



# New Year Celebrations (The Romans had a word for it...)

Apart from Christmas, Hanukah and Diwali, there are other celebrations around the turn of the year. The Welsh celebrate Calenig, the Scots Hogmanay and the ancient Romans celebrated Saturnalia.

For many, the season ends with twelfth night and, as the decorations come down, the celebrations end and a new year begins....

## Hogmanay

New Year in Scotland is called Hogmanay. It is not entirely clear why. The most likely explanation is that *hogmanay* is a corruption of the Norman French *hoguinané*, which means a New Year's gift. This reflects the fact that Scots children used to run from door to door asking for *hogmanay* – gifts of oat cakes and bread.

It is actually quite appropriate that the name derives from Norman French because the festival is of Norse origin, like *Upphellyar* in Iceland where people dressed as Vikings light enormous bonfires and hold torchlight processions. In Scotland Hogmanay has its own toned-down version of this in the practice of 'first footing'.

### Tall dark man

The belief is that the new year will be lucky if the first foot to cross the threshold is that of a tall, dark man. Traditionally, after the New Year is brought in at midnight on 31 December, a valiant band of tall, dark men goes the rounds of their neighbours 'first footing' them. Valiant, because the men have a lump of coal in one hand and a bottle of whisky in the other. Drams are exchanged at each doorway, so anybody



Brrh! at the turn of the year, Church Lane 2003 Photo Tony Roberts

who first foots more than six or so doesn't usually remember much about it.

## Burns Night Celebrations

By John Dearing

**Robert 'Rabbie' Burns was born in Alloway, Ayrshire in 1759, the son of poor tenant farmers. Despite their poverty he was extremely well read and started writing poetry at the age of 15, mostly on the topics of women and scotch whisky. Ten years later he published his first collection and rapidly the 'Ploughman Poet' became a national celebrity, accepted into Edinburgh literary circles. Leaving farming, he became an excise man, but his first love was writing, creating such masterpieces as "Tam O'Shanter". He died at only 37 from heart disease, probably brought on by the privations of his early years. 10,000 people attended his funeral, but his legacy of more than 400 poems and songs have made him Scotland's most famous poet.**

### Auld Lang Syne

The ritual of celebrating 'Burns Night' on his (presumed) birthday of 25 January was started by close friends a few years after his death, and has remained largely unchanged ever since.

It commences with the Chairman inviting the company to stand to receive the haggis, which is brought in by the chef, led by a piper, to the accompaniment of a slow handclap. Burns' poem *To A Haggis* is recited, the haggis opened and then toasted by all with a glass of whisky. The meal generally commences with Cock-a-leekiesoup, followed by Haggis, Neeps and Tatties and Topsy Laird (sherry trifle).

The formalities commence with a speech by an invited guest on the 'Immortal Memory' of

the poet, commemorating his life and his continuing relevance today. There is, then, a light-hearted address to the ladies present, nominally to thank them for preparing the food, but the opportunity is taken for some humorous asides at their expense. The ladies respond in kind, detailing the foibles of the men present. Again, humour is the keynote.

### Recitations

Recitations of famous Burns poems, such as *To A Mouse* ("Wee, sleekit, cow'rin', tim'rous beastie – O what panic's in thy breastie!") are punctuated by further toasts, in Scotch whisky of course.

The evening culminates with the company standing, linking hands and singing *Auld Lang Syne*.

### Death and rebirth

However, it is not all about getting legless. First footing reflects a pagan death-and-rebirth ritual. As the old year died, all the hearth fires of the clan were extinguished except for that in the holy place. As the new year was borne the priests carried fire – the coal, and sustenance – the whisky, to each hearth. It is no coincidence that *whisky* is a corruption of the Gaelic *uisge beatha* or *water of life*. There is more to Hogmanay than just singing *Auld Lang Syne*.

## Saturnalia

The modern Italians don't have much in the way of mid-winter festivals – *Natale*, which is Christmas, and *Anno Nuovo*, which is a bit of a damp squib. Which is strange, given that their ancestors in ancient Rome had the great granddaddy of all mid-winter binges: Saturnalia.

It was the festival of the god Saturn. It started on 17 or 19 December and lasted for up to seven days. The uncertainty as to dates may have something to do with the fact that at the end of the festival the participants had only a hazy recollection of it.

Saturn was basically the god of gloom. He ate his own children, which gives you some idea. His festival however was a total inversion of his nature and of almost everything else. Rome was a society based on slavery. But during Saturnalia slaves were masters and their masters slaves. Slaves wore the toga of a free Roman citizen and their masters wore the "pilleus"

– a felt bonnet – of slaves. Masters waited on slaves at table and both classes exchanged gifts.

Given that Rome was slavery based, Saturnalia is a puzzle. The slaves were not always happy. There were frequent slave rebellions, the biggest being that of Spartacus in AD71. So letting the slaves play master must mean either that Rome was a very self-confident society or that its citizens felt that letting off steam once a year might keep the slaves quiet. For all the booze and merrymaking, there was probably quite a lot of nail-biting done during Saturnalia.

## Epiphany

**The feast of the Epiphany, or as it is also known, the Manifestation of Christ of the Gentiles, is observed on 6 January. It celebrates the visit of the Magi, or the Three Wise Men, to the infant Jesus. The gifts they present symbolize significant events that take place in the life of Christ. In churches where a Christmas crib is erected, the figures of the shepherds are removed and replaced by those of the Three Kings.**

This festival in the Christian Church also marks the last day of Christmas as well as being an important celebration in its own right. It is secularly known as Twelfth Night.

One of the many traditions that still take place on 6

January is the Church service held at Saint James' Palace in London where members of the Royal household (originally the reigning monarchy) present the Chapel Royal with gold, frankincense, and myrrh in remembrance of the first Epiphany.

## Twelfth Night

By Ann Bronkhorst

The other name for Epiphany means more to people in our largely secular society. Straight after Twelfth Night we take down the decorations and put the sad moulting tree outside. Life returns to normal. This is the dull modern version of Twelfth Night but in past centuries it was a riotous time of tricks, masquerades and feasting.

### Lorde of Misserule

In 1585 Philip Stubbs described 'the wilde heades of the parissh' choosing 'a grand Capitaine of mischeef' who led a crowd of revellers with 'hobbie horses, dragons, baudie pipers and thunderynge drummers'. Many households also chose their own Lords of Misrule – often a child or a servant, creating a topsy-turvy world.

### The Twelfth Cake

A tradition, still observed in many European countries, was the huge Twelfth Cake. If you got a slice containing a bean or a pea you were king or queen for the day. The custom survives at London's Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, thanks to a stage-struck pastrycook. In 1794 Robert Baddeley, who'd quit cookery for the glamour of acting with

David Garrick, died leaving a bequest of money for a giant cake (with wine or punch) to be shared by the cast each Twelfth Night. This year it's thought that the cake will look like an ocean liner, complimenting the present production.

### A silly play?

There's another connection between theatre and this festive time of year: Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night' was first performed before Queen Elizabeth on 5 January 1601. Its plot is full of pretences and disorderly games yet Pepys who watched it on 6 January 1663 thought it 'a silly play and not related at all to the name or day'.

So on 6 January as we dismantle the Christmas decorations we could plan a livelier Twelfth Night next year with



Shakespeare - what was the connection?

Bean kings and queens, masquerades and an East Finchley Lord of Misrule prancing down the High Road with pipers and drummers.