Secondary School Nr.2 in Kuldiga

Calendar of Unusual Customs and Traditions in Great Britain

Research work in culturology

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Introduction

There are many interesting and unusual events and traditions held across the UK. From wife-carrying in Surrey to cheese-rolling in the Cotswolds, these are some of the quirkiest traditions and village pastimes still alive and well in Britain today. Apparently Brits are a nation of weirdos. To anyone who grew up in Britain - particularly in a small village in England, Scotland or Wales - there is nothing at all strange about dressing up in ribbons and bells and hitting sticks together in public, or chasing a large cheese down a steep hill, or setting fire to things and running around with them, trying not to get burned. To outsiders, this is weird. This is wacky. These quirky customs and pastimes, with their roots in customs dating back to the middle ages, are the last bastions of English eccentricity - and are often just a little bit dangerous, too. Third-degree burns, dropping your wife on her head, or knocked out with a wellington boot is all part of the fun.

One of the best known features of the great people of Britain is their long-standing loyalty to traditions, regardless of how strange they may seem. So the author decided to carry out a research on the theme "Calendar of Unusual Customs and Traditions in Great Britain".

**Goal of the research** is to clarify and summarize unusual, typical British folk tradition to create a special calendar for unusual customs and traditions in Great Britain.

**The main objectives** of the research work:

1) to analyze a variety of reference sources to find out what different, unusual, typical British customs and traditions nowadays have been preserved in the UK;
2) to classify unusual British customs and traditions of their anniversary date;
3) to create a calendar of unusual customs and traditions in Great Britain.

The research work consists of introduction, four chapters, six conclusions, ending, the bibliography and list of reference sources and appendix.
1. Spring traditions and festivals

A long time ago the year was marked out with special days which marked the passing year. These were days of celebrations where people would do things, eat things or make things which they would not normally do. Cheese rolling, Nettle Eating, Toe Wrestling, Bog Snorkelling are just a few of the strange, bizarre, wacky, eccentric and even mad festivals still taking place in Britain today. Not all of them are ancient traditions, and some, such as Maypole dancing, aren’t unique to the UK, but all have become regular features in British cultural landscape – and some might go some way towards explaining British reputation for being slightly eccentric!

The word 'March' comes from the Roman 'Martius'. This was originally the first month of the Roman calendar and was named after Mars, the god of war. March was the beginning of British calendar year. Brits changed to the 'New Style' or 'Gregorian calendar in 1752, and it is only since then when they the year began on 1st January. The Anglo-Saxons called the month Hlyd monath which means Stormy month, or Hraed monath which means Rugged month. (1)

All through Lent the traditional games played are marbles and skipping. The games were stopped on the stroke of twelve noon on Good Friday, which in some places was called Marble Day or Long Rope Day. The game of marbles has been played for hundreds of years and some historians say that it might have been started by rolling eggs. In the past, round stones, hazelnuts, round balls of baked clay and even cherry stones have been used.

_Tichborne Dole, Tichborne, Hampshire_ is one of the eccentric British traditions and dates back to the thirteenth century. It takes place every year on March 25th the Feast of the Annunciation (Lady’s Day). The dole was flour and it was given to the poor until 1796. From 1796 Tichborne family have given money to the church instead. _See appendix No. 1_

_Oranges and Lemon's Children's Service._ In the days when the River Themse at London was wider than it is now, barges carrying oranges and lemons landed just below the churchyard of St. Clements Dane. On the last day of March, local primary school children gather at the church to attend a service. They recite the famous nursery rhyme and, on occasions, play the tune on handbells. At the end of the service the children are presented with an orange and a lemon from a table. _Chop chop chop chop the last man’s head!_ Many adults remember this rhyme from playing a playground games. Two children would form an arch and become the choppers. They secretly decide who would be orange and who would be lemon. A line of other children singing the song would pass under the arch and the child passing when the song goes chop, chop, chop would be caught between the falling arch (arms). The caught child then chooses either orange or lemon and
lines behind the child he/she chose. When all children lined behind the choppers they have a tug war. *(See appendix No. 1)*

Like most months, March weather lore has many old sayings to guide people: ‘’When March comes in like a lion it goes out like a lamb. A dry March and a wet May fill barns and bays with corn and hay. As it rains in March so it rains in June. March winds and April showers bring forth May flowers.’’ *(5)*

Brits are very superstitious. There is a superstition about March - if Easter should fall on Lady Day (March 25) then some disaster will shortly follow.

No one knows for certain how April got its name, but it may have come from the Latin word 'aperire' which means 'to open'. April is, after all, the month when in the northern hemisphere buds begin to open and things start to grow again after the winter. Eostre monath or Eastremonath was the Anglo-Saxon name for the month. The name of the Christian Festival of Easter comes from this Anglo-Saxon word. *(1)*

April begins with a day of fun and jokes - April Fool's Day. No one really knows when this custom began but it has been kept for hundreds of years. *Walpurgis Night, Beltane Eve* Celtic Fire Festival celebrating the coming of summer. *(See appendix No. 1)*

The arrival of the cuckoo is the signal that spring has come. It arrives some time in mid April. The cuckoo sings from *St. Tiburtius' Day* (14th April) to *St John's Day* (24th June). However in Worcestershire there is a saying that the cuckoo is never heard before Tenbury fair (April 21st), or after Pershore fair (June 26th). The difference in dates is because traditionally the bird arrives in different parts of the country during April. Various April dates are called 'Cuckoo Day ' and some places hold 'Cuckoo Fairs'. *(See appendix No. 1)*

Superstition about April - if you should hear the cuckoo sing on St. Tiburtius' Day, you should turn over all the money in your pockets, spit and not look at the ground! If you do this and are standing on soft ground when you do it, you will have loads of good luck. However if you are standing on hard ground - the cuckoo's call means bad luck.

**May** is named after the Greek goddess, Maia. The month is a time of great celebrations in the northern hemisphere. It is the time when flowers emerge and crops begin to sprout. The Anglo-Saxon name for May was Tri-Milchi, in recognition of the fact that with the lush new grass cows
could be milked three times a day. It was first called May in about 1430. Before then it was called Maius, Mayes, or Mai. (1)

In Britain, as in most parts of Western Europe, May Day marked the end of the harsh winter months, welcomed the beginning of Summer, and optimistically looked forward to the bright and productive months. For British ancestors, largely in rural areas, it was a major annual festival and was celebrated throughout the country, especially on the first of May with music, dancing and games. Traditional May Day (Garland Day) celebrations included dancing around maypoles and the appearance of 'hobby horses' and characters such as 'Robin Hood' and 'Jack in Green'. Greenery was collected by primary school children to make garlands. In many English villages children would parade with garlands of flowers, sometimes fastened to sticks or in the shape of a cross, or fixed to hoops. This was done in the hope of collecting money. Sometimes this was known as May Dolling because often placed in the centre of the garland was a small doll. There are still garland ceremonies today. (See appendix No. 1)

Cheese Rolling Festival (Cooper's Hill, Brookworth in Gloucestershire). Forty thousand spectators congregate at Coopers Hill in the Gloucester village of Brockworth to watch the traditional Double Gloucester cheese hurtle down a steep slope, pursued by dozens of running, rolling competitors, the fastest of whom wins the cheese. (2) (See appendix No. 1)

May Day Superstition. First thing in the morning on May 1st, young girls used to rush out into the garden to wash their faces in the May dew. Why? There is an old tale that says that May dew has magic properties and that anyone who has washed their face in it will have a beautiful complexion all through the year. This dew was supposed to be able to remove freckles and also spots and pimples. (5)
2. Unusual traditions, sayings about summer

June marks the beginning of Summer in the northern hemisphere and the month of the Wimbledon tennis tournament in England. June is the sixth month of the year and takes its name from the Roman goddess Junno, the goddess of marriage. For this reason, June has always been looked upon as the best month in which to marry: ‘Married in the month of roses - June Life will be one long honeymoon.’ Sera monath (Dry month) was the name the Anglo-Saxons gave to the month. (1)

At different times during June there are ceremonies called ‘Well dressing’. Springs and wells of fresh water that come from the underground streams have always seem to be magical things, so some wells are honoured with decorations. The decorations consist of branches of greenery and amazingly beautiful pictures made of flower petals and moss. Nettle Eating Contest (Marsham, Dorset) held as part of a charity beer festival at the Bottle Inn in the village of Marshwood near Crewkerne, the event attracts entrants from around the world. Challengers attempt to out eat the current champion nettle-eater. (See appendix No. 1)

July is one of the hottest months of the year. It is nearly the end of the school year and summer holidays are near. July is the seventh month of the year according to the Gregorian calendar. It was the fifth month in the early calendar of the ancient Romans. The Romans called the month Quintilius, which means fifth. A Roman Senate renamed the month to Julius (July) in honour of Julius Caesar, who was born on 12 July. The Anglo-Saxon names for the month included Heymonath or Maed monath, referring respectively to haymaking and the flowering of meadows. (1)

The census of swans takes place annually during July on the River Thames in a ceremony known as Swan Upping. Swans are counted and marked on a 70 mile, five day journey up the River Thames. World Toe-Wrestling Championships held at the Bentley Bridge Inn in Derbyshire every July. (See appendix No. 1)

August, the eighth month of the year and the sixth month of the Roman calendar. The Romans called the month Sextilis, which means sixth. Eight years before Jesus was born the name of the month was changed to Augustus in honour of the Roman Emperor Augustus Cæsar, because many of the important events in his life happened around that time of year. The Anglo-Saxons called it Weed monath, which means Weed month, because it is the month when weeds and other plants grow most rapidly. August is the busiest time for tourism, as it falls in the main school holiday of the year, the summer holidays, which lasts for six weeks for state run schools. (1)
1st August is **Lammas Day**, and was Thanksgiving time (Harvest time) in Britain. The name comes from an Anglo-Saxon word *Hlafmaesse* which means *Loaf Mass*. The festival of Lammas marks the beginning of the harvest, when people go to church to give thanks for the first corn to be cut. This celebration predates our Christian harvest festival. On Lammas Day farmers made loaves of bread from the new wheat crop and gave them to their local church. They were then used as the Communion bread during a special mass thanking God for the harvest. The custom ended when Henry VIII broke away from the Catholic Church, and nowadays we have harvest festivals at the end of the season. Michaelmas Day (September 29) is traditionally the last day of the harvest season. Lammas Day used to be a time for foretelling marriages and trying out partners. Two young people would agree to a "trial marriage" lasting the period of the fair (usually 11 days) to see whether they were really suited for wedlock. At the end of the fair, if they didn't get on, the couple could part. Lammas was also the time for farmers to give their farm workers a present of a pair of gloves. In Exeter, a large white glove was put on the end of a long pole which was decorated with flowers and held on high to let people know that the merriment of Lammas Fair was beginning. *(See appendix No. 1)*

**Bog Snorkelling Championships (Waen Rhydd peat bog)** near Llanwrtyd Wells in mid Wales The aim is to swim two lengths of the 60-yard Waen Rhydd peat bog with flippers and snorkel in the fastest time. There are different categories including juniors, fancy dress, women's and men's. (3)

Weather-lore, beliefs and sayings about June, July and August: ‘‘A calm June puts the farmer in tune. June damp and warm, does the farmer no harm. It is claimed that summer doesn't start until the elder is in flower. *If the first of July it be rainy weather, it will rain more or less for four weeks together. Dry August and warm doth harvest no harm. If the first week of August be warm, the winter will be white and long.’’ (5)
3. British traditions and customs in September, October, November

The name **September** comes from the old Roman word 'septem', which means seven, because in the Roman calendar it was the seventh month. The Anglo-Saxons called it Gerst monath (Barley month), because it was their time when they harvested barley to be made into their favourite drink - barley brew. They also called it Haefest monath, or Harvest month. The Romans believed that the month of September was looked after by the god, Vulcan. As the god of the fire and forge they therefore expected September to be associated with fires, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. September is the start of the school year. Students return to school after the six week summer holiday. (1)

First Sunday - **Pearly King Harvest Festival**. Dating from the 19th century, the Pearly Kings & Queens are a much-loved Cockney tradition. It started when a young boy covered a suit with pearly buttons to attract attention and to raise money for the poor at charity events and fairs. Other boroughs were so impressed that they got their own Pearly King or Queen. The tradition continues to thrive today and Pearly Kings and Queens can be seen in their full spectacle at the annual Pearly Kings and Queens Harvest Festival. The annual Harvest Festival Service at the church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields offers a spectacular display of historical London in all its glory. (See appendix No. 1)

On the first Monday after September 4th, in a town called Abbots Bromley in Staffordshire, a very picturesque custom takes place. It is called the **Horn Dance**. Six men hold masks on sticks which have long reindeer horns attached to them. There are two teams of three men each. One team’s reindeer horns are painted white - the other's are blue. Each team dances towards the other as if to fight, then they go back, then advance as if to lock horns, and then go back again. After a while they pass each other straight over the the other side and they start again. There are other people in attendance dancing as well - a hobby horse, someone dresses as Made Marion, a boy with a bow and arrow, a triangle player, a musician and a Fool. (See appendix No. 1)

*The World Gurning Championships* are held at the Egremont Crab Fair in the Lake District in a tradition dating back to 1267. To gurn has many meanings but one of them is to 'distort the face' and making faces is just what this competition is - to see who can make the most awful face.

**Michaelmas Day** is the feast of Saint Michael the Archangel, celebrated on 29 September. St. Michael is the patron saint of the sea and maritime lands, of ships and boatmen, of horses and horsemen. He was the Angel who hurled Lucifer (the devil) down from Heaven for his treachery. Michaelmas Day is traditionally the last day of the harvest season. (See appendix No. 1)
In the old Roman calendars **October** was the eighth month of the year and got its name from the word 'Octo' meaning eight. The Saxons called it **Wyn Monath** because it was the season of wine making. (1)

*Lost Traveller Story.* In Hampshire, in the eighteenth century, a Mr William Davis was riding home when a heavy fog surrounded him, and in no time at all he found that he had lost his way. Suddenly, he heard the bells from his church start to ring, so he followed the sound and arrived safely home. Later on he worked out that he must have been only a few yards away from chalk pits, where the ground had been dug deeply. Had he gone any further, he would have been killed. When Mr Davis died in 1754, he left some money in his will. The money was to pay the bellringers to ring the church bells at 6:30 a.m. and 7 p.m. on 7th October every year, to help travellers find their direction should they get lost on the same night he had been lost. *(See appendix No. 1)*

After the calendar reform of 1752, some activities traditionally associated with **Michaelmas Day** (29 September) moved forward eleven days to 10 October, which is sometimes called 'Old Michaelmas Day'. **Mop Fairs or Hiring Fairs took place** on an around Michaelmas Day. Michaelmas used to be the time for 'Mop' or Hiring Fairs. Servants and farm labourers would work from October to October and then go to the centre of the village or town to hire themselves out again for the next year. People looking for work would dress in their best clothes, and to let people know what work they wanted, they used to wear or carry some sign of their work. Maids, looking for work, would carry a small mop (that's where we get the name Mop Fairs from), a shepherd had wool, a gardener had flowers and so on. The custom remains today in some towns and villages around the country. Several towns in Warwickshire enjoy the spectacle and the fun from the holding of the annual mop fair. *(See appendix No. 1)*

**Punky Night** falls on the last Thursday in October and is a Somerset tradition. Some time in the Middle Ages, all the men of Hinto St George went off to a fair. When they failed to return that evening, the women went looking for them by the light of **punkies**. Punky is another name for a pumpkin which has been hollowed out and has a candle standing inside it. Traditionally on this night, children in the South of England would carve their ‘Punkies’, (pumpkins) into Jack O'Lanterns. Once carved the children would go out in groups and march through the streets, singing traditional ‘punky’ songs, calling in at friendly houses and competing for best lantern with rival groups they meet. The streets would be lit with the light of the Punkies. Nowadays, on Punky Night in Hinton St George, Somerset, local children join a procession through the village streets, swinging
their homemade lanterns and going house to house, singing traditional ‘punky’ songs and sometimes getting a few pennies at the front door. *(See appendix No. 1)*

The name **November** comes from the Roman word 'novem' meaning nine, because it was the ninth month in their Roman calendar. Few people find November pleasant. The Anglo-Saxons called November *'Wind monath'*, because it was the time when the cold winds began to blow. They also called it *'Blod monath'* , because it was the time when cattle were slaughtered for winter food. The poet T.S. Elliot called it *'Sombre November'*. (1)

The first week of November has always been a time of festivals and celebrations marking the end of the harvest and beginning of Winter. Traditions and festivals in November include All Saints Day, All Souls Day, Mischief Night, Bonfire Night, Rememberence Day and Stir Up Sunday. *Bonfire Night* is the most widespread and flourishing of all British customs. The day was declared a holiday by decree of Parliament after Parliament was saved from being blown up by Guy Fawkes in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Until 1859, all parish churches were required to hold services this day. Unlike today, celebrations were heard throughout the day, with bells ringing, cannons firing and beer flowing. Today, as in for the last 400 years, effigies of the pope and now more often Guy Fawkes or other 'hated' figures, are burned on top of large bonfires. As the bonfires burn fireworks are let off in wonderful and spectacular displays. Just as in 1605, a new session of Parliament in London is still opened by the reigning monarch at the beginning of November. If there has been a general election in the same year, the opening of Parliament is in May. (2) *(See appendix No. 1)*

*Weather-lore, beliefs and sayings about autumn:* ‘*Rain in October means wind in December. When birds and badgers are fat in October, expect a cold winter. Wind north-west at Martinmas, severe winter to come.*’ (5)
4. Traditional British customs and superstitions in winter

**December** used to be the tenth month of the Roman year, and it gets its name from the word 'decem', which means ten. The Anglo-Saxons called it *Winter monath*, or *Yule monath* because of the custom of burning the yule log around this time. After many Anglo-Saxons became Christians they called it *Heligh monath* or holy month, because Christmas, the birth of Jesus, is celebrated in December. In the northern hemisphere December marks the beginning of winter, and it is the time of rain, wind and snow. (1)

*Mummers' Plays* are one of the oldest surviving features of the traditional English Christmas (24th December). Mumming in England goes back for over a thousand years. Mumming is best described as early pantomime. The plays are based loosely on the legend of St. George and the dragon. The plays are intended to show the struggle between good and evil. *(See appendix No. 1)*

In Britain, **Boxing Day** is usually celebrated on the following day after Christmas Day, which is 26 December. However, strictly speaking, Boxing Day is the first weekday after Christmas. Like Christmas Day, Boxing Day is a public holiday. This means it is typically a non-working day in the whole of Britain. When Boxing Day falls on a Saturday or Sunday the following Monday is the public holiday. *(See appendix No. 1)*

The beginning of the new year and the time to make New Year resolutions. **January** was established as the first month of the year by the Roman Calendar. It was named after the god Janus (Latin word for door). Janus has two faces which allowed him to look both backwards into the old year and forwards into the new one at the same time. He was the 'spirit of the opening'. In the very earliest Roman calendars there were no months of January or February at all. The ancient Roman calendar had only ten months and the new year started the year on 1 March. To the Romans, ten was a very important number. Even when January (or Januarius as the Romans called it) was added, the New Year continued to start in March. It remained so in England and her colonies until about 200 years ago. The Anglo-Saxons called the first month *Wolf monath* because wolves came into the villages in winter in search of food. (1)

New Year Superstition. The 1st of January was a highly significant day in medieval superstitions regarding prosperity, or lack of it, in the year ahead. A flat cake was put on one of the horns of a cow in every farmyard. The farmer and his workers would then sing a song and dance around the cow until the cake was thrown to the ground. If it fell in front of the cow that signified good luck; to fall behind indicated the opposite. It was an old Saxon belief that 2nd January was one...
of the unluckiest days of the whole year. Those unfortunate enough to be born on this day could expect to die an unpleasant death. (5)

The evening of the fifth of January, preceding Twelfth Day, the eve of the Epiphany, formerly the last day of the Christmas festivities and observed as a time of merrymaking. Twelfth Night is an annual seasonal celebration held on the Bankside by Shakespeare's Globe, in London. It is a celebration of the New Year, mixing ancient Midwinter seasonal customs with contemporary festivity. It is free, accessible to all and happens whatever the weather. Plough Monday is the traditional start of the English agricultural year. While local practices may vary, Plough Monday is generally the first Monday after Twelfth Day Epiphany, 6 January. References to Plough Monday date back to the late 15th century. The day before Plough Monday is sometimes referred to as Plough Sunday. Straw Bear Festival (Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire) takes place at weekend near Plough Monday. The Whittlesea Straw Bear is maintaining the folklore tradition of parading a man dressed in straw around the streets near to Plough Monday. Molly Dancers and Morris Dancers dance in the streets Haxey Hood is a traditional event throughout the civil parish of Haxey that focuses on a contest at the village of Haxey in North Lincolnshire, England, on the afternoon of 6 January, the Twelfth Day of Christmas (though if this falls on a Sunday, it is held on 5 January). It is a kind of large rugby football scrum, called the "sway", which pushes a leather tube, called the "hood", to 1 of 4 pubs, where it remains until the following year's game. (See appendix No. 1)

February, along with January, was introduced onto the Roman calendar by Numa Pompilious when the calendar was extended from ten to twelve. The word February comes from the word 'februa' - which means cleansing or purification, and reflects the rituals undertaken before Spring. (1)

Imbolc Fire Festival. Huddersfield. Imbolc is based on a 2000 year old Celtic festival, marking the first signs of spring. It features a procession, fire 'circus' drama and music. Starts at Marsden Station. Lantern & torch parade with fire-jugglers, antler-wearing drummers, Celtic characters, fire druids, a 12ft Jack Frost and spring's Green Man. Shrove Tuesday marks forty days before Easter. The forty days are supposed to be a time of quietness and fasting. Shrove Tuesday (sometimes called Mischief Day) was the last day before Lent, so it was the last day for fun and food for a long time. A special game of football is played in February. It is played differently from the game our country is well known for. This game of football has no rules and is played on Shrove Tuesday. In some villages and towns traffic would be stopped and all the men would come out into the street at a set time. The church bell would ring and a football would be thrown into the crowd and the biggest ever football game was played. This game is still played in some places in
England. Skipping is also a traditional Shrove Tuesday game. Pancake races are held all over England on or near Shrove Tuesday. The object of the race is to get to the finishing line first whilst flipping a pancake in a frying pan a pre-decided number of times. (3) (See appendix No. 1)

It is said that if the weather is fine and frosty at the close of January and the beginning of February, there is more winter ahead than behind. When the cat lies in the sun in February, she will creep behind the stove in March. (5)
Conclusions

1. The United Kingdom’s cultural traditions are reflective of the country’s heterogeneity and its central importance in world affairs over the past several centuries. Each constituent part of the United Kingdom - England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - maintains its own unique customs, traditions and festivals.

2. Most of the parts of Britain have an ancient custom or traditional festival at some time during the year, many have more than one.

3. Brits are very superstitious. There are special superstitions about every month of the year.

4. Some of British traditions are unusual, weird, but only for outsiders. To anyone who grew up in Great Britain - particularly in a small village in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland - there is nothing at all strange.

5. These quirky customs and pastimes with their roots in customs dating back to the middle ages are the last bastions of English eccentricity and are often just a bit dangerous, too, e.g. third-degree burns, dropping wife on her head or knocked out with a wellington boot, but it is all part of the fun.

6. Not all of them are ancient traditions, some, such as Maypole dancing, are not unique to the UK, but all have become regular features in British cultural landscape.
Ending

The main benefit for the research author is getting new knowledge of British culture and history. Equally important advantage is information about British character features, such as eccentricity, sense of humor. Brits respect their history, culture and tradition very much - it is a manner that can be learned from them of any world nation.

There are some disadvantages of the research work. Unfortunately there is not enough information in English about British culture and traditions in Kuldīgas’ main library. It was offered only one book and a couple of magazines that came out before year 2000. It was not possible to visit other libraries for research author. So the author together with her research head, teacher of English Inese Reisa decided to use electronic reference sources.
The bibliography and list of reference sources


Appendix Nr.1 Calendar of unusual customs and traditions in Great Britain