

St Brigid's Day Customs and Traditions.

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February 1st marks Lá Fhéile Bríde or St Brigid's Day. There are many traditions and customs associated with this feast-day, some of which are highlighted below.

Spring and protecting the farm and home .

St Brigid promised fine weather from her feast day onwards. Spring, the season of hope and new life, brought better weather, longer days. With it came new life on the farm and new growth on the land. On St Brigid's Eve, a festive meal of potatoes and butter was eaten and all the family made special crosses in honour of the saint. They sought St. Brigid's protection for the fertility of the household, farm and land and to safeguard them from illness and disease.

In parts of Connacht, people would carry a large straw belt (**a Crios Bríde**) through which the inhabitants passed while saying a prayer to St Brigid, in the hope of gaining the saint's protection from illness during the coming year. Throughout Ireland, there are many holy wells dedicated to St Brigid and it was traditional to visit these either the evening before or on her feast day. Water obtained at this time, was believed to be particularly blessed.

Sometimes a piece of cloth or ribbon (**Brat Bríde** or Ribín Bríde) was left outside on the windowsill or near the door for the night. It was believed it would be touched by St. Brigid on her travels and thus be endowed with the power to ward off illness and pain in both humans and animals. For the coming year, it was kept safely and used for healing or incorporated into clothing so as to offer protection to the wearer. In many of parts of Ireland '**Biddy Boys**' (or girls) went from house to house with 'Biddy', an effigy of the saint, often a straw doll, collecting money and food for a party in her honour while reciting a rhyme like this one:

Here is Brigid dressed in white.

Give her a penny for this dark night.

She is deaf, she is dumb,

For God's sake, give her some.

St Brigid's Crosses.

The St Brigid's Cross, pinned up above the front door or in the kitchen, is still a familiar feature in many Irish homes. The making of crosses - in a variety of styles - biddy-boys, brídeoga and visiting holy wells are all traditionally associated with the celebration of the feast of St. Brigid.

The most recognisable cross is the four-armed St Brigid's Cross, popularised by its use as an emblem for RTÉ television since it started broadcasting in 1961. This style was favoured in the north of Ireland. Regional styles and variety existed throughout Ireland and the Irish Folklife Collection, located in the National Museum of Ireland - Country Life has an example of most of these.

Although straw, rushes and reeds were most common, grass, hay, wood, goose quills, wire and fabric were also used to form crosses. Whatever material was used, it was sprinkled with holy water before-hand and a prayer to welcome the saint into the home was often recited. Traditional designs were diamond, interlaced or wheel-shaped and could have two, three or four arms. In some areas of the west coast, two strips of wood were tied together to form a simple cross.

Crosses were hung up in homes and animal sheds, and then leftover straw was often sprinkled on the crops or incorporated into spencels or bedding for animals so as to invoke the saint's blessing as she passed through the country on the eve of her feast day. It was common to give a St Brigid's Cross as a gift to those with a new home, and to newlyweds, so as offer protection and to wish the couple well in starting a family.

Beannachtaí na Féile Bríde oraibh go léir!

Article by Clodagh Doyle, Curator, Irish Folklife Division