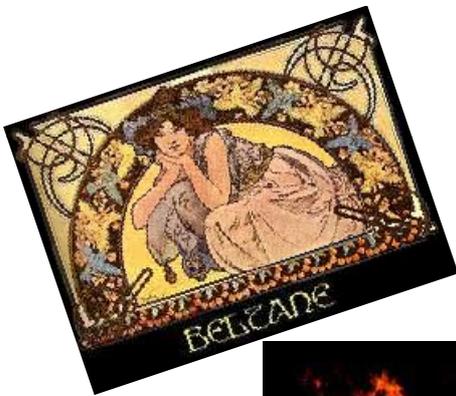
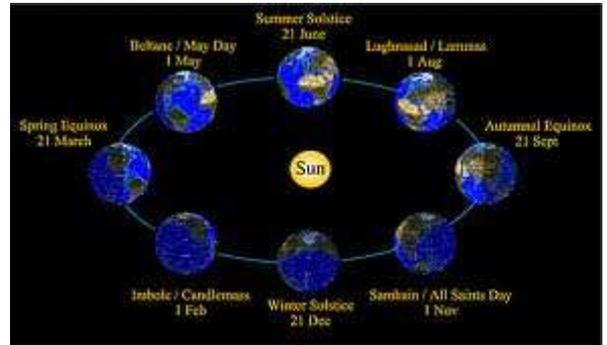


MAY DAY

Look at any calendar, and you will realize that May Day falls exactly 6 months after November 1st, or All Soul's Day which was really an originally pagan way of honouring the dead, or of protecting oneself from the potentially beligerent dead. What could be more logical then but to celebrate Life and the Living in May ?



It would seem that May Day and its accompanying festivals trace their origins way back to the Celts. The Gaelic name for both the month and the festival was Beltane, and May saw the beginning of the summer season, longer days, and (theoretically at least) the end of cold and inclement weather, leading to a few months of somewhat carefree existence. Fire is associated with Beltane and was a very important part of the spring festivities - it encouraged fields, crops and trees to grow well, it cleansed and purified the land before the coming of summer, and was also hoped to increase fertility. Two fires were often lit in villages and cows were then led between them in order to encourage them to produce more milk and healthy calves.



Courting, wooing and relationships were also a big part of Beltane, and young men and women would gather flowers and boughs of greenery to decorate the celebration area. These decorations were also hung over doors and windows of houses, with wreaths of either Rowan (*'sorbier'*) or Whitethorn (*'acacia'*). These two trees were particularly popular as they were in bloom in springtime - indeed, another name for Whitethorn is MayBush - they can often be found in church yards.

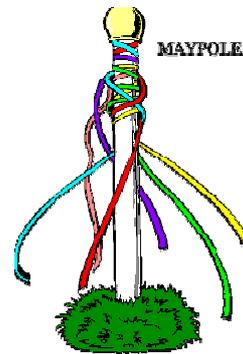


And what of the emergency distress signal, MayDay? It has absolutely nothing to do with May 1st, but results from the rather bad French of young pilots during WWI. Sent to bomb the German enemy, and therefore flying over France, when shot down or in difficulty due to their less than perfect flying machines, they radioed "M'aidez, m'aidez"...



Rather obviously, the colour associated with May is green, after all, nature does literally explode at this time of year and somewhere in the past a Green Man sprang to life. In Medieval times, he was simply a man decorated with greenery, garlands and what not, but the decorations grew so complicated that it was often impossible to detect any human presence underneath all the flowers, branches, twigs and leaves. The tradition was lost over the ages, (at one point it was even forbidden, the church having taken a rather grim view of dancing and whatnot), however it has been revived of late, and Jack in the Green is once more an essential part of any May Day dance or parade.

The maypole is thought to come from the ancient Saxon, Viking and other pagan traditions involving the worshipping of trees. No-one is entirely sure, but what is clear is that maypoles have been a crucial part of May Day celebrations for hundreds of years in England. The maypole itself is a tall wooden pole which is either put up every year, or stands permanently on a village green. There were many maypoles erected during the fifteenth century, and they were often a focus of inter-village rivalry and were stolen if possible. The more puritanical brand of the Reformation of Christianity denounced maypoles, but Elizabeth I, enjoying revelry, did not in any way ban maypoles even if there was increasing pressure to get rid of them. Finally, the puritans got rid of them, denouncing them as heathenish, superstitious, wicked, and vain.



Dancing round the maypole was either done casually, or there were also dances for sets of dancers who weave and un-weave ribbons tied to the top. Dancers weave in and out of each other each holding a ribbon, so that as they continue around the pole, the ribbons are wrapped from the top of the pole to the bottom in (if all goes well !) an attractive pattern.

A very important part of May Day celebrations involves Morris dancing. This is a kind of rhythmic dancing involving flags, sticks and handkerchiefs being waved around. Morris dancers frequently wear bells (especially on their feet), so that when they are dancing in step the bells ring out in unison. Morris dancing was done around the calendar in England, but was particularly common on May Day and at Whitsun ('Pentecôte') both May holidays. The musical accompaniment is most commonly provided by a melodeon but can also be a violin, pipe, accordion or even drums.