

'Whipping the herring': how Easter used to be celebrated in Ireland.

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Analysis: there were many traditions associated with Easter in Ireland, from a 'black fast' on Good Friday to 'cake dances' on Easter Sunday.

For some in modern Ireland, Easter is about chocolate eggs and a long weekend. After years of being closed on the day, even the pubs are now open on Good Friday. It's all a big contrast to how it was celebrated by people, mainly as a religious festival marked with some unusual festivities and customs.

It commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ and is a major event in the Christian calendar and marks the end of the Lenten season of fasting. The Sunday that came a week before Easter Sunday was known as **Palm Sunday** where 'palm' was blessed in the church and taken home. Blessed palm could be any green plant such as conifer, spruce or yew. The custom continues today, but usually with branches of *Leylandii*, its abundance and flatness make it perfect for slipping behind statues or pictures in the home. In the past, slips of blessed palm were worn by men in their lapels. It was also hung in barns to protect livestock and branches of it were used as a holy water sprinkler in the home. Palm Sunday marked the beginning of Holy Week, and the leadup to Easter marked a time for spring cleaning the home.

Good Friday was a day of suffering for Christ, so it was a day of prayer and fasting for Catholics to mournfully reflect on this. Good Friday meant a so-called black fast, meaning that nothing but water was taken. No work was to be done (although the day was considered a good one on which to plant potatoes and grain). No blood was to be shed, so there was no slaughter of animals, and no fishing boats were to be launched. No wood was to be burned, or nails driven through wood, in solidarity with Christ's suffering on the cross. Some women hung their hair loose as if in mourning and some people went barefoot all day. Men trimmed their hair and fingernails: doing this on Good Friday was thought to prevent headache for the year ahead. Some believed that hair cut during Lent would never grow again. Cold and wet weather was expected, yet many visited

graveyards, shrines and holy wells despite this to pray. Water from holy wells on Good Friday was considered especially curative. Nothing important was to be started on a Good Friday, so it was a quiet day, punctuated by church services. Silence was observed from noon to 3pm when devotions began at the church. At this time, the sky was expected to darken in sympathy with the suffering of Christ.

On **Holy Saturday**, holy water was blessed in the church. People took containers of this 'Easter water' home and it was used to bless the house and farm. At this time, Lent was nearly over, and butchers in some urban areas around the country held symbolic mock funerals for herrings to symbolise it. Herrings had sustained many people during the meat-free Lent but most were quite bored of them by Holy Saturday so butchers were looking forward to an upturn in business. In parts of the country, notably the southern counties and Cork city, they held a procession heralding the final day of Lent known as 'whipping the herring'. A herring tied to a rope was pulled along and whipped to pieces by the crowd.

On **Easter Sunday** morning, many people rose early to see the 'dance of the sun'. It was believed that the sun would 'dance' in the sky at sunrise on Easter Sunday morning. People would gather on a high vantage point to witness the spectacle, but it was advised not to look directly at the sun (as in an eclipse) in case of damage to the eyes. Therefore, people observed the sun reflected in a pan of water. The use and decoration of Easter eggs is customary throughout Europe and Irish traditions are not that different. Not only had eggs connotations with life-power, but there would have been an abstinence from them for Lent so there would be a large glut of them collected to use up. A feast of eggs was enjoyed for breakfast on Easter Sunday. Children added dyes to water to colour them while they boiled. They were painted and decorated and either eaten, displayed or played with. "Easter Houses" were made especially for the day, outdoor makeshift dens constructed by children who, under adult supervision, might light a fire within them to boil their eggs. Easter dinner was second in importance only to the Christmas dinner, and seasonal spring meats such as lamb, veal or kid were customary. Richer farmers distributed meat amongst the poor so that they too might enjoy a festive dinner.

Traditionally, Easter was also a time for wearing new clothes. For women, bonnets became associated with the day, but it was customary for men to wear new outfits too. In response to the finer weather, outings to the countryside took place where people visited landmarks and holy wells. As people gathered, festive bonfires were lit and egg rolling took place.

A 'cake dance' was held outdoors or at a crossroads on Easter Sunday evening, with a large cake as a prize (it's nice to see this custom revived in Leitrim). On **Easter Monday**, fairs took place consisting of the usual trading and games, sports, sideshows, food, music, gambling and occasionally, organised faction fighting. It was considered an unlucky day to sow any kind of seeds. The dark days of Lent were over, and it was time to look toward to late spring and summer.

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