

Genealogy: Medieval Holy Days and Quarter Days

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Last week's Easter celebration reminded me of the holidays celebrated by our ancestors. Although Christmas and Easter remained long traditions in medieval Europe, many other traditions such as Michaelmas, Whitsunday, St. Swithun's Day, and many other "Holy Days" slowly disappeared overtime. These religious holidays marked the progress of the year and the changes of the seasons.

Because the lives of our ancestors were influenced by the church calendar, it is important for us to look at forgotten or changed traditions. These changes can impact our genealogical research as we move back in time. As an example, as I was researching my family in early English documents, I came across their birth dates given only as Saints' days. Hmmm, Saints' ...days ??

Upon further research, I discovered that Saints' days were given to every day of the year. These days were written and used by the clergy or monks. St. Luke's day was Oct. 18, St. Swithun's day was July 15, and so on.

Folklore or customs are attached to some Saints' days. St. Swithun's Day, falls on July 15. If it rains on that day, it is said, there will be rain for the next 40 days. But, if it's a "good" St. Swithun's Day there will be fair weather for the next 40 days. Reminds me of our Groundhog Day tradition, eh?

With the adoption of the Gregorian calendar, in 1752, many holy days of importance on the old Julian calendar were dropped. Lady Day or March 25 on the old Julian calendar was the first day of the year, and the official start for both church and government. Lady Day is named after the commemoration of the annunciation of the Virgin Mary.

Term days or quarter days were established as a way of dividing the calendar year into quarters. These days were significant because they marked the date when rents and taxes were due, debts payable and labour contracts began or ended.

Since there were few calendars and many people were illiterate, the quarter days were set on known religious holidays. These four days of the year were named, Lady Day (March 25), Midsummer Day (June 24) Michaelmas Day (Sept. 29) and Christmas Day (Dec. 25).

Easter was a moveable feast day, meaning that it does not fall on the same date each year. Easter is determined by the phases of the moon. The method of setting the date for Easter, is finding the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox, March 21. Therefore, Easter can fall on any date between March 22 and April 25. Our spring type weather quite often follows this moon phase, which can determine either an early or a late spring for planting crops.

In medieval times a celebration called "Hock-tide" marked the end of the Easter season. On the second Monday after Easter, the women of the villages would stop the men folk, tie them up and demand a small fee or fine for their release. The next day, the men would take their turn binding up the women, demanding a fee for their release as well. These monies would then be donated to the local parish church. Later this evolved into villages blocking roads for payment and thus started the term "tolls" which is a common practice today for paying for major bridges and highways.

This year the second Monday after Easter falls on April 4. Just to warn all men, if you notice your women friends carrying ropes, you may want to run or lay low and not get "Hog-Tied," unless you want to pay a toll.

(Sources: Google and Family Chronicle)

Lloyd Robinson may be contacted at timetraveller2011@gmail.com