

HAVE YOU GOT

ST PATRICK'S DAY AND IRISH FOLKLORE

It's coming up to St Patrick's Day, the Irish national holiday that is celebrated all over the world. So let's take the opportunity to learn a bit about Irish traditions.

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Snakes and Shamrocks

Who was St Patrick? Well, the first surprise is that he was not a native Irishman. He was born in either Scotland or Roman England in the second half of the fourth century. When he was 14 or so, he was captured by pirates and sold into **slavery**¹ in Ireland. After six years he escaped and went to France, where he joined a **monastery**² and eventually became a **bishop**³. Then he set out for Ireland and started converting the **pagan**⁴ Irish to Christianity.

There are two famous stories of St Patrick. One is that he **drove out**⁵ all the snakes in Ireland. (It's true that Ireland has no snakes, but this is because it's an island – it's never had them.) The other is that he explained the Christian idea of the Holy Trinity (the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit) by using the three-leafed shamrock: God, like a shamrock, is both three and one. This is why people wear shamrocks on St Patrick's Day.

The Fairy Folk

Every country has its own magical inhabitants, but Ireland seems to be particularly busy with them. On one level it's kind of surprising. It's long been a Catholic country, after all, and the Catholic Church is not particularly keen on folk **superstitions**⁶. But as anyone who has been lucky enough to visit Ireland will tell you, there's a real sense of magic in the Irish air. (Mostly rain, to be honest – Ireland has more rainy days than any other country in Europe – but magic, too.)

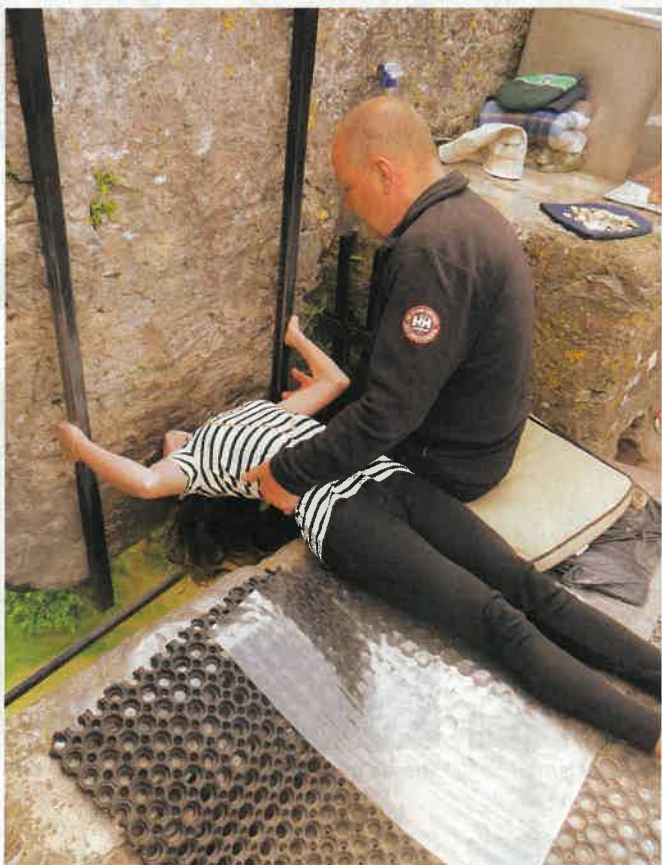
Ireland's magical folk are commonly grouped together as fairies, though you shouldn't think of them as tiny, cute girls with wings. There's the banshee, who appears as a screaming woman, all in white and with white hair, when someone is about to die. There's the Pooka,

who appears after dark and can change into bats, eagles, dogs, goats or black horses. And the Dullahan, the headless horse-rider who carries his **glowing**⁷ head and uses a human **spine**⁸ as a **whip**⁹. Worst of all are the changelings, who are the damaged children of fairies that are left behind when a human child is stolen. With such terrifying figures, it's no wonder the Irish thought it unlucky even to talk about the fairies directly. Instead, some were known as the "little people", some known as the "good people" and some as the "gentle people".

Most Europeans stopped believing in fairies a long time ago, but in some parts of Ireland, people still believed in and even left milk out for them until well into the 20th century.



THE BLARNEY?



Kisses in the Castle

Ireland is a country of strange and wonderful stories, and the Irish do love a good storyteller. If you don't have the talent, though, you're in luck. There's a magical stone that is part of Blarney Castle in Kerry, in the South of Ireland. It is said that if you kiss this stone you get the gift of being able to speak well, and a good talker is often referred to as having "the gift of the blarney".

To kiss the stone, you have to lie on your back with your head down a hole. People have been kissing the stone for hundreds of years, and these days around 400,000 visitors do so every year. Just think how many lips have been there before yours – no wonder it's been called "the world's **germiest**¹⁰ attraction". Add in the high prices and long queues (which can be over an hour), and we have to think that whoever convinced everyone that this is a great idea must *really* have had the gift of the blarney.

ST PATRICK'S DAY TRADITIONS

St Patrick's Day celebrates St Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland. It takes place each year on March 17th, the anniversary of his death. All over the world, Irish people (and many who are not Irish) join in carnival-like parades, listen to Irish music, drink Guinness and wear green or dress up as leprechauns. Many landmarks get lit up with green lights, some pubs serve green beer and the city of Chicago even dyes its river green.

When we say "all over the world", we really mean it. Major St Patrick's Day celebrations are held in dozens of countries and on every continent. New York has the world's largest, with more than two million people gathering for the grand parade. Dublin in Ireland has a four-day celebration. On the tiny Caribbean island of Montserrat, St Patrick's Day falls on the same date as their independence day, and celebrations are a mix of local and Irish traditions. Tens of thousands of people take part

in Tokyo's St Patrick's parade. Buenos Aires, sometimes called "the Paris of South America", looks more like Dublin as it hosts the biggest St Patrick's Day celebration in South America. Other big celebrations take place in Birmingham, Munich, Moscow, Auckland, Kuala Lumpur and of course many cities in North America.

You might be surprised to know that it's not really a very Irish tradition. St. Patrick's Day was a religious holiday when people went to church, and in the villages men would pin a shamrock to their clothes and head off to the pub to get drunk (a tradition called "drowning the shamrock"), but it wasn't a very important festival until Irish emigrants to America made it one in the 17th century. The Irish in Ireland only started holding parades in the 20th century, and originally these were quite political and connected to Irish nationalism. These days, in Ireland as everywhere else, they are more like carnivals.



VOCABULARY

- 1 **slavery** ['sleɪvəri] – otroctví
- 2 **monastery** ['mɒnəstri] – klášter
- 3 **bishop** ['bɪʃəp] – biskup
- 4 **pagan** ['peɪɡən] – pohan, pohanský
- 5 **to drive out** – vyhnat

- 6 **superstition** [ˌsuːpəˈstɪʃn] – pověra
- 7 **glowing** ['ɡləʊɪŋ] – zářící
- 8 **spine** [spain] – páteř
- 9 **whip** [wɪp] – bič
- 10 **germy** ['dʒɜːmi] – plný bacilů