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Hogmanay Photos



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Hogmanay

Pronounced hog-muh-NAY is the Scots word for the last day of the year and is synonymous with the celebration of the New Year in the Scottish manner. Its official date is 31 December (Old Year's Night). However this is normally only the start of a celebration which lasts through the night until the morning of **Ne'erday** (1 January).

The roots of Hogmanay perhaps reach back to the pagan celebration of the winter solstice among the Norse, as well as incorporating customs from the Gaelic New Year's celebration of Samhain. In Europe, winter solstice evolved into the ancient celebration of Saturnalia, a great Roman winter festival, where people celebrated completely free of restraint and inhibition. The Vikings celebrated Yule, which later contributed to the Twelve Days of Christmas, or the "Daft Days" as they were sometimes called in Scotland. The winter festival went underground with the Protestant Reformation and ensuing years, but re-emerged near the end of the 17th century.

There are many customs, both national and local, associated with Hogmanay. The most widespread national custom is the practice of *first-footing* which starts immediately after midnight. This involves being the first person to cross the threshold of a friend or neighbor and often involves the giving of symbolic gifts such as salt (less common today), coal, shortbread, whisky, and black bun (a fruit pudding) intended to bring different kinds of luck to the householder. Food and drink (as the gifts, and often Flies cemetery) are then given to the guests. This may go on throughout the early hours of the morning and well into the next day (although modern days see people visiting houses until the 3 January). The first-foot is supposed to set the luck for the rest of the year, so it is important that a suitable person does the job. A tall, handsome, and dark-haired man bearing a gift is strongly preferred. According to popular folklore, a man with dark hair was welcomed because he was assumed to be a fellow Scotsman; a blond or red-haired stranger was assumed to be an unwelcome Norseman.

An example of a local Hogmanay custom is the fireball swinging that takes place in Stonehaven, Kincardineshire in north-east Scotland. This involves local people making up *balls* of chicken wire and tar, paper, and other flammable material up to a diameter of 61 cm. Each ball has 2 m of wire, chain or nonflammable rope attached. The balls are then each assigned to a swinger, who swings the ball round and round their head and body by the rope while walking through the streets of Stonehaven from the harbor to the Sheriff court and back. At the end of the ceremony any fireballs that are still burning are cast into the harbor. Many people enjoy this display, which is more impressive in the dark than it would be during the day. As a result large crowds flock to the town to see it.

Another example of a pagan fire festival is The Burning of the Clavie that takes place in the town of Burghead in Moray. The Hogmanay custom of singing Auld Lang Syne has become common in many countries. Auld Lang Syne is a traditional poem reinterpreted by Robert Burns, which was later set to music. Outside Scotland, a common mistake is to sing "For the Sake of Old Lang Zine" instead of "For auld lang syne".

An old custom in the Highlands, which has survived to a small extent and seen some degree of revival, is to celebrate Hogmanay with the *saining* (protecting, blessing) of the household and livestock. This was done early on New Year's morning with the smoke of burning juniper, and by drinking and then sprinkling "magic water" from "a dead and living ford" around the house ("a dead and living ford" refers to a river ford which is routinely crossed by both the living and the dead). After the sprinkling of the water in every room, on the beds and all the inhabitants, the house was sealed up tight and the burning juniper carried through the house and byre. The smoke was allowed to thoroughly fumigate the buildings until it caused sneezing and coughing among the inhabitants. Then all the doors and windows were flung open to let in the cold, fresh air of the New Year. The woman of the house then administered "a restorative" from the whisky bottle, and the household sat down to their New Year breakfast.

Until next month...

Sláinte