

## Why are bonfires so important...

Bonfires at their most primal level provide warmth and they provide light. In an even more fundamental respect they provide a relief from darkness. Basic human needs that we all naturally search for, in fact need to survive. The huge importance of fire meant bonfires were not only used for warmth and light, to keep away animals and insects, and cooking; they became a focal point for social activity and a rallying point for the religious and spiritual.



Most bonfire traditions have their roots in changing seasons. A bonfire lit to say farewell to one season or to welcome another, or perhaps more accurately, in a gesture to some universal force to ensure that the coming season would be a good one. Pre-history origins of fires easily became subsumed into pagan beliefs and rituals involving symbolic sacrifice or the warding off of evil.



In Ireland the coming of Christianity caused a fundamental shift in religious belief. Gone were the days of the fire worshippers and instead the bonfire took on another significance. Feast days and other religious holidays were celebrated around the bonfire as the whole community joined together to feast and praise God, and as and where Christianity developed in many cases it adopted the existing practises but attributed new meaning to them.



## Bonfire night...

Across the United Kingdom 'Bonfire night' has been celebrated for several centuries. On the 5th November 1605 Guy Fawkes was discovered under the Houses of Parliament. His mission had been to blow it up and kill King James I, the beginning of a counter-Reformation plot in England. The conspirators were betrayed, rounded up and executed; and bonfires were lit immediately to celebrate. It has happened every year since.



Lewes in Sussex is regarded as the 'Bonfire capital of the world'. Each 5<sup>th</sup> of November local bonfire societies mark not just the Gunpowder Plot, but also the burning at the stake of seventeen local Protestants during the reign of Queen Mary. The Lewes celebrations consists of a parade that includes the dragging of burning tar barrels, and the drawing through the streets of large effigies later burnt on the bonfires.

## Lundy the Traitor...



Every December a giant effigy is burnt in Londonderry and in other centres of Northern Ireland. Lundy had been the Governor of Londonderry in 1688-89, and when the city fell under siege by King James II's army, he advocated surrendering. Thirteen Apprentice Boys closed the City Gates foiling Lundy's intentions, who then fled the City under the cover of darkness. In the process he became a figure of abuse, and his name was entwined into Ulster- Protestant as being one and the same as Traitor.

The 'Shutting of the Gates' commemorations every year in the Maiden City see the burning of 'Lundy the Traitor', in the continuation of a tradition that is first recorded in 1832. The giant representation of Lundy is constructed in the Apprentice Boys Memorial Hall, and is wheeled into Bishop Street raised on a metal frame before being set alight.



The strength of the tradition is well illustrated in 1915 during the First World War. Derry Day was celebrated by the Derry Battalion of the 10th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. It was the 246th anniversary of the shutting of the gates, but they felt that just because they were in France didn't mean they had to break with tradition.



## Signals, celebrations, demonstrations...



In their practical form bonfires could also be used to send a message or be a signal to a watching friend or waiting enemy. Armies would often use bonfires as a means of communicating the imminent approach of danger. One of the most famous examples is the lighting of beacons and bonfires when the Spanish Armada was sighted, first off the coast of England and later as the stricken Spanish ships neared Ireland.

Celebrations were often marked with fires such as weddings or the visit of a prominent individual or individuals. When the first Home Rule Bill was defeated in 1886 the defeat was received by Unionists with delirious rejoicing, and bonfires were lit on the hills around Belfast. During the 1932 Belfast Outdoor Relief Strike when workers joined together to protest their working conditions, bonfires were used as a focal point.



At the close of the Second World War bonfires were erected when the Axis forces in Europe surrendered, used as a focal point for the celebrations of Victory in Europe Day. Huge street parties were held and the fires of all shapes and sizes were a manifestation of the tremendous outpourings of jubilation for both triumph and an end to the war.

## Across the World...

Every single Country in the world has a tradition of bonfires within its boundaries, most in fact have dozens if not hundreds of varying National and localised traditions.



Among occasions in India when bonfires are erected are during the festival of *Lohri* each January to celebrate the Winter Solstice, the festival of *Holi* to representatively destroy the demoness *Holika*, and the Harvest festival of *Bhogali Bihu*. During the farmers festival *Pongal*, houses are stripped of unwanted items, stacked and burnt on bonfires.



In Japan the *Gozan no Okuribi* sees bonfires to mark the end of the Buddhist *Obon* season. In Turkey *Hidirneliz Day* celebrates the awakening of nature each 5<sup>th</sup> May with large fires. In Scotland and elsewhere across the world New Years Eve (*Hogmanay*) is marked with bonfires to 'burn out the auld year'.



The largest recorded bonfire in the world was constructed in 2016 in Norway, where each year bonfires are lit to celebrate Mid-Summers Eve. The 2016 fire in the town of Alesund was constructed on a small man-made island, was over 47 metres (154 feet) high and took three months to build. Built to burn from the top down, it stayed alight for over two days.



## William Prince of Orange...

The most well-known tradition of bonfires in Ulster can trace its roots directly to the Glorious Revolution and the cult of personality that surrounded King William III Prince of Orange.



William III Prince landed at Torbay in England on the 5th November 1688, signalling the onset of the Glorious Revolution. He had come at the request of the people to remove his father-in-law King James II from the throne and to restore the civil liberties which James had removed from his subjects. William agreed to a new Bill of Rights that is the framework upon which the UK's modern-day Democracy is founded.

Bonfires were utilised to show support throughout his reign. On hearing of William and Mary's coronation on 11<sup>th</sup> April 1689, bonfires were lit all over Ulster from hilltop to hilltop in celebration. In June 1690 he landed at Carrickfergus with 15,000 men in order to take command of his forces in Ireland. As he marched into Belfast, bonfires were lit amongst great jubilation. The most well-known tradition of bonfires however, the eleventh night fires, has its direct basis in celebration of the victory of King William at the Battle of the Boyne 1<sup>st</sup> July 1690.



The Battle was fought on the 1st of July, but changes in the Christian calendar meant it was more appropriate to mark it on the 12th of July. In almost every decade that followed there is some reference to bonfires to celebrate the date, some saying they were originally a representation of the camp fires of William's troops the night before the Battle. As early as 1712- just ten years after his death, in Ireland bonfires were being lit on 4<sup>th</sup> November to celebrate the birthday of this conquering hero.



## Reivers Festival...

The eleventh of July has been marked in Killeel by Bonfires for centuries. Today there is still a bonfire, but events around it have changed considerably. Killeel's 'Eleventh Night' has developed into the Reivers Festival, officially the largest event on the evening each year in Northern Ireland, and one of the most successful Ulster-Scots Festivals in the Country.



The Reivers Festival features live music in the afternoon, massed bands, re-enactors, marching bands, vintage vehicles, floats, Lambeg drums, living history characters and fireworks; and all covered on its own radio station FUSE FM. Estimated crowds attending the Festival annually exceed 10,000!



Whilst the occasion has 'spread its wings', the traditional eleventh night bonfire is still a fundamental part of the proceedings. The bonfire was the beginning of and motivation for the Festival, and its place in it is secure as the spectacle that brings the night to a close.



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Community Relations Council



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