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The traditional Scottish Christmas



Reprinted from www.cottages-and-castles.co.uk/guides/traditional-scottish-christmas

By Elianne Reed 2019

SCOTLAND has history: a lot of it. When you have history, you have traditions, and Scotland has traditions stretching back thousands of years. What us proud Scots love more than tradition, is food. And more than food? Drink. And when you expertly blend tradition, food and drink together you have the perfect recipe to create a custom that will inevitably last for hundreds of years.



With the nights closing in, the sun with its annual pale light making way for the early dusk, we know that the days of ochre autumn are coming to an end and soon winter, with its spiky frost and chilled air, will be upon us. And then, bringing a warm glow of celebration after the winter solstice, it's Christmas - and the joy of Christmas is universal, although celebrated in many different ways all over the world. Countries have their own rituals and customs which have marked this special time of year over many centuries. Let's look at some old Scottish traditions and see which have stood the test of time to start you off.

Druids, pagans and a 400-year ban

What many people don't know is that Christmas in Scotland was banned for nearly 400 years. However, let's go back to the days of Yore when our bonny land was inhabited with druids and pagans. The pagans celebrated the winter solstice, taking greenery into the house as a symbol of life during the dark nights. Mistletoe, revered for its fertility properties, was cut and hung – and as it compels us today to kiss underneath it, we suppose its fertility prowess works! The pagans also bought light into the dwellings, burning a Yule log with the charred remains being used to protect the house throughout



the year. Since then, placing candles in the window to welcome a stranger is a long-upheld Scottish Christmas tradition. By honouring the visit of a stranger in the night, you honour the Holy Family, who searched for shelter the night of Christ's birth. Many Scots today still burn a twig of the rowan tree at Christmas as a way to clear away bad feelings of jealousy or mistrust between family members, friends, or neighbours.



Rowan Tree
(Mountain Ash)

Continued on p.2

The Traditional Scottish Christmas ... from p. 1



An illustration of people collecting a Yule log from *Chambers Book of Days* (1832). Photo: en.wikipedia.org

As it stands perhaps more luck was needed, as in the mid-16th century, Cromwell's Reformation saw Christmas branded a catholic celebration and it was made illegal to celebrate. When Cromwell fell, the Scottish Presbyterian Church guided by its very own grinch John Knox, cancelled the festive season, forbidding any Christmas holiday festivities.

And that's how things were, until the Victorian era which saw a revival in festive celebrations, when Prince Albert bought many rituals from Germany which form the Christmas we recognise today. In the late 1950s, Christmas and Boxing Day became recognised holidays for the Scottish people, a now hodge-podge of Christian, Celtic, pagan and European traditions.

Despite the ban, we still had to eat and this became a way to celebrate by masquerading it as a necessity — so we turned to our food. One of the Scottish Christmas traditions that was banned for many years was the baking of Yule bread. A loaf of unleavened bread was baked for each individual in the family — made with caraway seeds, it looks a bit like a rope arranged into a circle. The person who finds a trinket in their loaf will have good luck all year. It is now more common of course, to include charms in the Christmas pudding or the Clootie Dumpling, a spiced pudding studded with dried fruits that is wrapped in a cloth (or the Scots word 'clood') and simmered in water for a lengthy period.



Clootie Pudding
Photo: reddit.com

Similarly, the Celts knew Christmas as Nollaig Beag or the Little Christmas, and they burned the Cailleach — a log carved with the face of an old woman, also known as the Hag of Winter — who brought the long nights and the cold. Burning the log was supposed to banish the cold and darkness and to take away any lingering bad luck.



Victorian Christmas
Photo: Victorian.com

Some parts of Scotland refer to Christmas Eve as Sowans Nacht, presumably inspired by the dish Sowans, which consists of oat husks and fine meal that had been steeped in water for several days until sour — yum. And mince pies, but not as we know them. Anyone anticipating today's fruit and spice pastry would be in for a shock, as then, the mince pie contained meat, fruit, spices... indeed anything that came to hand. The signature miniature size of the mince pie came about during the ban, as tiny pies were easier to hide from prying Presbyterian eyes. Topped off with black buns (cakes made from fruits, almonds, spices and a little whisky), bannock cakes (made of oatmeal) and sun cakes (sun-baked cakes), these were the traditional picks for a Christmas meal. And whisky — added to absolutely anything — is a must.

One still-popular custom is first-footing — after the stroke of midnight, neighbours visit each other, bearing traditional symbolic gifts such as shortbread or black buns. The visitor, in turn, is offered a small whisky, a wee dram. The first person to enter a house in the New Year — the first foot — could bring luck for the coming year. The luckiest was a tall, dark and handsome man. The unluckiest, a redhead and the unluckiest of all, a red-haired woman... you've been warned!

At the stroke of midnight, the quaich filled with whisky is passed around, and everyone enjoys a celebratory sip, sharing love and good luck for the new year to come. Another traditional day for Scots is the first Monday after New Year, where small gifts, or handsels, were given out. Traditionally coins and items of food such as cakes or pastries, it soon became synonymous with Laids, or Ladies, of a household giving them to their staff. This tradition was eventually overtaken by the English custom of giving boxed gifts to your employees on 'Boxing Day' in Victorian times.

So, there you have it. When you kiss under the mistletoe, find a charm in your pudding, or bite into your mince pie, take a moment to remember the canny folk that kept the traditions alive, even when celebrating was illegal. Perhaps you could introduce some new traditions, such as carving your own Cailleach to banish the dark and cold midwinter nights, or try purifying your house with a burning rowan branch. Whatever you do, remember that Christmas, or whatever it is called wherever you are, is — and has always been — about family, friends and giving thanks for what you have. It's also about hope, for hope is what keeps us moving forward. *By Elianne Reed.*



Sowans (fermented oats.) [Twitter.com](https://twitter.com)



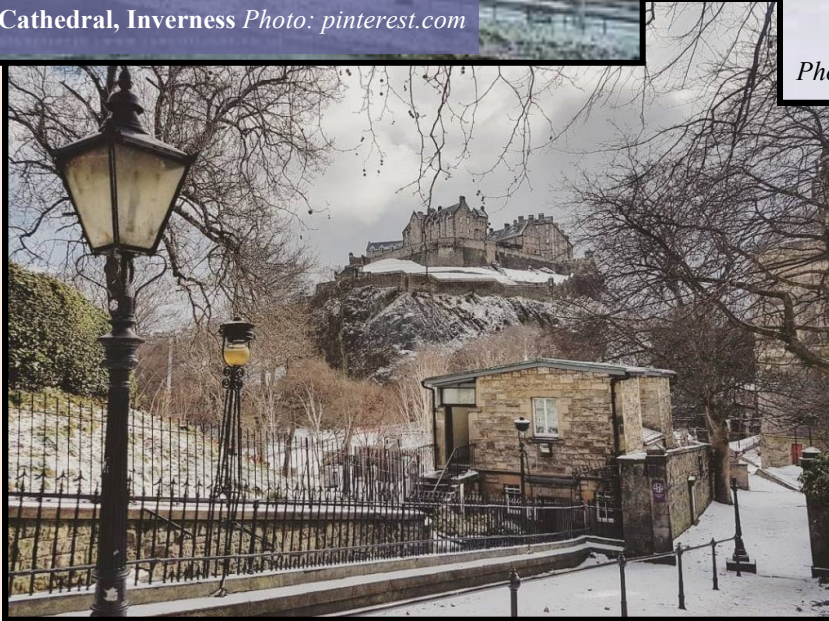
Scenes of Scotland in December



St. Andrew's Cathedral, Inverness Photo: [pinterest.com](https://www.pinterest.com)



Photo: Mark Hamblin [sciencephoto.com](https://www.sciencephoto.com)



Edinburgh Castle from the stairs descending down into St Cuthbert's Parish Kirk in the Princes Street Gardens. Photo: [castlehunter.scot](https://www.castlehunter.scot)



Students at University of Aberdeen. Photo: www.abdn.ac.uk



University of Glasgow. Photo: ugstudyglasgow.wordpress.com

Joan Axford Honoured for Forty Years of Dancing

By June Robinson & Louise Perry — Vancouver Island Scottish Country Dance Society. *Photos: Ray Fischer*



Joan Axford with celebratory roses — 20 November 2021.

VICTORIA—JOAN AXFORD looks amazingly relaxed for someone who has been doing Scottish country dancing for more than forty years. Admittedly it has not been a non-stop performance, but still it's an energetic accomplishment.

On Saturday afternoon 20 November 2021, the Wednesday night class hosted the long-anticipated dance honouring Joan Axford for her more than forty years of teaching. It was a well-attended event at City Light Church Hall, with fifty club members and six guests present.

The afternoon started with Jamie Orr piping Joan into the hall, escorted by Robin Gubby and David Walde. June Robinson, President of the *Vancouver Island Scottish Country Dance Society* (VISCDS), welcomed everyone to the special afternoon. The dancers were then called to the floor by MC Gael Forster who briefed the first dance, and then the dancing began! The entire program was a selection of dances with special significance to Joan.

In between the first set of dances, Gael introduced special guests—Patti Whitehouse, Robert Irvine, Monica Roots, Kurt Bandelou, Penny Catton and Ed Pitkin. Patti Whitehouse gave a tribute to Joan, including a poem



Patti Whitehouse delivers tribute to Joan Axford.

written by Patti in appreciation of Joan. She also recalled some memories and anecdotes from Joan's years of leading the demonstration team.

Following the second set of dances was a speech by Gordon Robinson, summarizing Joan's many accomplishments over the years in her dance life and in her professional life. Lori Morrison and Gael Forster then presented Joan with a specially decorated cake and a bouquet of roses. Joan expressed her appreciation, recalling people from the years of her involvement with Van Isle and thanking all who arranged and attended the special afternoon.

Another highlight of the afternoon was a demonstration for Joan of a dance written and briefed by Bob Anderson called, "Joan's Ruby Jubilee". In addition to the dance being especially written and performed, a musical selection was commissioned and written for the dance by Chris Dewhurst, and the CD recording of same was presented to Joan.



Some of the crowd honouring Joan Axford (right).

It was a great celebration of our very talented Joan Axford. The afternoon just flew by. Thank you to Gael Forster who co-planned the event and stepped in for her fellow teaching and planning partner, Sarah Kell. Thanks too to Sarah for briefing a dance over the phone, in spite of being ill. Our appreciation goes to Gordon Robinson for filling in to brief dances. Much gratitude to Lori and the social committee and to the Wednesday-night class for organizing the details. Kudos to all who helped clean up. In addition, it was such a warm feeling of community after nearly two years of isolation, to listen and share stories about Joan, to socialize with friends, and to be back together to dance!

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Joan at 2018 Highland Games.

Scottish New Year — the Three-Day Version

Adapted from an article by www.highlandtitles.com/caitlin, first published 30 December 2019.



New Year fireworks over Edinburgh.

EDINBURGH — Scottish New Year celebrations are world famous, and if you have yet to experience a traditional Hogmanay you are going to want to by the end of this article! The parties are usually inclusive of the whole family and are renowned for going on into the early hours — so much so that the Scots have an extra Bank Holiday on the 2nd of January! *[Doesn't apply anywhere in Canada.]*

What does the Scottish word Hogmanay mean?

Hogmanay is the word for the last day of the year and is synonymous with the celebration of the Scottish New Year. In the Scots language New Year's Eve has been widely known as Hogmanay since at least the 17th century. Some sources suggest it could have been adopted since Mary, Queen of Scots' return to Scotland from France in 1561. It is thought to have entered Middle Scots from a word in northern French dialect, *hoguinané*, meaning 'gala day'.

How do they say Happy New Year in Scotland?

In Scots they say 'haud Hogmanay' to celebrate the end of the old year and, once the New Year comes in, they call it 'Ne'rday' or 'Neerday' for New Year's Day.

And what does Auld Lang Syne actually mean? 'Auld Land Syne' is the song that everyone drunkenly croons just after midnight on Hogmanay. The words to Auld Lang Syne were written by famous Scottish poet Robert Burns, and it is set to an old folk tune that already existed.

At Hogmanay in Scotland, it is the correct practice that everyone joins hands with the person next to them to form a great circle

around the dance floor. At the beginning of the last verse, everyone crosses their arms across their breast, so that the right hand reaches out to the neighbour on the left and vice versa. When the tune ends, everyone rushes to the middle, while still holding hands. When the circle is re-established, everyone turns under the arms to end up facing Outwards, with hands still joined.



In countries other than Scotland, hands are often crossed from the beginning of the song, at variance with Scottish custom. The Scottish practice was demonstrated by Queen Elizabeth II at the Millennium Dome celebrations for the ringing in of the year 2000 and the English press berated her for not "properly" crossing her arms, unaware that she was correctly following the Scottish tradition. While the meaning still causes confusion, it is thought that the opening lines of the song are meant to be a rhetorical question: 'Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind? Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and auld lang syne?' Which apparently means that means we should have a drink in honour of whatever is passing and remember old friends.

Where did Hogmanay come from?

The large Hogmanay celebrations, of the likes we see now, date back to pagan times many hundreds of years ago, when people used to mark the end of the harvest and the end of the year with a festival called Samhain. Later, this became a midwinter yule festival, which continued when Catholicism became the nation's main religion. The period of celebrations became known as the 'daft days,' with people eating and drinking lots, enjoying parties and bonfires, and visiting and hosting neighbours.



Image: clipartlibrary.com

Why is Scottish New Years so big? In 1560, there were lots of arguments about how the Christian religion should be practiced, in a period known as the Reformation. People bringing in religious changes didn't approve of all the partying and they banned or strongly discouraged feasts that were associated with Catholicism, including Christ's Mass — i.e. Christmas. By 1640, an Act of Parliament had officially banned the Christmas break, so it is believed that this is what pushed all the partying and fun to New Year instead. Even though this Act was partially withdrawn in the late 17th Century, new year remained the big moment for celebrating in Scotland. It was only in 1958 that Christmas became a public holiday in Scotland — later than the rest of the UK.

Another New Year tradition takes place in **Stonehaven**, where sixty fireball bearers dressed in costume, parade down the High Street swinging lit-cages filled with paraffin-soaked rags. The fire harkens back to ancient pagan celebrations to mark Winter Solstice and the purifying power of fire.

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Stonehaven

A L-o-n-g Load for Scottish Community Centre

Photo update from Ian Booth, President of Scottish Community Centre Society



Long load of laminated beams leaving the factory for Scottish Community Centre of Victoria. Photo: Ian Booth

VICTORIA—Work progresses at the Craigflower construction site of the Scottish Community Centre. Potential donors are reminded that donations must be received before the end of December, in order for you to receive a 2021 tax receipt. Donations small or large are appreciated!

www.victoriasscottishcommunitycentre.ca

Annual Burns Dinner

Sponsored by Greater Victoria Police Pipe Band

The Greater Victoria Police Pipe Band has recently decided to cancel its popular Burns Dinner — normally held at the Winspear Centre in Sidney at the end of January. Instead of an in-person event in 2022, the band will do a video that is similar to the well-received product they put together in January 2021. Stay tuned!



Past Provost Jim Masterton (left) and Piper, Dr. Ken Wilson (right), at Saltire Society's St. Andrew's Dinner on 28 November 2021 at RVYC. Photo: L. Scott



Pipers Mike and Mike at Ross Bay Cemetery, Remembrance Day — 11 November 2021. Photo: L. Scott

Scottish Culture:

Saltire Society of Victoria: Contact is the Provost, Doug McLeod, at 250 360-1776 or the society's Scrivener (secretary), Larry Scott at 250 213-5239.

Sons of Scotland Benevolent Association. For inquiries, contact Keith Feir at 250 652-5773 or kfeir@shaw.ca

Victoria Gaelic Choir: The group sings in both Gaelic and English. www.victoriagaelicchoir.com

Victoria Highland Games Association: President is Jim Maxwell. www.victoriahighlandgames.com

Websites:

The Celtic Connection: Burnaby-based tabloid, publishing since 1991. Online at celtic-connection.com

The Scottish Banner is a digital download subscription service. View at: www.scottishbanner.com

Bruce Knight Memorial Piobaireachd Competition
<https://www.facebook.com/bruceknightmemorial>

Scottish Review is now edited by Islay McLeod, who is located in Prestwick: www.scottishreview.net

Rampant Scotland is a site begun in 1996 and written by Alan Scott at: www.RampantScotland.com/letter.htm

Canadian Alliance of British Pensioners. Did you ever work in the UK? You may be eligible for a pension. info@britishpensions.com or www.britishpensions.com

Dance Instruction:

Brentwood Scottish Country Dancers: Contact Janet Mitchell at mitchel5@telus.net for more detailed information. Classes happen at the Brentwood Centre.

Vancouver Island Scottish Country Dance Society: www.viscds.ca Weekly classes for various levels of ability. Further information may be had from June Robinson, viscdspresident@shaw.ca

Bon Accord Highland Dancers: Lynne Griffiths. Tel. 250 479-7804 BonAccordDancers@shaw.ca

Glengarry Highland Dancers: Carolyn Phillips-Cusson. Tel. 250 758-0208 or email for information to info@celticperformingarts.com

Kathleen Laurie School of Highland Dance: Tel. 250 213-9627 dancehighland@gmail.com

Kathy White's Island Highland Dance Academy: kathywhitedance@hotmail.com Cell 250-710-0837

Katie Dean School of Highland Dance: H 250-920-3513 cell 250-514-8110 kdean@shaw.ca

O'Brien School of Irish Dancing: Teachers — Mairead O'Brien/Crystal van Boven. www.obrienirishdance.com Tel. 604 340-2370.

Victoria Highland Dance Association. Sponsors competitions, etc. Contact at www.vhda.weebly.com

Victoria School of Irish Dance: www.victoriairishdancers.com Contact Alison Paladini at 250 888-9421 or alisonpaladini@shaw.ca

Victoria Area Pipe Bands:

BC Pipers' Association serves solo Highland Bagpipers, Scottish Drummers and Pipe Bands in British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon. www.bcpipers.org

Canadian Scottish Regimental Association Pipe Band
www.canadianscottishregiment.ca

Castle Cary Pipes and Drums. For band info go to: www.castlecarypipesanddrums.ca

443 Squadron RCAF Pipe Band. P/M Stephen Kelly Stephen.kelly@forces.gc.ca or stevekelly@live.ca

Greater Victoria Police Pipe Band. www.gvppb.com Pipe Major Warren Fells; Drum Major Randy Evans.

Pipe Band of the Canadian Scottish Regiment (Princess Mary's). Drum Major Glen Ereat, contact at Glen.Ereat@forces.gc.ca

Saanich Peninsula Pipe Band. Contact 250-652-9954 or <https://saanichpeninsulapipeband.blogspot.com/>

78th Fraser's Highlanders Pipe Band. Contact Pipe Major Dave Hjalmarson at nordicsword@hotmail.com

2136 Royal Canadian Army Cadet Corps Pipes and Drums. www.2136cadets.ca

VanIsle Caledonia Pipe Band. Pipe Major Richard Findlay at www.vanislecaledonia.com

Local Businesses With Celtic Flavour:

Bard and Banker Scottish Pub, 1022 Government St, Victoria www.bardandbanker.com

Caledonia Meats. Haggis makers. colegriffiths11@gmail.com or 250 857-5260.

Craigdarroch Castle, 1050 Joan Cresc, Victoria. Built by Scottish coal baron Robert Dunsmuir. <https://thecastle.ca/>

Fraser Orr's Butcher and Deli, 108-1931 Mt. Newton Cross Rd., Saanichton. Haggis, Scotch pies, etc. www.fraserorrsbutcher.com

Freedom Kilts, 1335 Pembroke St., Victoria www.freedomkilts.com

Irish Linen Stores, 1019 Government St, Victoria www.irishlinenvictoria.com

Irish Times Pub, 1200 Government St, Victoria www.irishtimespub.ca

Island Bagpipe, 5775 Alder Way, Nanaimo www.islandbagpipe.com Bagpipes and much more.

Lion Rampant Scottish Pub, 6777 Beaumont Ave., Duncan. www.lionrampant.ca

North of Hadrian's Kilts and Celtic Clothing, 102-318 Wale Rd., Victoria. 778 406-2243 www.northofhadrians.com

Out of Ireland Irish Importers, 1000 Government St., Victoria: www.outofireland.ca

Victoria Caledonian Distillery & Twa Dogs Brewery does tours and events. www.victoriacaledonian.com

*If you would like to be on the free email mailing list for the **Scottish Newsletter**, contact Larry Scott by email at kitimatlarry@gmail.com There is no print version available.