

**Harvest Time**

If you go for a walk or a drive in the countryside at this time of year, what will you see? Golden fields shimmering in the autumn sunshine. Trees and bushes laden with fruit. Farmers, busy but also very happy. Why? Because this is harvest time.

Harvest time is the season of the gathering of crops. The word itself is derived from the Anglo-Saxon haerfest (“autumn”) or the Old High German herbist.

Harvest time has been the reason for joyful festivals for many centuries. Harvest festivals were also celebrated with another purpose in mind: to reaffirm commitment to families, friends, and the local communities people lived in.

Our early ancestors thought that nature itself was a supreme force that rewarded mankind for their good deeds, and punished them for their bad ones.

The ancient Druids, with fire and spells, would celebrate the harvest on November 1st. Therefore, they carried out many rituals of thanksgiving to the creative force of Mother Earth who had to be obeyed if people were to survive.

The Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, is connected to agriculture – the sowing of seeds, growth and brining in the harvest.

The Romans had their Ludi Cereales feasts in honour of Ceres who they believed was the goddess spirit of agriculture. (It is from this source that we get the word ‘cereal.’}

When Christianity came to Britain fifteen hundred years ago and evolved into the national religion, the harvest festival became a religious as well as a social event. It reminded Christians of all the good things God gave them. This made them want to share with others who were not so fortunate.

In schools and in churches, people often bought food from home to a harvest festival service. The celebrations on this day usually included singing hymns, praying, and decorating churches with baskets of fruit and food in the festival known as harvest festival, harvest home, harvest thanksgiving or Harvest Festival of Thanksgiving.

**When is harvest time in the UK?**

In the UK the Harvest Festival, also known as the Harvest Home, is traditionally celebrated on the Sunday nearest the Harvest Moon. This is the full moon that occurs closest to the autumn equinox, which is often between 21-23 September.

Normally falling towards the end of September, or early October, the harvest festival is the closest thing we have to a day of thanksgiving. Although today we cannot plan a fixed day for this celebration, in the past the harvest festival differed, based on when all the crops had been brought in. The whole community, including children, needed to help right up to the end, as lives depended on the success of the harvest.

In the past they would be held as soon as the harvest had been completed and the final cartload triumphantly returned to the farm where the harvest supper, also known as the ‘Harvest Home’, would take place. At their most lavish, the meal would brim with several meats, vegetables, puddings, tarts and ale, and would be accompanied by singing, drinking games and much reverie. Everything was to be conducted by St Michael’s Mass on the 29th September. Harvest was one of the great village occasions. Because some often partied to excess, though, such occasions often came in for much criticism from the local authorities.

**What about the future?**

Now that most of us neither sow nor reap what we eat, it is almost impossible for us to imagine how crucial this time of year was in the calendar. By knowing a little of the history and by keeping some harvest traditions alive, we can still honour the countless generations who depended upon it.

Remembering harvest time in some way may also teach us to respect the land we live on and the planet we exist upon. As far as we know, there is no other planet like ours anywhere in the solar system. No other that supports Life in such rich abundance. Today we understand more than ever that as a race we either look after the Earth properly or we destroy it and have to face the consequences. Each of us is called upon to play our part to make sure future harvests happen and such festivals continue to be celebrated by all who have enough to eat.