

April Fools' Day

The first of April is regarded around the world as the day when it's okay to play tricks on others. How the custom actually originated has apparently foxed many a researcher, but they seem to agree on one point: it had something to do with The New Year. No, I'm not joking.

Apparently, in medieval times the celebrations of the coming New Year began during the last week of March and finished on the first day of April. Europeans accepted this until Pope Gregory XIII decided to ditch predecessor Julian's calendar and gave the French a new one of his own. This meant that, in 1582, January 1st then became the start of the new New Year; and it set the proverbial cat among the peasants.

The problem came with communication, or the lack of it. Seeing as news of the new New Year took time to get out to the remoter regions, he who had no news only knew old News. Even when it finally did, die-hard old New Year practitioners refused to recognise the new New Year and insisted on sticking with the New they knew best. There were also plenty of others, probably peasants and nobles alike, who either didn't have a clue what day of the week it was, never mind the actual date, so they too carried on in ignorance. The wise and newly educated, however, took this as a sign of blatant stupidity and played jokes and hoaxes on these April Fools.

Despite the Gregorian calendar not being adopted in England until 1752, the Brits had already been playing April Fool pranks on each other since 1700. So, perhaps the tradition had more to do with the British sense of humour than any royal decree. North of the border, and not wishing to be outdone by mere Sassenachs, the Scots had their own version - "hunting the gowk," a word for the cuckoo and also symbolising a fool (who presumably flew over that bird's nest). For them, April Fools' Day was followed by Tailie Day, a time for pinning fake tails or "kick me" signs on the kilts of the unsuspecting - a definite bummer for the unfortunate recipient!

The modern interpretation can be elaborate, and some go to extreme lengths when playing hoaxes and practical jokes. I daresay even government departments are not immune; although sending a gullible employee off to deliver a fake or nonsensical memo to a self-important politician would be like trying to catch fish in an empty bucket.

Silly or not, the tradition goes on; and if you are on the receiving end and don't want to be thought a party-pooper, take it on the chin (or wherever else they stick it). Then watch the clock: for after midday, anyone playing a trick is considered an April Fool themselves. And if nothing at all happens to you, either think yourself lucky, or start wondering if the prank is too subtle for even a fool to figure out...

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