Halloween

The nights are getting longer, the leaves are changing colour and are starting to fall and there is a chill in the air that is not just down to the weather... But where do our modern day Halloween traditions come from? Why do we carve pumpkins or dress up? Why are we worried about ghosts and ghouls and things that go bump in the night?!

Where it all began

Halloween is among the oldest traditions in the world and even though some aspects of the holiday are relatively recent developments, many can be traced back to the Celtic festival of Samhain. The observance evolved from ancient rituals marking the transition from summer to winter, thereby associating it with transformation, which is still a central theme of the holiday. The name Samhain means "summer's end", and the festival marked the close of the harvest season and the coming of winter. The Celts believed that the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead were thinnest at this time and so the dead could return and walk where they had before.

Christian groups through the years have routinely attempted to demonize and denigrate the observance, in part by repeating the claim that Sam Hain was the Celtic god of the dead and Halloween his feast. It was actually the Church itself, however, which preserved the Samhain tradition in the West by Christianizing it in the 9th century. Once the festival was Christianized, All Hallows' Eve became a night of vigil, prayer, and fasting in preparation for the next day when the saints were honoured at a tame celebration.

When the British came to North America, they brought their traditions with them. The Puritans of New England, who refused to observe any holidays which might be associated with pagan beliefs kept the observance of Guy Fawkes Day on 5 November as a reminder of their supposed moral superiority to Catholics. Guy Fawkes continued to be celebrated up until the American Revolution of 1775-1783.

The rituals of Samhain arrived in the United States less than a century later with the displacement of the Irish in 1845-1849, during the potato famine. The Irish, largely Catholic, continued to observe All Hallows' Eve, All Saint's Day, and All Soul's Day along with the practice of "souling" but these festivals by now were infused with folk traditions such as the jack o' lantern.

Today, Halloween is not generally associated with any particular religion or tradition and is commonly viewed as a secular community holiday, primarily focused on the young, and a boon for businesses offering candy and decorations as well as the entertainment industry which releases films, TV specials, and books on paranormal themes.

Countries around the world today celebrate Halloween in one form or another, from Mexico's Day of the Dead to China's Tomb Sweeping Day.

Fancy Dress

It was a long held belief that the veil between the world of the living and the dead was thinner during 'All Hallow's Eve'. Further, there was a very good chance that the spirit of a person one may have wronged would also make an appearance. In order to deceive the spirits, people darkened their faces with ashes from bonfires (a practice later known as "guising"), and this developed into wearing masks. A living person would recognize the spirit of a loved one and could then reveal themselves but otherwise remain safe from the unwanted attention of darker forces.

Transformation was also a central theme of Samhain and is still central to the observance of Halloween today. The mask and costume transforms the wearer from their everyday life to another persona. For a night, one becomes Darth Vader or a zombie or a Great Pumpkin.

Trick or Treating

Many of the rituals which accompanied the new incarnation of the festival are unknown but by the 16th century, the practice of "souling" had become integral. The poor of the town or city would go about knocking on doors asking for a soul-cake (also known as a soul-mass-cake) in return for prayers. This practice is thought to have begun in response to the belief in purgatory where it was thought a soul lingered in torment unless elevated by prayer and, most often, money paid to the Church.

Today "Soulling" is more recognisable as "trick or treating" and home owners placate mischievous children with sweets to prevent property damage.

Carved Pumpkins

The jack o' lantern is associated with the Irish folk tale of Stingy Jack, a clever drunk and con man who fooled the devil into banning him from hell but, because of his sinful life, could not enter heaven. After his death, he roamed the world carrying a small lantern made of a turnip with a red-hot ember from hell inside to light his way. Scholars believe this legend evolved from sightings of will-o-the-wisp, swamp and marsh gasses which glowed in the night. On All Hallows Eve, the Irish hollowed out turnips and carved them with faces, placing a candle inside, so that as they went about "souling" on the night when the veil between life and death was thinnest, they would be protected from spirits like Stingy Jack.
The basics of Halloween were now in place with people going from house to house asking for sweet treats in the form of the soul-cakes and carrying jack-o-lanterns. Shortly after their arrival in the United States, the Irish traded the turnip for the pumpkin as their lantern-of-choice as it was much easier to carve.

Further Reading

There are many fantastic websites that explain the origins and traditions of Halloween in more detail should you wish to do some further reading:

- History and Traditions of Halloween in Britain | Historic UK (historic-uk.com)
- History of Halloween - World History Encyclopedia
- Remembering the dead - by Seán O'Neill (Lic. Ac.) ~ Oct 2020 | Tai Chi Foundation Inc.
- History of Halloween - Halloween Meaning and Origin (countryliving.com)
- The Dark History Behind Halloween Is Even More Chilling Than You Knew (businessinsider.com)

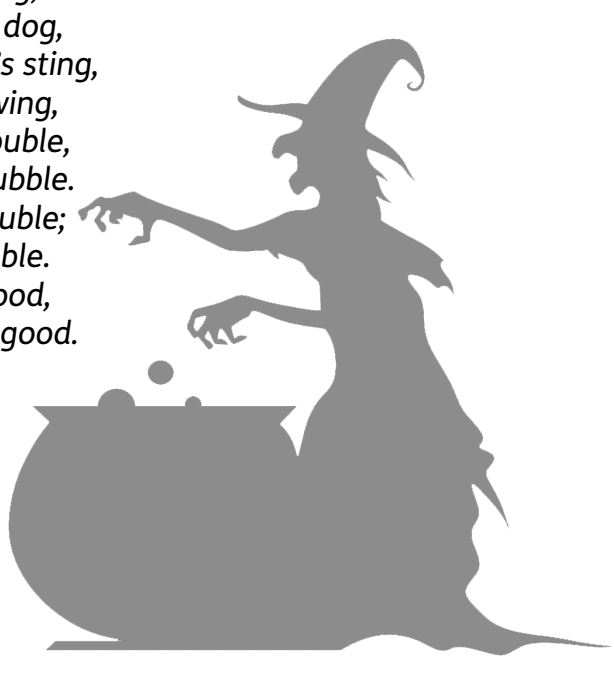
Did you know?

We can credit William Shakespeare with many of the phrases we use for Halloween today.

"Something wicked this way comes" is part of a couplet in his play 'Macbeth'. The line is a very striking piece of verse, not only because of the way it sounds but also because of its ominous announcement of some approaching monster.

By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.

spoken by the second of the three witches in act 4, scene 1 of the play

'Macbeth' also popularised the iconic scene of witches huddled around a cauldron:

Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn and caldron bubble.
Fillet of a fenny snake,
In the caldron boil and bake;
Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg and howlet's wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.
Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn and caldron bubble.
Cool it with a baboon's blood,
Then the charm is firm and good.