

Marriage

The quarter days (spring - February 1 - *St. Brigid's Day*, summer - May 1 - *Bealtaine*, autumn - August 1 - *Lúnasa* and winter – November 1 – *Samhain*), representing the start of the seasons, were favoured for divining what the future held. Marriage divination was especially popular and never more so than at Hallowe'en. A ring was often put into the colcannon or the traditional cake, the báirín breac, and whoever received the lucky slice was destined to be the next to marry. Other items to predict the future were sometimes put in the cake. These included a thimble (spinsterhood); a button (bachelorhood); a stick (to be beaten by the spouse); a rag (poverty); a coin (wealth) and a crucifix (the taking up of religious orders).

Another popular game played to foretell fate was to place four plates in front of a blindfolded person. If they chose the one with water, emigration was inevitable; grain indicated prosperity; clay foretold of death; a ring predicted marriage.

Blindfolded games were often used to determine the size and stature of the future spouse – one game involved selecting a cabbage and its size, shape and roots indicated the qualities of the husband to be.

A long single peeling of an apple skin thrown over the shoulder was examined to decipher the initials of the future spouse. The letters of the alphabet on pieces of paper left overnight in water might float to reveal a name. A snail left in a flour dusted bowl overnight, or on smoothed fire ashes, might reveal next morning a clue to the identity or the initials of a future husband or wife.

By putting objects under the pillow such as apples, cabbages, spade heads or spinning-wheel parts, the spouse might appear in a dream. Plants such as ivy and yarrow were also placed under the pillow to induce the dream. Hair and nail clippings put in the fire that evening were also believed to induce a dream of the partner to be.

Common dreams could feature the future spouse offering water or a towel if the dreamer had fasted before sleep or not dried their face!

Protection

The association with winter and death in nature meant that there was much association with remembering those who had died and the protection of the home and family. Holy water was sprinkled on the inhabitants, around the threshold and other places within the home. Often, small wooden or straw crosses were made and hung to offer protection and luck for the coming winter and year (Four of the [Halloween Crosses](#) on display in the National Museum Galleries are from Erris, Co. Mayo and another is from Letterfrack, Co. Galway).

This was also believed to offer protection from the fairies and other supernatural beings that were believed to be particularly active on this night. Another name for Halloween was

Oíche na bPúcaí or *Oíche na Sprideanna* as there was a belief that evil spirits were about: people avoided travelling alone on this night for fear of abduction. Fairy mounds, trees or forts were avoided. Stories were told to children of the *púca* going about on this night spitting on the wild fruits. This was to try and prevent them from eating the damaged berries and apples after this date.

Masks

People believed that on this night the spirits of the dead would be in limbo and would tend to travel around the country and return to their home place.

Halloween masks were made with this in mind to frighten the living daylighters out of people (One of the scariest masks on display in the [National Museum of Ireland](#) is one from An Fál Mór, Co. Mayo). Anything that could be made to frighten people was used. Turnips and potatoes were popular for turning into scary lanterns for walking with or placing on the windowsills. The pumpkin that is preferred today is an American development of this idea.