

# CEREMONIAL FIRES



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Fire is particularly associated with pagan times when transitional moments of spring and autumn were always celebrated with fire rituals. Bealtaine fires were lit to celebrate the lengthening of the day and the sun's increasing strength. Then at Samhain, all old fires were extinguished and new ones kindled from the ceremonial bonfire.

## IDEAS TO EXPLORE WITH YOUR CLASS: VISUAL ARTS

## FIRE RITUALS



In the Christian year, those who have died are remembered particularly on All Souls' Day – the graves of loved ones are often bedecked with flowers and candles. In times gone by, fires and bonfires would have been lit to light a soul's way to the next life, and food, particularly 'soul cakes', would sometimes have been left out for the dead who would visit their earthly homes on the Eve of All Souls. Food would also have been left in the kitchen on the eve, where a large log would have burned in the hearth all night. The previous day, All Saints' Day (1 November), also called All Hallows, is still an important festival in honour of Christian martyrs.

**Guy Fawkes Night**

Bonfires were traditionally good for roasting seasonal foods and for clearing garden rubbish. In many English towns and villages 'guys' are still made from old clothes stuffed with paper and straw, and children beg 'a penny for the guy', the pennies then being saved to buy fireworks to accompany the huge bonfires on which Guy Fawkes, one of the conspirators in the Gunpowder Plot, is ritually burned every 5 November.

- *Your class might research the story of Guy Fawkes.*

Tradition still suggests that houses should be cleaned on New Year's Eve and the ashes of the old fire taken out. In many countries, New Year celebrations are still marked by fire rituals such as firework displays. For Iranian New Year, or No Ruz (20/21 March), people also plant little gardens a few weeks before the date so that they bloom for the festival, and everyone leaps over a fire, symbolising leaving the old sorrows behind.

In Scotland, fireballs are sometimes swung on poles at Hogmanay to represent the power of the sun that will start to get warmer during the New Year.

To celebrate their New Year (between 1 January and 19 February), Chinese homes are cleaned and decorated with red banners and streamers, hanging lanterns, red envelopes containing money and squares of bright paper with greetings, and there are often fireworks to scare away the evil spirits.

- *The class might research and compare celebrations.*

- Listen on YouTube (or similar) to the performance broadcast by the BBC on 23 August 1991 of Handel's *Music for the Royal Fireworks* by a huge baroque band on period instruments, consisting of 24 oboes, 16 bassoons, 1 contra-bassoon, 9 trumpets, 9 horns, 3 pairs of timpani and 5 drums, conducted by Robert King. The Overture is accompanied by a dramatisation in paper cut-outs of the events at the very first performance during which, as a result of the improperly handled fireworks, the concert pavilion was burned down. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXjY6w1KQMo>

**Winter Solstice, 21 December**

Solstices and equinoxes quarter the year and have always been celebrated as the culmination of the sun's rhythmic journey. They were felt to be critical moments of transition, when the natural forces of the heavens alone might not meet the needs of the time, and therefore the support and involvement of earthly communities should be invoked.

The Vikings thought the sun was a wheel that changed the seasons and the word 'yule' is said to come from their word for wheel, houl. Druids believed the sun stood still for twelve days, so they lit a huge log to overcome darkness, and to get rid of evil spirits and bring good luck. (See Newgrange worksheet for further information on the winter solstice.)

**Summer Solstice, 21 June**

This is the longest day of the year in the northern hemisphere. The sun appears to stand still (solstice means 'sun stand'), rising at the same point for three days in a row. Midsummer's Day has been fixed to 24 June, which is also known as St John's Day, as it is taken to be the birthdate of St John the Baptist. John said, 'I must decrease, he must increase', and this refers to the fact that his own birthdate is celebrated on the longest day of the year, after which days will grow shorter, whereas Jesus's birthdate is celebrated as days begin to grow longer and daylight to increase.

In parts of Ireland fires are still lit at sunset on St John's Eve – small fires in homes and huge bonfires at crossroads or beaches for the community to enjoy.

- *Children might ask older relatives and/or elderly neighbours what they remember about such bonfires.*