

Halloween Traditions 'Trick or Treat'

Ghosts, trick-or-treating, fancy costumes and the colour orange. What are we talking about? Halloween, of course! Or at least Halloween as we celebrate it in North America and Britain. Ever wondered where our 'trick-or-treating' customs got started? Ever wondered what other people eat at Halloween? Here's how tricksters and treaters have celebrated around the world.



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.

A Norwegian trickster?

Trick-or-treating in Norway this year? You'll need these words: "Knask-eller-knep!" ("Treat or trick!")

Today these traditions are still evident. Scottish children may blacken their faces with soot, a practice carried out by Druids during pagan times, and are known as 'guisers'. Costumes and masks were also an early part of celebrations in Germany and France. They used costumes made of animal heads/skins when trying to connect with the spirits of the dead.

Trick-or-Treating

Trick-or-treating is the tradition of dressing in costume and going from door to door to ask for sweets or money. In western Europe, it possibly developed from the 'mumming' or 'guising' that took place in villages throughout Britain. Commonly, choreographed performances of dancing or singing were given by groups of men. These groups were then treated to drinks or sweets after their performance. However, there was no threat of violence if the locals didn't feed them in these cases. Sometimes it was the threat of bad luck that encouraged people to give.

In Ireland, the tradition was to dress up as the 'white mare' or *Lair Bhan*. In this celebration, groups would follow the 'white mare' and ask for food from the households they stopped at. If food was forthcoming, good luck would fall on the house. If none was given, bad luck would descend.

In the village of Hinton St. George, and others in Somerset, the tradition of demanding money with menaces is still strong today.

The day is called 'Punkie Night' and is celebrated on the Thursday closest to Halloween (typically the last Thursday of October). The celebrations consist of a group of children with lanterns, led by a Punkie King and Queen. They typically march about singing about Punkie Night. There are various versions of the words they speak, including: "Give me a candle, give me a light. If you don't, you'll get a fright!" They don't generally want a candle anymore, though; money is more the order of the day.

Beans of the Dead?

In Italy, the tradition is to eat the Fave dei Morti (Beans of the Dead). Fortunately this isn't quite as unappetizing as it sounds. They are actually small oval cookies, somewhat like a macaroon in flavour and texture.

In America, the tradition of trick-or-treating probably came from the custom of the poor asking for food and money at doorsteps on All Soul's Day. This door-to-door begging was officially stopped in the 1930s but soon became an opportunity for children to stop at doors and ask for sweets.

Many believe the American tradition developed through the many Scottish, English and Irish immigrants to North America, who brought their mumming or guising traditions with them. Indeed, the first mention in the press of something relating to trick-or-treating comes from 1911, in a newspaper in Kingston in Ontario, Canada. It mentions children "guising round the neighbourhood". By 1927, the words "trick or treat" were beginning to appear in relation to similar events.

Saying the words 'trick or treat' has become a popular tradition in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Puerto Rico and even northern areas of Mexico. In Mexico, where the Day of the Dead is celebrated in conjunction with Halloween, the children shout out other words, however. There, the common saying is "Me da me calaverita?" or "Can you give me my sugar skull?", as sugar candy formed into the shape of a skull is very popular for Day of the Dead celebrations. A new custom of 'Trunk or Treat' has become popular in some American and Canadian cities. Church groups and community organisations band together to promote a safe and communal environment in which to celebrate Halloween.

Rather than knocking on neighbourhood doors, children walk around car parks where open car trunks (boots) display decorations and sweets to be given away - kind of like a themed car boot sale where everything is free!

Accident Prone Ghosts?

In Germany, it might be difficult to do any cooking on Halloween at all. The tradition in some districts is to hide all the knives in the house, just in case the visiting ghosts hurt themselves!

In Germany, Flanders, the Netherlands, Austria and Switzerland, St. Martin's Day is celebrated in a similar way to Halloween. Children roam the neighbourhood with homemade beet or paper lanterns and sing songs about St. Martin in exchange for sweets.

In northern Germany and southern Denmark, children also trick or treat on New Year's Eve during an event known as Rummelpott.



Literary Trick-or-Treaters

There have been many examples of trick-or-treating throughout history. Whether these represent an unbroken tradition of going door to door is unknown.

In ancient Greece, Athenaus of Naucratus recorded a tradition from the island of Rhodes in which children dressed up as swallows and went from door to door. They would sing and then demand food from the house owner. If food was not forthcoming, trickery and mischief might be threatened.

Shakespeare even mentions Halloween and the traditions of asking for food. In *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, his character Speed accuses his master of “paling (whining) like a beggar at Hallowmas”.



Food for the Treaters

The making and giving of food, whether leaving it out for the spirits of the dead or giving it to the children who call, has been a major part of Halloween for many centuries. This may relate to the fact that the celebration coincides with the end of the harvest season, when thanks was given for the harvest and various special dishes were prepared.

One of the earliest traditions associated with All Hallows' Eve or Halloween is the baking of soul-cakes. In Flanders, Southern Germany and Austria, the tradition of making and giving out these baked goods is a long one. Originally, people would visit one another's homes, bringing soul-cakes with them, either to represent the dead or as payment for people's willingness to pray for their dead loved ones. Later, young people began to visit parishes, singing and then asking for soul-cakes in exchange for their performance. They might sing “Souls, souls, for a soul-cake; Pray you good mistress, a soul cake.”

In colonial America, the tradition of baking a Halloween cake was also common. This would contain various household items baked into it, much like a Christmas pudding today.

Each item represented the fortune of the person who found it in their slice of cake. Finding the thimble was particularly bad luck as this meant the finder would have trouble in love!

This was probably still nicer than the tradition in some American towns. In some places, Halloween was originally known as ‘Cabbage Night’ as folks took the opportunity to throw assorted rotten vegetables around town. A particular favourite for throwing? The humble cabbage, it would seem. It probably had something to do with the great round shape!

Regardless of the traditional foods served for Halloween, the all-time favourite in the United States and Canada is candy (sweets). Miniature chocolate bars, bubblegum and individually-wrapped sweets make up the bulk of the ‘treats’ given to children these days. These pre-wrapped sweets make up a multi-million-dollar industry that industry specialists say makes Halloween the second-highest grossing holiday of the year for retailers. In terms of sales of decorations, costumes and candy, the holiday is only rivalled by Christmas!