

# Halloween in Britain – Then and Now

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The paper aims to look at the changing nature of Halloween (All Hallows Eve) in the United Kingdom over a period of about seventy-five years, c. 1950–2025. The author was a child there in the 1950s, and a teenager in the 1960s. He will argue that the nature of this event has completely changed over that time. As well as desk research, he has interviewed members of his own friends, family, and others from different parts of the country, as well as well-known British folklorists. There is surprisingly little scholarly work on this subject. The interviews took place either person to person, or on the telephone, during the first four months of 2025.

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## Halloween: Name and Origins

Halloween takes place on the 31<sup>st</sup> October, the evening before All Hallows Day, the 1<sup>st</sup> of November. ‘E’en’ is a contraction of ‘eve’ or ‘evening’. It takes place in many parts of the world, but in the Western Christian tradition it marks both the day before All Hallows Day, and All Souls Day on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November. It coincides with pagan traditions, such as the Gaelic tradition of Samhain. It marks the beginning of a time in the liturgical year called ‘Allhallowtide’, a time for celebrating the souls of the dead. Agriculturally, it marks the end of harvest time, and the beginning of the ‘dead’ winter time on the land.

## Halloween in the 1950s, 60s and earlier

In the author’s experience, growing up in the county of Cheshire in the north-west of England, Halloween was not an important event at all. Yet his parents and wider family always insisted on doing *something* at Halloween,

however limited these practices were. They consisted of *apple bobbing*, where a number of apples are placed in a large bowl of water. The person then has to keep their hands behind their back, and try to pick up and eat apples using only their mouth. This is a difficult and wet task, but involves a good deal of fun. An alternative was to tie an apple on a string, and suspend it from the ceiling to head height, and again try to eat it with your hands behind your back. Even this unremarkable activity is unknown to some people living at the same time in the same area. One other activity was to make turnip lanterns. The turnip (*brassica rapa*) is hollowed out, and sinister looking faces are carved into the remaining skin. Then a candle is placed in the bottom of the turnip. The light from the lit candle shines through the carved face, giving a very sinister effect, especially when carried in darkness. These 'lanterns' are sometimes called 'jack-o-lanterns' and are associated with warding off evil spirits. 'Raymond' (aged 74, born in Longton, in rural mid-Lancashire, and still living there) and his brother 'Peter' were interviewed in March 2025. Their only memory of the Halloween of their childhood and youth were of making these jack o'lanterns, and carrying them through the lanes once it was dark, but this is the only thing they practised. They liked doing it because it was 'creepy'. On the other hand, when the author questioned 'Ruby' (aged 93, born in and still living in Crewe, east Cheshire) of her memories of Halloween practices of her childhood in the 1930s, she said very emphatically "Nothing!". 'George' (aged 94, born in Catfield, Norfolk, now living in North Walsham, Norfolk) expressed the same view, of nothing, and so did 'Jenny' (aged 71, also born Catfield, Norfolk, now living in Norwich). Yet both had fond memories of Bonfire Night.

There is one other ancient Halloween tradition in parts of England which has all but died out, except in a handful of places, including a tiny village in east Cheshire called Antrobus. Small flat spiced cakes are made, called *soul cakes*, to be eaten or sold around Halloween. In Antrobus they are accompanied by a folk play, very similar to what is called *mumming*. A number of characters go round to various premises (usually pubs) and present their play, ask for donations, sell soul cakes to the customers, and raise money for charity. The broad theme of the play is a fight, death, and resurrection. The Antrobus soul play had died out in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but luckily the play had been written down by a retired major, and was revived some time later. It continues to this day for several weeks around Halloween.

Steve Roud (aged 75, born in Sussex, now living in Cambridgeshire) is a leading British folklorist. When interviewed, he pointed out there was a clear near-horizontal line between the north and south of England in Halloween activities, in that in the south, little or nothing was done at all. In Scotland and Ireland, some people went in for *guising* (dressing in disguise) and went

around their area begging for sweets or money. It is likely that Scottish and Irish immigrants to the USA took guising with them, where it developed into 'trick or treating', which was essentially a form of begging. The idea is that groups of children dress up and go from house to house, begging for 'treats' (usually sweets or money). If they are not offered any 'treats' by the householder, then they will play a 'trick' on the householder, which varies in severity, but is usually quite mild. A common 'severe' form of 'trick' is to throw eggs at the house.

## Bonfire Night in the 1950s and 1960s

However strongly or weakly Halloween was celebrated in the past, there is no doubt that it was completely suborned in England by *Guy Fawkes Night*, better known as *Bonfire Night* (as the author knew it), which still takes place on November 5<sup>th</sup>. It relates to the notorious plot by Guy Fawkes and his fellow conspirators to blow up the Houses of Parliament in London in 1605, and to kill all the government, lords and members of parliament, who were meeting in the rooms above. The plotters were Catholics at a time when Catholicism had been suppressed by the Protestant version of Christianity, a result of the Reformation and King Henry VIII's break with the Pope. After Henry's second daughter, Queen Elizabeth I died, Catholics were hoping and expecting to get better treatment from the new king, James I. (Also known as James VI in Scotland). When it became apparent that better treatment for Catholics was not going to happen, a small group of radical Catholics decided to attack the government. Barrels of gunpowder were placed in the cellars of Parliament, and Guy Fawkes was chosen to light the fuse when Parliament was assembled in the rooms above. However, the plot was betrayed, Fawkes was arrested, and the other plotters were all killed or captured. Bonfire Night marks the overthrow of the 'Gunpowder Plot', which has been strongly celebrated ever since on November 5<sup>th</sup>, but much less strongly nowadays than in the author's youth, and very much sidelined by the modern version of Halloween. The importance of Guy Fawkes Night is demonstrated in the following well-known rhyme:

"The Fifth of November we all will remember, for Gunpowder,  
Treason and Plot.

I see no reason why Gunpowder Treason should ever be forgot."

In the author's childhood and youth, groups of children would make a mannequin of Guy Fawkes from old clothes and a mask. This was taken

round in a cart, and money begged from passers-by with the words “Penny for the Guy”. This money would normally be spent on fireworks. In the weeks before Bonfire Night, these individual groups of children would build their own bonfires on waste ground, or in their home garden, to be lit on the night of 5<sup>th</sup> November. When the fire was properly alight, the Guy would be placed on the fire and burned. The bonfire was accompanied by the letting off of a variety of fireworks – rockets, Catherine wheels, bangers, rip raps, sparklers, roman candles, volcanoes and many more. This practice went on all over the country. (In Lewes, Sussex, it is a very large event, in which participants in asbestos clothing carry flaming barrels of tar through the streets of the town. It is a jealously guarded ceremony, and can draw a crowd of 80,000 spectators to this small town of only 17,000 inhabitants. As well as remembering the Gunpowder Plot, it also remembers the death of 17 Protestant martyrs of the town, burned at the stake by the Catholic Queen Mary I).

In the author’s youth, there was much rivalry between groups over the size of the bonfire, and it was not unknown for one group to steal wood from another group’s bonfire so as to make theirs bigger. The main feature here was that these ceremonies were carried out by the children themselves, though with a measure of adult control, for example if the children were all very young. Nowadays bonfires are very much controlled, and provided as a spectacle with large bonfires and firework displays without involvement by the children. It has become very much a passive ceremony, rather than an active one. The reason for this is easy to comprehend – Health and Safety legislation. Accidents with fireworks were all too common, especially when children themselves had control over fireworks and bonfires. It is difficult not to overexaggerate the excitement caused by Bonfire Night amongst children then, and their parents usually approved too. The author can remember one Bonfire Night around 1960 in which a boy took off his overcoat because he was too hot, and someone, thinking it was rubbish, threw it on the fire!

## Iona and Peter Opie’s notes on Halloween

The views expressed above on Halloween are based on the author’s interviews with people in several geographical areas of the country, and taken from different age groups. However, they are reflected in the writings of Iona and Peter Opie, pioneer folklorists who studied children’s culture and play in Britain. They noted early signs of the sweeping changes to Halloween practices, and note that these changes for children were actually encouraged by schoolteachers, who worried about firework accidents on Bonfire Night (cf. Opie & Opie 1959: 268–283). They also note that despite a strong popular

belief to the contrary, Halloween was never associated with paganism. The author himself and most of his contemporaries remember with great pleasure the Bonfire Nights of their childhood and youth. They were far more exciting than modern Halloween, perhaps largely because the youngsters were active and autonomous, with only slight parental 'interference'.

## The influence of Cinema and the Mass Media

There are, however, other important factors in the replacement of Bonfire Night by Halloween in popularity. One of these is the role of mass media, notably cinema films. Arguably the most influential ones were 'Halloween' (1978) and 'E.T. – The Extra-Terrestrial' (1982), both of them U.S., Hollywood productions. Both these films featured 'trick or treating' as an essential backdrop to the plot; 'Halloween', directed by John Carpenter, is a gory horror film, which features a crazed killer escaping from custody and returning to his home town to indulge himself in a bloodbath of horrific killings of teenagers, but with a backdrop of innocent children trick-or-treating. Thus the festival of Halloween became associated with monsters, blood and murder. Its success resulted in several more films, 'Halloween 2', etc.

'E.T.', however, directed by Steven Spielberg, is a science fiction film aimed at children, in which a friendly alien is stranded by his fellow extra-terrestrials while on a brief visit to Earth. A few local children hide him from the authorities who want to capture him. He looks like a friendly children's toy, and possesses magical powers. Again, there is a background of trick-or-treating at Halloween in the film. The enormous success of 'E.T.' made children in Britain and elsewhere want to involve themselves in trick-or-treating and dressing up, and commercial entrepreneurs were quick to exploit this new market with costumes, toys and sweets related to the new fashion. Pumpkins quickly replaced turnips as lanterns; not only were they bigger, they were much easier to carve into lanterns, and enterprising farmers began to grow them to meet the rising demand. These new, American practices swept the country for children, while teenagers and young adults began dressing up in 'horror' costumes and bizarre make up (zombies, vampires, monsters, ghosts, etc.) and holding parties and dances especially aimed at Halloween.

## Conclusion

Speaking to scholars and ordinary people across the country, it can be fairly said that Halloween was not an important event in Britain until

the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whereas Bonfire Night was far more important. The modern version of Halloween is due largely to the influence of commercialization, 'Americanization', and other factors, including the role of mass media, particularly cinema, as well as government legislation.

## Bibliography

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### Ноћ вештица у Британији – некад и сад

*Кристофер Хеппа*

#### Сажетак

Циљ рада је испитивање начина на који се мењала природа празника Ноћ вештица (Ноћ свих светих) у Великој Британији у периоду од око седамдесет и пет година, оквирно од 1950. до 2025. године. Аутор текста био је дете на том простору педесетих година 20. века, а тинејџер шездесетих година 20. века. Он ће заговарати став да се природа овог догађаја у потпуности променила током наведеног периода. Поред обављеног „кабинетског” истраживања, интервјуисао је и чланове своје породице, али и друге особе из различитих делова земље, као и познате британске фолклористе. Постоји изненађујуће мали број научних радова на ову тему. Интервјуи су изведени уживо или путем телефонских разговора током прва четири месеца 2025. године.

*Кључне речи:* Ноћ вештица, Ноћ ломача (Ноћ Гаја Фокса), промена, медији, комерцијализација.

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