



History Group

At the meeting of the history group on Tuesday, 15th November 14 members and two visitors attended. Bob Massey came to speak to us about the historical origins of Halloween traditions. He took us on a journey back to Celtic times when the festival of Samhain (*sow in*) was celebrated to mark the end of the summer and the harvests. It is easy to understand that in these early times when folks relied entirely on the natural world for survival the prospect of a harsh winter ahead brought with it dread. Fewer hours daylight and mists prompted people to believe this was a time associated with death and otherworldly spirits walking the earth. As one time of year passed into another huge bonfires were built, and sacrifices made to pray for the return of the sun and good harvests to come. Hollowed out turnips (replaced by the pumpkins today) with carved faces and a candle inside and animal skin costumes were used to ward off any evil that may harm the group's survival. Offerings of food were left for the spirits of ancestors who were believed to return to walk the earth at this time.

Later the Roman festival of Feralia, which marked the passing of the dead, was incorporated into celebrations along with the Roman festival of Pomona, the celebration of the fruit harvest symbolised by the apple – and hence the tradition of apple bobbing.

By the 9th Century Christianity was established in the UK. Many of these pagan customs were Christianised by rededicating them to a Christian saint or belief. In 1000AD the church dedicated November 2nd as All Soul's Day or All Hallows, a day to honour the dead and this was celebrated with bonfires and parades, like the pagan Samhain. It was from 'Hallows', meaning 'souls, we have today's name of Halloween – 'een' meaning eve. Distributing soul cakes replaced the ancient practice of leaving food out for ancestral spirits. According to Roman Catholic belief the souls of the dead went to purgatory before entering heaven or hell; they did not return to roam the earth. The ghosts must therefore be evil spirits and demons.

Ghost stories proliferated in Victorian times with the popularity of Gothic novels and drawing room seances. Candlelight made Victorian homes very atmospheric for telling ghost stories as they flickered and cast odd shadows on the walls. The advent of gas lighting was often responsible for hallucinations of ghosts. Halloween became a national holiday in the USA in the late 1800s, many of the traditions taken there by immigrants from Ireland and other parts of Europe. Americans spend \$6 billion a year on Halloween. It is gaining popularity again in this country as it becomes more commercialised and scary Halloween movies have become box office hits.

We hope Bob will return next year to tell us about Bonfire Night customs.

The history group does not have a meeting planned in December as it would fall very close to Christmas.

On January 17th we meet again at 10am St Theresa's Church Hall when Dennis Hill will be joining us again to speak about Newstead Abbey and its owners. Hope to see you there. Merry Christmas to you all and wishing you a very happy new year.

Barbara, Sue and Tamar