

Ghosts, Black Cats and Jack-o'-Lanterns!

Ghosts, black cats, Jack-o'-Lanterns and the colour orange. You may be aware of the most popular images of Halloween, but are you aware how their connection to Halloween actually came about? Here's the spooky lowdown on our favourite creatures and things that go bump in the night!



A Few Ghosts Abroad:

The North American and western European festival of Halloween (or All Hallows' Eve, October 31st) uses customs borrowed from the Celtic festival of **Samhain**. The Celts (early people of Ireland and Scotland) believed that, at this time of year, the spirits of those who had died the previous year returned to Earth. The living tried to protect themselves from the

dead by wearing masks to hide their faces. They might also leave treats outside to appease the spirits who rose from their graves.

People have always disagreed about what the spirits who rose from the graves looked like. The most common description of a ghost is an ethereal, wispy white form that seems to float above the ground. Anthropologists believe that this comes from the ancient notion of the spirit of a person being visible. They think that our ancient ancestors noted the cold mist that formed around the mouth when breath was exhaled in cold climates and presumed this was the person's spirit escaping, hence the idea that a spirit or ghost was misty, transparent and floating.

A Little Witchiness:

One of the most common icons associated with Halloween is the witch, but did such a person actually exist, with a black cape, a pointy hat and a trusty black cat by her side?

The myth of the witch has developed over many centuries. While witchcraft has been



common around the world for centuries and is still practised in many places, the creation of our own picturesque image of a woman in black is probably more prosaic. The witch of a town, feared and reviled by many, was often nothing more than a single, older woman who knew a thing or two about herbs and treatments. In a world without the benefits of modern medicine and science, local people were quick to find a supernatural explanation for sicknesses and famine in their community, and that explanation often ended with the

assumption that the community harboured a witch. She was often the village wise-woman or midwife, and an easy target for blame.

Witchcraft trials were all too popular across Europe and North America in the Middle Ages and beyond, and a number of authors cashed in with hefty tomes about how to spot a witch and her evil familiars. According to books such as the **Malleus Maleficarum**, published in 1486 by two German monks, witches were more likely to be single women than men. They could be identified by their familiars, animal consorts given to them by the devil. These animals were often cats but might also be bats (another Halloween favourite). It was believed that witches could coat themselves in a substance that allowed them to fly, thus encouraging the myth of the broomstick propelling them through the sky.

Our later impressions of witches as older women with tall pointy black hats may have more to do with the common dress of certain districts than with any magical properties. Welsh peasants were known for their traditional black flat-topped hats made from shiny silk. These were popular from the 1840s onwards. Perhaps it

is from this traditional Welsh costume that the pointed, black hat derived, the point being added to remind us that witches are associated with the Devil (the Horned One).

The representation of the witch as an old woman may also stem from something quite innocent.



The Crone was a pagan goddess, originally honoured during Samhain, long before she made an appearance in Game of Thrones. At that time, the old woman represented the Earth mother, wisdom and the change and turn of the seasons – a far cry from the cackling old woman of our Halloween festivities today.

Thinking of Adopting?

Cats, black ones in particular, have long been associated with witches and Halloween. This was once a worry to many animal shelters across America. They were so concerned about the animals being adopted just for parties (or possibly even for sacrifice) at Halloween that they wouldn't allow black cat adoption throughout October.

The fears seem to have been quelled now – black cats can generally be adopted anywhere and at any time these days. Let's hope kitty brings good luck and not bad!

Black Cat Luck:

One of the witches' most popular familiars was the black cat. Throughout Europe, there were superstitions that black cats were either unlucky

or lucky. Most of mainland Europe feared that black cats crossing one's path were an omen of death or misfortune. These superstitions were something that the Pilgrims brought with them to North America, spreading the fear that black cats were most often familiars of witches or shape-shifting witches themselves.

In Britain, however, the traditional view is that black cats are extremely lucky, bringing prosperity into any house they enter. In Celtic Ireland and Scotland, a fairy known as the **Cat Sith** took on the form of a black cat. At **Samhain**, it would bless or curse the house it visited depending on whether a saucer of milk was left for it or not. In some areas, it was believed that the Cat Sith could steal the souls from the bodies of the recently deceased and so it was not trusted.

A Great Big Pumpkin Head, Anyone?

The tradition of carving various types of gourd for Halloween probably stems from the Irish tradition formed in the 19th century. Then, turnips, beets and the ever-popular mangle-wurzel were more commonly used for the carving. Regardless of the vegetable used, the carving may then have served one of two

A Few Jack-o'-Lantern Records

The record for the most Jack-o'-Lanterns carved and lit in one place has been consistently broken by the town of Keene, New Hampshire in the United States. The most recent record was set on Oct 19th, 2013, when 30,581 Jack-o'-Lanterns were put on display!

The record for the largest Jack-o'-Lantern ever carved rests with Scott Cully. He carved an enormous 1,469lb (666.33kg) pumpkin into a Jack-o'-Lantern on October 31st, 2005.

purposes. It might have been used to simply scare people. Alternatively, it might have been placed on a windowsill, as they often are today, in order to scare away harmful spirits who might otherwise seek to enter the house during **Samhain**. The name Jack-o'-Lantern is probably derived from the words 'Will-o'-the-Wisp' or 'Will of the torch'. This is the name for the strange light phenomenon seen sometimes over boggy areas, in which a pale white light appears to hover above the ground.

Our Jack-o'-Lantern may also stem from the Irish story of 'Stingy Jack'. Jack was a crafty



and careful fellow who realised that he could fool the Devil and by doing so stop himself from going to Hell. He successfully tricked the devil into climbing a tree. While the Devil was in the tree, Jack placed crosses all around the base of the tree so that the devil couldn't get down. However, the trick back-fired on Jack. When he died, he was not deemed good enough to enter Heaven, but the Devil wouldn't have Jack in

Hell either after the trick he had played. Jack was condemned to wander the Earth, lighting his way with a lantern made from a carved-out turnip and a candle.

Over the years, the pumpkin, a common North American gourd that can grow to huge dimensions, has become the vegetable of choice. The vibrant orange colour of the vegetable might have something to do with its popularity though. Orange has traditionally become associated with the Halloween season through its earlier associations as the colour of the harvest and the changing leaves, reflecting the coming of Winter.



Afraid of the dark?

Know anyone who is scared of Halloween? They're not alone.

The fear of Halloween is such a common problem that it even has a recognised scientific name. The condition is known as **samhainophobia** from the original Celtic name for Halloween, **Samhain** or **Samhuin**.

Sufferers may experience panic-like responses when encountering things associated with Halloween. These can include raised heartrate, quicker breathing, dizziness and nausea.

Other Halloween-related phobias include **phasmaphobia** (fear of ghosts), **wiccaphobia** (fear of witches), **sanguivoriphobia** (fear of vampires) and **placophobia** (fear of tombstones)!