantic or poetic. Presents can be a box of chocolates, flowers or jewellery.

When and where did this festivity start?

The custom of celebrating Valentine's Day probably began with the Roman festival of Lupercalia on 15 February. During Lupercalia there were games and dancing. Every young man took the name of a young lady from an urn. The lady was the young man's sweetheart for one year.

With the beginning of Christianity pagan customs were not permitted, but the festival continued. In the 7th century this festival was called St. Valentine's Day.

The origin of the name is still a mystery. Some historians say that the festival took its name from a Christian martyr named Valentine. He died on 14 February in the year 270.

Others say Valentine was put in prison by Emperor Claudius because he secretly married young couples. The Emperor did not like these secret marriages.

Some say that Valentine comes from the French word 'galantin' (a gallant or beau).

A legend says that birds begin to mate on 14 February!

The Roman conquerors brought the celebration to England.

In England the pagan and Christian customs combined to form the Valentine festivity.

The Valentine tradition was popular in Shakespeare's time.

Shakespeare's characters Romeo and Juliet are the eternal symbol of love.

In the play Hamlet Ophelia sang this song:

'Tomorrow is

St. Valentine's Day

All in the morning be time,

And I a maid at your window

To be your Valentine.'

In 17th century London, sweethearts exchanged presents on 14 February. The English settlers took this romantic tradition to the New World.

Some settlers made beautiful Valentine's cards by hand. They painted butterflies, flowers, cupids and hearts on the cards, and then wrote original verses.

In the 1800's few people had time to make Valentine's cards. American manufacturers printed millions of romantic cards. The most popular cards had moving parts: windows that opened and showed a romantic poem, and little birds that seemed to fly.

After the romantic Valentine, the comic Valentine became popular. It had funny cartoons or grotesque pictures with comic messages.

Today there are all types of Valentine's cards: romantic, poetic, comic, grotesque, artistic and handmade!

In 1947 the town of Loveland in Colorado, USA, became Cupid's residence! In Loveland something very unusual happens about two weeks before Valentine's Day. The Loveland Post Office receives more than 300,000 Valentine's cards from all over the world.

The Loveland Post Office cancels these cards with the Loveland, Colorado cancellation. A picture of Cupid and romantic verses are stamped on the envelope. Then the Valentine's cards are sent to the addressee.

These are two examples of the Loveland verses:

"Across the land
we send hugs and kisses.
From the Sweetheart City
Come Valentine wishes.'

'Hope this special day
will make you smile
and the love sent from Loveland
will shorten each mile.'

If you want to use this unusual Valentine's service, write to the following address for more information:

Ms Julie Farnham - Visitors Center - Valentine's Cards

5400 Stone Creek Circle - Suite 100 - Loveland,
Colorado 80538 - USA

Telephone: 001-880-258-1278

In Great Britain it is customary to send an anonymous Valentine's card or present to the person you like or love. The person must guess who wrote it!

Today in the United States Valentine's Day has a bigger meaning. On this day you can send a card or a present to a parent, grandparent, relative or a friend. Valentine's Day is an occasion to express love or affection to anyone.

In elementary school American boys and girls write cards to their favourite classmates. Then they put them into a big box in the school hall. In the afternoon there is a Valentine's Day party. The teacher takes the cards out of the box and gives them to the children. This is always an exciting moment! Children like counting their cards. Most children sign their Valentine's card, but some remain anonymous or write 'From a Secret Admirer.'

In American high schools and universities there is a 'Sweethearts' Ball' on the evening of 14 February. For the 'Sweethearts' Ball' the hall is decorated with red hearts and cupids! Some people have parties at home to celebrate this day dedicated to love.

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In the USA, the top of the Empire State Building in New York City is illuminated with red lights to celebrate Valentine's Day.

CHAPTER TEN

St. Patrick's Day

In the United States and Great Britain, the Irish communities celebrate St. Patrick's Day on 17 March.

The Irish community in the United States is very big. During the 1800's thousands of Irish immigrants went to America. They settled in all parts of the country and took their traditions with them.

Who was St. Patrick and why is he important to the Irish?

St. Patrick is the patron of Ireland. He left several writings about his life and work in Ireland.

Patrick was born in Britain in 389 AD. His father was a landowner and a Christian. When Patrick was 16 years old he was captured and taken to Ireland. He became a slave. After six years Patrick escaped to France by ship. There he became a priest.

He returned to Ireland as a bishop in 432 AD. His missionary work was very successful. He converted most of the Irish to Christianity. He was a generous and dedicated man. He introduced the Roman alphabet to Ireland.

There are legends about St. Patrick. One legend says that he banished all the serpents from Ireland. Another legend says that he used a shamrock to teach the Irish about the Trinity. Today the shamrock is still a symbol of Ireland and the Irish.

St. Patrick died in 461 and his tomb at Downpatrick is a centre of pilgrimage.

Today on 17 March there are big parades in most American cities in honour of the Irish. Marching bands dressed in green play lively Irish music. The Irish community organises parades and other colourful events.

American and British people wear green clothing on St. Patrick's Day. Most people wear a green shamrock. Many shops and restaurants are decorated with green shamrocks in honour of the Irish.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Easter

Easter is a very important Christian festivity. People celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ on the third day after his death.

Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday after the full moon in March. This is between 22 March and 25 April.

The origin of the English word Easter is uncertain. It probably comes from the pagan goddess of spring, Eostre. The pagans celebrated the arrival of spring with special festivals.

The Christian Easter slowly replaced the pagan festivals, but some symbols of the spring festivals remained, such as flowers, eggs, rabbits and bunnies. The tradition of the Easter basket is ancient. The pagans offered their eggs in grass baskets to the goddess Eostre.

In Britain and in the United States it is usual to send Easter cards to friends and relatives. For most Christian families Easter morning begins with a church service. Some Easter services begin very early in the morning. Others take place out of doors in a garden or park.

Easter is a time for Christians to be happy and there is special music in the churches. It is possible to hear George Frederick Handel's 'Messiah' during some Easter services.

To celebrate Easter and the arrival of spring almost everyone wears something new: a new dress, a new suit, new shoes.

Before Easter Day American and British children paint Easter eggs with bright colours and designs. Coloured eggs were exchanged at ancient spring festivals. The egg is an ancient symbol of life and fertility. The decoration of Easter eggs began in England during the Middle Ages. Members of noble families gave one another gold-covered eggs as Easter presents!

On Easter Day in the United States there is the traditional Easter egg hunt in every city and town. Parents tell their children that the Easter bunny hid many eggs in the park. The children must find the hidden eggs. Eggs are hidden in the grass, in a shrub or under a tree. When the children find the eggs they put them in colourful Easter baskets. The child with the biggest number of eggs is the winner.

The tradition of the Easter bunny and the basket of eggs was introduced by German immigrants long ago.

On Easter Monday children roll their eggs down a hill. Egg rolling is an ancient Easter tradition. The first egg that reaches the bottom of the hill without breaking is the winner. A famous egg-rolling contest takes place outside the White House in Washington DC on Easter Monday. The President of the United States invites children to roll eggs on the lawn of the White House.

At Easter time there are chocolate eggs, chocolate bunnies and sugar eggs in all sweet shops. Some eggs are personalized with a name on them.

Hot Cross Buns are a special Easter food.

They are small sweet cakes with a cross on top. This cross represents Christ's death on the cross. The buns are usually eaten in Britain on Good Friday.

In many American cities and towns there is an Easter Bonnet Parade. Girls and women with funny and bizarre Easter bonnets march in the parade. Most women make their own bonnets. There is a prize for the most original. The most famous Easter Bonnet Parade is in New York City, on Fifth Avenue. Thousands of people participate!

In 1933 the great American composer Irving Berlin wrote a song about the Easter Bonnet Parade. Here is a verse:

'In your Easter bonnet
With all the frills upon it
You'll be the grandest lady
In the Easter parade.'

Families usually spend Easter Day together. The traditional Easter meal consists of roast lamb, peas, new potatoes and eggs in many forms.

CHAPTER TWELVE

May Day

On the first day of May we celebrate the arrival of spring and warm weather. Everyone is happy to say goodbye to winter and to welcome spring. Flowers bloom, leaves grow and baby animals are born in spring.

The May Day festival originated in the Roman Empire in about 258 BC. It was a festivity in honour of Flora, the goddess of flowers and spring. When the Romans invaded Britain the festivity was celebrated by the Britons too.

The ancient Celts celebrated spring the night before May Day. This festival was called Beltane. The Druids made big fires on top of the hills. The Celts sat around the fires and ate, sang songs and danced happily.

In central Scotland Beltane is still an important festival.

In the Middle Ages May Day was one of the merriest festivities in Britain. People went into the forest after midnight to pick flowers and plants. They returned the next morning and put the leaves and flowers in their hair. There was music, singing and dancing all day.

The most important event of the day was the dance around the Maypole. The most beautiful young woman of the village became the Queen of the May. There were Morris dances too.

In Britain May Day is a public holiday and it is celebrated on the first Monday in May. It is not a public holiday in the United States.

In Britain and the United States there are still traditional Maypole dances on May Day. People in costumes dance around the Maypole. The Maypole is decorated with many coloured ribbons. The coloured ribbons represent the sun's rays and form a design on the Maypole.

In Britain many people in costumes do Morris dancing on May Day. They dance with bells and handkerchiefs. The tradition probably came from Spain in the 13th century when it was called Moorish dancing.

In the United States most elementary schools celebrate May Day with dances around the Maypole. In some American towns and universities there are May Day festivals. A young woman becomes the May Queen. Music, dancing around the Maypole and games are all part of the festival. There are beautiful floral decorations everywhere.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Independence Day

The most animated American festivity is the Fourth of July or Independence Day. It is the nation's birthday. The Fourth of July is a salute to freedom and democracy. It is a time to remember America's ideals of liberty, equality and opportunity for all.

What happened on 4 July?

In the 1700's the thirteen American colonies belonged to Great Britain. The colonists did not want to be governed by Britain. They wanted to be independent and to choose their own government. They wanted a democracy. Britain imposed high taxes and there were many rebellions.

On 4 July, 1776 a group of patriots wrote the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration proclaimed independence from Britain and democracy and justice for all. With the Declaration of Independence the thirteen colonies created their own nation, the United States of America. The Liberty Bell is a symbol of Independence Day.

The Americans fought against the British in the American Revolution. After years of war the British were defeated in 1781 in Yorktown, Virginia.

Today Americans celebrate the Fourth of July in many different ways. There is an American flag on every flagpole and many people put a flag outside their window. Americans call their flag 'the Stars and Stripes'.

Every city and town organises its own celebration. Red, white and blue decorations fill the streets.

Traditional Fourth of July events are patriotic speeches, parades, baseball games, competitions, a lot of music, dancing and picnics. These picnics are an old American tradition. The typical picnic consists of hamburgers, hot dogs, potato salad, chocolate cake and ice cream. The festivities usually end with a brilliant fireworks show.

In the West rodeos are a favourite event. A western rodeo is a spectacular event to watch!

In Virginia there are historic parades with people in 18th-century costumes.

In New York City the top of the Empire State Building is illuminated with red, white and blue lights!

In Flagstaff, Arizona, American Indians celebrate with a three-day pow-wow, a rodeo and tribal dances.

Bridgeport, California is a small town in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Bridgeport celebrates Independence Day in an old-fashioned way.

Before the 10 o'clock parade someone reads the Declaration of Independence to the town. Then cowboys and Indians from nearby ranches come to the town on their beautiful horses. Children ride decorated bicycles in the parade. There is a big pie-eating competition. After a delicious picnic of barbecued meat, there is a baseball game. In the evening there is country music and dancing.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Notting Hill Carnival

The Notting Hill Carnival of London is the second biggest carnival in the world and the biggest street festival in Europe! It is always on the last Sunday and Monday in August which is a Bank Holiday (a public holiday) in the United Kingdom. On Sunday there is the Children's Carnival. The Carnival takes place in Notting Hill, West London. When did the first Carnival take place?

In the 1950's people from the Caribbean, and in particular from Trinidad, emigrated to Britain. They took their customs and traditions with them. People remembered the great Carnivals held in the West Indies and in 1964 a street festival took place in Notting Hill.

There were few people in costume dancing in the streets and carrying steel drums in this first festival. However, it was a great success.

Since then Carnival has taken place every year in Notting Hill and it has grown into an enormous multicultural arts festival.

Carnival celebrations normally take place before Easter, in the month of March. However, in Britain the celebrations take place in August when the weather is warmer. During the year the West Indian families prepare their beautiful costumes and practise playing their steel drums. They also work on their floats.

On the days of Carnival, Notting Hill is full of colour, excitement, music, noise and people. About two million people go to Carnival every year!

People with wonderful costumes dance in the streets and steel bands play Calypso, the traditional music of the West Indies. They also play Soca, the traditional music of Carnival, a mixture of Soul and Calypso. It is also possible to hear reggae, hip-hop and jazz. A parade with colourful floats travels a half kilometres through the streets of London. There is a prize for the best float. It is sometimes almost impossible for the public to walk along the streets - the only way to move is to dance!

In the streets food vendors sell meat and vegetable patties, salted fish and other delicious West Indian specialities. Everyone has a good time!

- THE END -

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