

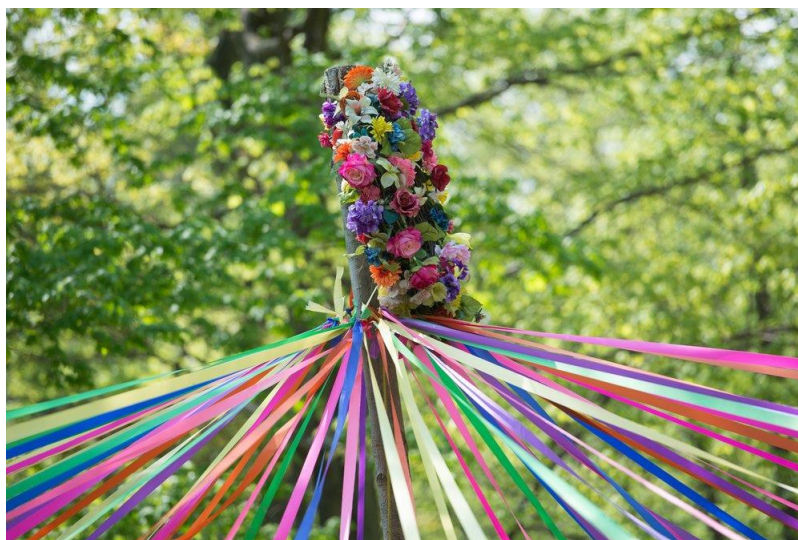
Gylden Briefing: May Day ©

As we approach the Feast of Beltaine on 1 May, even though lockdowns and social distancing will stop most communal festivities in 2020, it's probably worth reflecting upon customs and traditions, such as maypoles and may queens. We'll publish more details about Beltaine itself on our website (www.gyldenfellowship.co.uk) a little nearer to the day and also on our Facebook groups.

Maypoles

Maypoles are interesting in that the pole is often seen as the male symbol and the disk at the top as the receptive female symbol. The fertility symbols were largely suppressed during the Victorian revival of May Day, but (to quote from Terry Pratchett) this was probably a phallusy!

Coloured ribbons are tied to the pole. Mainly, they show whichever colours were available, although some people like to believe that the ribbons represent the colours of the rainbow. Not sure how people distinguished between blue, indigo and violet! In actual fact, the maypoles stood in villages all year round and were likely decorated with ribbons or flowers according to each season, eg Beltaine, Lughnasadh or Yule.



In some pagan pathways, it is considered to be the time that the God and Goddess are wed and the time that he impregnates her sexually on this day. This is represented symbolically by the wrapping of the maypole. The ribbons attached around the top of the maypole are red and white...either red as the Sun God and the white as the Virgin Goddess or the white for the Maiden and the red for the Mother.

The participants dance around the maypole carrying the ribbons: men holding the red and the women holding the white. As they dance, they weave and intertwine the ribbons to form a symbolic birth canal wrapped around the phallic pole, representing the union of the Goddess and God. Many pagans choose this time to perform their own hand-fastings or weddings.

The fertility aspect of the maypole is dubious at best, since the only real spiritual overlay came along last century, i.e. the idea of the Triple Goddess (maiden-mother-crone). To be sure, there is ample historical evidence for maypole ceremonies in England from the Middle Ages (and in Germany and Sweden from earlier than that). The earliest maypoles were tall trees with the branches cut off and decorated with flowers or garlands, i.e. no ribbons.

Of course, there was a much earlier festival in ancient Rome that fell on 1 May – Floralia, a festival that honoured Flora, the goddess of spring and flowers. It was a time of singing, dancing, flower parades and a time for Romans to hang flowers on doors. Roman prostitutes especially enjoyed the festival, for they considered Flora their patron goddess.

So, there was a sexual symbolism involved long before last century, perhaps the pole showing the god planting his phallus into the womb of mother earth, bringing new life. This sexual aspect and the wild festivals that accompanied it led the Puritans to ban the maypole custom in 1644. This ban was repealed soon after the restoration of Charles II in 1660, as can be seen from the article on the Cerne Abbas Giant (by Dr C. March, *Dorset Field Club's Proceedings*, 1901).

According to authorities, cited by Dr March, the festival of the Cerne Abbas maypole used to be accompanied by this custom in the 1580s.

"Hundreds of men, women, and children go off to the woods and groves and spend all the night in pastimes and, in the morning, they would return with birche boughes and branches of trees to deck their assembles withal. And they bring home with great veneration the Maie-pole, their stinking idol rather, covered all over with flowers and herbes, and then fall they to leaping and dancing about it, as the heathen people did. I have heard it crediblie reported by men of great gravity that, of an hundred maides going to the wood, there have scarcely the third part of them returned home again as they went."

"The ordinance of the Long Parliament in April 1644 made law, whereby all maypoles were to be taken down and removed by the constables, churchwardens, and other parish officers. It met with no little resistance that the Cerne maypole was destroyed in 1635."

The Puritan ban stopped that sort of celebration, but the eventual Restoration allowed some sort of May Day festival – again from Dr March.

"After the advent of Charles II, the Maypole was set up again, and had a long life. The Maypole was made every year from a fir-bole, and was raised in a night. It was erected in the ring just above the Giant, decorated and the villagers went up the hill and danced round the pole on the 1 May. This hill was Trendle Hill, situated about half a mile from the town, upon the steep southern declivity of which the famous figure of the giant was cut in the chalk."

Many towns and parishes erected permanent maypoles in celebration, some boasting 80 or 90 feet! These permanent poles were left to stand throughout the year but only decorated and danced around on May Day. In the village of Sturminster Marshall (Dorset, pictured below), a commemorative plaque beside the maypole reads, as shown below.

"In the year of 1101, the Lord of the Manor the Earl of Pembroke, granted permission for a fare to be held on this site and it is probable that the first maypole was erected at the time. Known restorations took place in year 1669, 1867 and 1897. The present maypole follows the design of the 1897 pole and stands thirty-five feet high with a static ring four foot in diameter fixed five foot from the top. A new innovation is the weathervane in the shape of a water rat - the village emblem. The pole weighs three and a half tons."



Today's maypole dancing with its colourful ribbons is a relatively modern dance, only dating back to the 19th century. According to the *Dorset County Chronicle* for May 1884, we can read that,

"in the parish of Chardstock, on the Somerset and Devon border, the children of the parish brought round garlands as usual on May Day; in the afternoon upwards of seventy of them sat down to a feast at which the local squire, the vicar, and other gentlemen and ladies were present. Dancing round the Maypole concluded the keeping up of this old English custom".

May Queen

Another good example of this blurred remembrance of tradition is the [May Queen](#) where a common view is that Beltaine was the time when a village would choose a young woman as the May Queen to represent the Goddess in her transition from maiden to mother. That may be what some in the pagan community believe, but it's not actually true, from history.

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English Folklore*, the tradition of crowning the May Queen comes from the Victorian era, based on the popularity of Tennyson's poem, *The May Queen*. It seems to have evolved from a practice of selecting a Lord and Lady or King and Queen for a festival, carnival or just for the day. Women and girls were the focus and the May Queen celebration, by the mid-19th and early 20th centuries, involved the coronation of a local girl or young woman who would preside over events with a group of ladies to support her. In villages with strong Roman Catholic histories, the focus honoured the Virgin Mary and she was designated as Queen of the May. If we look back to the May Day festivities in the town of Bridport in 1918, we find an account of the Crowning the May Queen and the Maypole Dance.

"On Thursday the girls of the National Schools had their annual festival of crowning the May Queen and dancing round the Maypole. There was a very good attendance of the general public, the ceremony taking place in the school-yard. Favoured with fine weather, the scene was a very picturesque one, and the proceedings were watched with the greatest interest and pleasure.

The children, as is their custom, were dressed in white, and with their Queen (Vera Meech), who is elected by the votes of her schoolmates, they paraded the Rope Walks, St. Michael's Lane, and Gundry Lane, and returned to the playground. Here the Maypole was set up and the Queen was then enthroned. She recited a verse of Tennyson's May Queen, and then the Rector crowned her with a wreath of flowers. Some very pretty Maypole dances were then gone through, and some nicely rendered songs gave variety to the programme, while at the close a collection, which realized £4, was made to defray the cost of a new set of strings for the Maypole."