

# EXTRA EXTRA!

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### A look into the history behind May Day

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#### What is May Day and why is it celebrated?

May Day is the first day of May, traditionally a celebration (or festival) of spring and the resurrection of nature after the winter months. It is normally associated with flowers, dancing and maypoles, with celebrations sometimes including the crowning of a “May King”, or “Queen”.

#### What are the origins of May Day?

May Day probably has Roman origins, emerging from the festival Floralia, which was a celebration of fertility and nature that took place around early May and was dedicated to the goddess Flora. However, it is also believed that May Day has roots in the Celtic festival Beltane — a day that marks the start of summer and considered the best time for animals to be put out to pasture.

#### How was May Day traditionally celebrated?

Much like the Roman festival Floralia, May Day was celebrated with flora (particularly flowers and other vegetation). John Lydgate’s

15th-century poem *Mumming at Bishopwood* describes “mighty Flourra, goddess of freshe floures”, and in *The Knight’s Tale*, Geoffrey Chaucer mentions woodbine and hawthorn as decorations.

On May Day, people would traditionally collect flowers, blossom and branches to decorate their homes, and as they gathered their bouquets they would literally “sing in the May”. Women and girls would rise early and wash their faces in the fresh May morning dew, for it was believed to make them radiant, reduce blemishes and attract their future spouse.

The most iconic expression of May Day celebrations is the maypole, the centre of the celebrations and the dancing. Originally, this was a large tree in the forest that was decorated in situ, but later it was cut down and brought to the village (or community) and decorated with flowers, wreaths, handkerchiefs and ribbons. The dance around it was an expression of the joy of new life.

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