

Imbolc festival: A short history of the Gaelic celebration dating back to 10,200 BC

Excerpts from: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/imbolc-festival-short-history-gaelic-celebration-dating-back-10200-bc-1485913>

Imbolc, or Saint Brigid's Day, is one of the oldest celebrations marking the beginning of spring, and has a rich history in Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man.

It was held on or near February 1st, to observe the midpoint between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox. Its name means "in the belly," and its celebration was timed to coincide with the start of the ewes' lactation and lambing.

A celebration of hearth and home, and the sign of longer days to come, traditional customs included hosting special feasts, visiting holy wells and carrying out divination, both of the weather and of one's future. The ancients had a tradition of watching to see if serpents or badgers emerged from their winter dens - which is thought to be a harbinger of the American tradition, Groundhog Day.

On Imbolc, the lighting of bonfires celebrated the increasing power of the sun over the coming months. For the Christian calendar, the holiday was reformed and renamed Candlemas - where candles are lit to remember the "purification of the Virgin Mary".

It was also a day to honor the Goddess Brigid. Brigid is considered the patroness of poetry, metal-smithing, healing and midwifery, arts and crafts, cattle and other livestock, sacred wells, serpents, and the arrival of early spring. She is worshipped as a fire goddess, who in her 3 manifestations represents the maiden, matron and crone.

She is also the goddess of all things perceived to be of relatively high dimensions such as high-rising flames, highlands, hill-forts and upland areas; and of activities and states conceived as psychologically lofty and elevated, such as wisdom, excellence, perfection, high intelligence, poetic eloquence, craftsmanship, healing ability, druidic knowledge and skill in warfare.

Brigid and Saint Brigid

In the [Middle Ages](#), Christian "monks took the ancient figure of the mother goddess and grafted her name and functions onto her Christian counterpart," [St. Brigid of Kildare](#).^[9]

Both the goddess and saint are associated with holy wells, at Kildare and many other sites in the Celtic lands. Methods of petitioning or honoring Brigid still take place at these holy wells today. These include decorating with flowers, tossing coins, lighting candles, and tying [clouties](#) (blessing cloths) to the trees around the well. <http://www.druidry.org/library/sacred-waters-holy-wells>The Holy Wells of Ireland (Link with more detailed info)

The following is excerpted from:

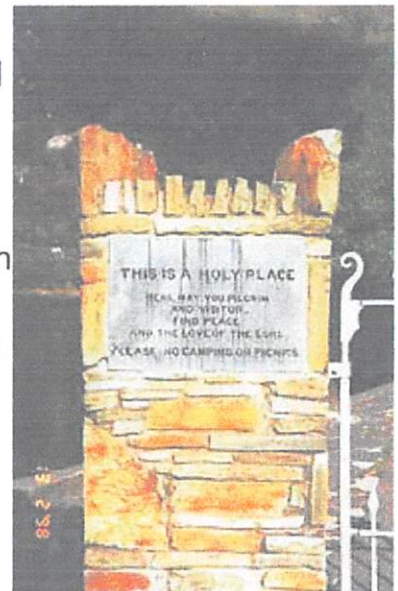
<http://www.druidry.org/library/sacred-waters-holy-wells>The Holy Wells of Ireland (Link with more detailed info)

In Irish myth, wells and springs are depicted as originating in the Otherworld - that parallel dimension whose inhabitants have the power to control the natural forces of this world. From sources in the Otherworld, water flows into our world to fill springs or gush forth as rivers.

It was believed that drinking from or bathing in these holy waters would bestow the power of the Otherworld in the form of poetic inspiration, wisdom, or healing. Supernatural fish, especially salmon or trout, are still said to appear in a well's depths to those seeking omens for the future. The fish motif may derive from a belief that well goddesses could take the form of a fish. Also, salmon were often credited with being bearers of "iomas" - the "light that illumines" - meaning the insight and wisdom that comes from a supernatural encounter.

In pagan Ireland, the wells were visited at special times of the year: Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh and Samhain. These were all special turning-points of the Celtic year when the gates of the Otherworld were opened.

Elements of pre-Christian Celtic religion persist in the configuration of holy well sites and the practices that have been performed for generations. Many sites actually consist of three elements: the well, spring, or other water source; a sacred tree - usually very large and very old; and a hill or standing stone. These features played a part in the prescribed rituals for pilgrims who came to the sites seeking favors. These were called "patterns" and almost always included some sort of circular walk, always done "deiseal" - in the same direction in which the sun travels.



In some places, additional ritual actions may have made use of the site's specific features. For example, many well sites include a large stone that has a depression in it. Those large

well. This practice was thought to drive illness into the cloth that is left behind. As the cloth rotted away, the ailment would disappear as well.

Many Christian churches were constructed near pagan wells, and the early Celtic church used them for baptism until the Roman church replaced them with the font inside the building. A number of old churches contain a crypt or grotto that opens into a subterranean spring. This place - close to earth and water - is the innermost sanctum, the hidden holy center of the sacred enclosure.



Holy wells exist in most counties of Ireland. While many of the old wells have fallen into disrepair, interest in the history and heritage associated with these ancient sites has been revived and there are many people now actively attempting to restore them.