



Some Wiltshire Folklore And Traditions

Animals and Birds

1. Crows - A poem much like that of the one recited today when magpies are seen - 1 for sorrow, 2 for joy etc. All the good luck went to the person who saw them first.
2. A sighting of a swallow was a sure sign that summer was upon you
3. A robin in winter was meant to mean prosperity in the year to come
4. A singing mouse foretold of sickness

Cakes

1. A piece of Bride or Wedding cake was always kept by young girls to place beneath their pillow to dream upon.
2. Katherine or Cattern Cakes were made on the feast of St. Katherine a Somerset tradition adopted by the Wiltshire folk near to the Somerset county border.
3. Simnel cake is eaten at Mid Lent or on Mother's Day.
4. Easter Cakes are thin biscuit type cakes with currants and notched edges and very pale in colour.
5. Twelfth cake is a rich ornamented sugar cake with little gifts added tot eh mixture such as coins, rings and thimbles.
6. Lardy cake is a doughy cake made with lots of fat and sugar and currants and is normally eaten hot. One of the best Lardy cakes used to be available in Ye Olde Pie Shop in Devizes Market Place.
7. Cop-loaf was a Christmas tradition, consisting of a square of paste with an apple in the centre, it was notched around the edges and a cock's head shape sat on top with two currants for eyes.
8. Lease Cake was a harvest time favourite often made from the recently harvested fresh corn.
9. Seed or Caraway cake was always served at funerals. Parliament cake was a thin kind of ginger bread. Fairings was another crisp gingerbread normally sold at fayres a bit like ginger snaps. Hot Cross buns were always eaten on Good Friday

Candles

1. If a burning candle formed a gutter and a ridge down the side it was called a winding sheet and a death was to be expected in the family.

2. If a flame burnt with a tiny spark at one side then the person sat opposite that spark would get a letter. However a large spark which would cause the candle to create a channel down one side meant thieves. There is a saying there's a thief in the candle, take 'im out.

Christmas

1. If the Christmas pudding fell apart when the muslin cloth was removed then this was deemed as a bad omen. Some believed that it meant the death of one of the heads of the household.
2. Pulling the wishbone from the Christmas poultry would mean that the one getting the largest part of the bone would get all they wished for during the new year.

Chairs

1. If you were to sit in a chair immediately after the previous occupant had vacated it, it would mean that your death would follow quickly after that of the person whose seat you had occupied. Hence the saying 'would you jump in my coffin as quick'.
2. Leaving a chair vacant at a wake meant that the departed would not be forgotten and a toast to the empty chair should be undertaken to speed the soul on its way.

Charms

1. Cramp-bone - this was carried in the pocket for good luck and to ward of the onslaught of rheumatism.
2. A rabbits foot was hung from a belt or carried in a purse
3. Lucky heather was always bought from a gypsy if one came to knock on your door otherwise you home would be cursed

Clothes

1. Passing on the clothing of the dead for use by someone else was thought of as of little value since the clothes would wear out quickly.
2. Washing clothes on Good Friday was regarded as awful sin some believe that the Devil himself will pay a visit to anyone who washes clothes on Good Friday.

Coal

1. If a piece of coal should fall from a lit fire, the piece would be pushed to one side and allowed to cool before examining it to see if resembled a coffin, purse or cradle. Depending on the resemblance it was thought to mean death, riches or life (birth).
2. At midnight on New Years Eve it was traditional for the 'first footer' to enter the home carrying a piece of coal to offer good luck to the household for the coming year.

Death

1. A howling dog was always regarded as a sign of someone having passed away.
2. If a corpse did not stiffen and the joints remained pliable and bending then this was a sign that another death would soon occur.
3. If sitting in vigil at a dying persons bed it is not good to sit at the bottom of the bed as this blocks the path of the dying soul from leaving and death is a long time coming.
4. The hooting of owls near a dwelling was a sign of death.
5. Hoards of mice fleeing a household would be regarded as an ill wind coming more often a death in the household was imminent.
6. It was often the custom that the front door of a house from which a coffin was being removed for burial was not closed until the burial was over and the earth replaced covering the coffin.
7. If the priest made a mistake in reading the Church Service on Sunday, it was the popular idea that one of his congregation, or at the least a parishioner, would die during the ensuing week.

Ears

1. A burning sensation to the right ear meant someone was saying something nice about you somewhere.
2. If the left ear burned then bad things were being uttered and if untrue and the falsely spoken of had had the sign of a cross on his ear then the utter of the malicious words would develop a stammer.

3. A noise or ringing in the ear meant news was on its way, for the news to be good news then the person should remain silent until the noise stopped.

Fires

1. A fire burning on one side was a sign of a parting.
2. A spark flying up the chimney was a sign of hastily received news.
3. If the fire would not light easily or the wood burned out without kindling the coals it was a sign of real good fortune. A little rhyme goes "When wood refuse to kindle fire, Something comes that we desire."
4. A piece of black hanging from the bars of the grate meant a stranger was cross your path, you would clap your hands in front of the hanging piece of black naming a day of the week commencing Monday until the black fell off, whatever day you were reciting at the time of the falling then that was the day you would meet the stranger.
5. The last thing at night it was essential to make sure that the fires in the kitchen or dining room were completely out. To find one burning in the morning was considered very bad luck.

Food

1. If a loaf of bread was baked and when cut had a hole in the centre this was meant to represent a grave of someone close.
2. If the bread broke whilst being cut then this meant that a separation was imminent
3. It is believed to be a bad omen to retain a cut unused onion in the home

Implements

1. If you are handed a pair of scissors or a knife by a loved one then you should hand them an object back even if only a pin - this will stop the bond of love being cut.
2. A cold metal key was said to stop nose bleeds by placing it down the back.
3. Crossed knives on a dinner table was thought to warn of an impending quarrel.
4. Pins - If you saw one on the floor or in the street, never pass it by. The poem goes - see a pin and let it lie, you will live to want before you die, but see a pin and pick up, you'll neither want bit or sup.

Insects

1. Crickets or Grasshoppers - Lucky in the house. Bad luck to kill them.
2. Ladybirds - If you count the spots that is how many children you were likely to have
3. Money Spiders - Never flick them off your person - you turn away good fortune

Marriage

1. To know who will marry you. On any Friday morning, fasting, write the names of three persons you like the best, and also death, on four pieces of paper exactly alike, and folding them up, wear them in your bosom all day and at night shake them up in the shoe you wear on the left foot, going to bed backwards; throw three of the papers away from the shoe, and in the morning whichever name is left in your shoe is the name of the person you will marry, but if death is left, you will not marry any of them. This to be done three Friday nights.
Winchester Journal 22nd, January 1848
2. A chimney sweep at a wedding would bring good fortune to the happy couple
3. The bride should always carry a horseshoe to collect good fortune in this should then be nailed above the front door of her new home open end upwards. Should the horseshoe slip and the open end face the ground then all the good fortune would be lost for the foreseeable future.

Nature

1. A ring of fungi found in woodland or downland areas would be a sure sign that fairies were in the vicinity.
2. Lots of berries on a holly bush or other bushes in autumn meant a bad winter was to be expected.
3. The moon with horns up foretells of fine weather
4. Finding a cluster of 5 or more nuts on a tree meant your wishes would all come true

People

1. Sing before breakfast cry before night so the saying goes
2. Morning dreams are said to come true provided they are not told before midday