

WALES: CALAN MAI

by Ross Mulkern

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In Wales, May Day (Calan Mai) is a bit different from the May Day celebrated in England. Like in England, Welsh people take part in May Pole dancing, in which one girl is chosen as “May Queen” and the others dance around her holding ribbons which are connected to a central pole. However, as well as this, the traditional Welsh Calan Mai included lighting ritual fires that sometimes had animals roasted on them. These fires were traditionally made from nine different types of wood collected by participants on May Day, and are a purification ritual that can be traced back to pagan times.

In Wales, The first of May is a “spirit night”, similar to Halloween, in which spirits can enter our world from the next. This is also seen as a time when it is possible to see into the future. Special rituals are performed to see into the future of your love life. Will you meet a new lover? Will your wife or husband leave you? May Day is the time to find out. As a symbol of fertility and new life, hawthorn plants were also used to decorate the outside of houses. But a word of warning: never use hawthorn to decorate the inside- hawthorn is unlucky, then last thing you would want to be on a day of celebration.

Another tradition in some areas of Wales, such as Anglesey, is that straw dolls were made and hung near girl’s homes on May Eve. These dolls were hung by young men whose girlfriends had left them for another man, and otherwise expressed jealousy that could lead to fights.

Not all the traditions of Calan Mai are different from those in England, however. As mentioned, dancing around a May pole formed an very important part of the celebrations. The May Pole is traditionally made of birch, though the way in which the dance is performed varies by region. In the South of Wales, the dancing works much the same way it works in England, with the dancers weaving their ribbons around the pole through their circling dance to make a beautiful pattern that will stay in the village through the summer.

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In the north of Wales, however, the may pole ritual is called “Cangen haf”, the summer branch, and requires eighteen young men dressed entirely in white with ribbons attached (rather like the Morris Dancers of England) and two young men to play characters called the Cadi and the Fool. The Cadi carries the “cangen haf” around the town, this was a special tree branches often decorated with spoons, watches, and other silver borrowed from the people of the village, while the others sing and dance and ask for money from everyone they meet.

These days, amusement park rides and bouncy castles also tend to make an appearance, especially since May Day is a bank holiday in the UK and most people have the day off to join in the festivities. It remains a day of fun and celebration for all the family.