

Halloween – Then and Now
It wasn't always about trick-or-treating



I always thought that the festival of Halloween originated in America. A little research disproved that. From what I can gather, it all began in Britain sometime between 600-800 AD when the Celts figured they needed to round off the last harvest with a celebration prior to the onset of winter. Apart from deciding it was propitious to mark the change of seasons they, being heavily into the supernatural, also believed it to be a time of year when the dead were able to revisit the land of the living. Whether or not village folk welcomed the ghosts is anyone's guess, but in those days of often going without, they didn't need much of an excuse to have a party and probably figured if the spooky gatecrashers had a good time they'd be less likely to wreck the joint before leaving.

Some 500 years later, and ever on the lookout for anything quirky that might lighten up an otherwise austere religion, the Christians borrowed it. They couldn't, of course, include an entire pagan ritual as a stand-alone without adaptation, so they worked the fancy bits into one of their own. Being at the same the time of year, All Hallows Evening was the ideal candidate. Not satisfied with pinching a bit of someone else's religion, they customised it to suit and even hacked the name around. The Scots had already abbreviated "evening" to "even", which then became "e'en". Scrub the "All" and we get Hallowe'en. Then it's only a matter of losing the apostrophe for the longer-lasting Halloween.

In the early days, it was imperative to keep farms and people safe through the harsh winter months, so it wouldn't hurt to enlist the wiles of a few dead people. One way to keep them onside was with gifts of food and drink when they came a-calling. Trick-or-treating was most likely derived from this practice, but it took a while to evolve into the modern-day version. In the 1500's, people would dress up to mimic the spirits and swan around town singing and spouting poetry in the hopes of being given food by appreciative residents. Like now, they also had kids able to twist adult ideals to suit their own agenda. Their verses were less-than-Christian and the penalty they promised for any home that refused to come up with satisfactory gifts was likely to be unfortunate indeed.

Towards the end of the 16th century, it was believed that the dead who popped up round the end of October could be taking the chance to give one last serve to their enemies before going on to the next world. Wearing disguises was a way to avoid being spotted by some corpse you'd done the dirty on in its former life. As additional protection against avenging evil spirits, jack-o'-lanterns were made from pumpkins and mangel wurzels. Being illuminated from inside by a candle made the gruesome faces glow even more fearfully, and they also helped prevent the carrier suffering embarrassing pratfalls in the dark streets.

1400 years isn't a bad run for any institution, but it's not really surprising considering the sinister connotations. People the world over love being scared out of their wits; while others enjoy doing the scaring. Admittedly, no-one really believes that a bunch of short people in weird costumes are the walking dead; but who would take the chance on being wrong? Whatever they might be, best to hand over a bag of candy and sleep well that night.

Happy Halloween

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