

## BELTANE



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The annual festival of **Beltane** (or *Bealltainn* in Scottish Gaelic) has deep and ancient roots in pagan traditions, and was one of the four most important festivals in the Celtic calendar alongside *Samhain* (Hallowe'en), *Lughnasa* (1<sup>st</sup> of August) and *Imbolc* (St. Bride's Day). It has long been seen as a highly symbolic time in which it is important to welcome in the summer. In our more agricultural past this meant a lot more than hoping for some sunny weather, as successful crops and good grazing for cattle could mean the difference between life and death. Overall, there was a strong focus on fertility and a healthy start to the summer. There were many different Beltane customs practised across the country, but some of the most notable are given an overview here.

### BONFIRES

Perhaps the most popular and important element of any Beltane celebration is the lighting of a large bonfire, which long held a great deal of significance among communities. There are records of all sorts of rituals relating to communal fires taking place – particularly in the Highlands, where communities were known to burn 'need-fires'. This involved extinguishing all flames in the village, before lighting one large fire, using flint or wood to create friction, which would then be spread to relight the hearth fires in the village, a process of renewal and cleansing. It was also popular for festive goers to leap over or drive their cattle around Beltane bonfires, which held a sacred significance. This sacredness of fire played a big part in

the revival of Beltane celebrations in recent years, with Edinburgh's **Beltane Fire Society**. A large volunteer-run organisation has revived Beltane to be one of Edinburgh's strongest cultural events, combining performance theatre, fire displays, drumming and dance into a pageant-like display, centring around the marriage of the two summer elements – the May Queen and the Green Man. In Edinburgh, Arthur's Seat was traditionally the ancient celebration point for Beltane where beacons were lit every year and maypoles erected, but in recent years this has moved to Calton Hill instead – however a faithful few still ascend the Seat each year to welcome the dawn.



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## BANNOCKS

Another common Scottish Beltane custom was the baking of special bannocks to mark the occasion, an oatmeal based bread similar to oatcakes. There were also rituals and practices associated with this, which F. Marian McNeill gives details of in *The Silver Bough*:

*'After kindling the bonfire with tein-eigen (needfire) the company prepared their victuals. As soon as they had finished their meal, they amused themselves in singing and dancing round the fire. Towards the close of the entertainment, the person who officiated as master of the feast produced a large cake baked with eggs and scalloped round the edge, called an bonnach bealt-tine – i.e., the Beltane cake. It was divided into a number of pieces, and distributed in great form to the company. There was one particular piece which whoever got was called cailleach beal-tine – the Beltane carline, a term of great reproach. Upon his being known, part of the company laid hold of him and made a show of putting him into the fire;*

*but the majority interposing, he was rescued. In some places they laid him flat on the ground making as if they would quarter him. Afterwards he was pelted with eggshells, and retained the odious appellation during the whole year.'*<sup>1</sup>

Although we wouldn't necessarily recommend trying that at home, perhaps you would like to try your hand at baking a bannock?

### **Beltane Bannocks**

#### **Ingredients**

4 oz (125g) medium oatmeal  
2 teaspoons melted fat (bacon fat, if available, butter or ghee will work well)  
2 pinches of bicarbonate of soda  
Pinch of salt  
3/4 tablespoons hot water  
Additional oatmeal for kneading

#### **Method**

Mix the oatmeal, salt and bicarbonate and pour the melted fat into the centre of the mixture. Stir well, using a porridge stick if you have one and add enough water to make into a stiff paste. Cover a surface in oatmeal and turn the mixture onto this. Work quickly as the paste is difficult to work if it cools. Divide into two, roll one half into a ball and knead with hands covered in oatmeal to stop it sticking. Roll out to around a quarter inch thick. Put a plate which is slightly smaller than the size of your pan over the flattened mixture and cut round to leave a circular oatcake. Cut into quarters (also called farls) and place in a heated pan which has been lightly greased. Cook for about 3 minutes until the edges curl slightly, turn, and cook the other side. Get ready with another oatcake while the first is being cooked.

An alternative method of cooking is to bake them in an oven at Gas 5/375F/190C for about 30 minutes or until brown at the edges. The quantities above will be enough for two bannocks about the size of a dessert plate. If you want more, do them in batches rather than making larger quantities of mixture. Store in a tin and reheat in a moderate oven when required.

**Recipe:** <http://urbanherbology.org/2011/04/30/beltane-herbs/>

## **OTHER CUSTOMS**

Washing one's face in the May dew in the early morning is one of the best known and widespread May Day or Beltane customs, with young women up and down the country engaging in it, often in the belief that it would help find them a lover. In a similar fashion, it is recorded that in Barra the girls would climb to the top of a hill and say this Gaelic phrase on May morning, willing for a tall, handsome man:

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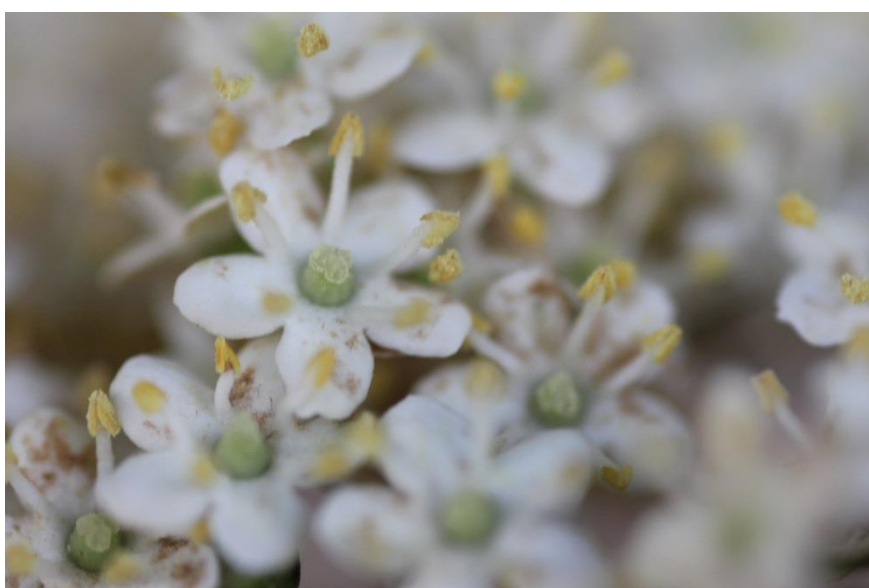
<sup>1</sup> F. Marian McNeill, *The Silver Bough* (Glasgow: William MacLellan, 1959), p. 60.

*Fear brèagha bu togarainn  
Fear mhòr, àrd, brèagha, gheibheamaid!*

Other superstitions were associated with Beltane in the Gaelic tradition also, for instance in this proverb, that suggests that Beltane falling on a Friday would bring misfortune for the rest of the year:

*'s minig is màthair na mhac 'iodh baath  
Mar is h-Aoine Bealltuinn*

Nature and greenery of course also play an important part in Beltane lore, with the rowan and hawthorn trees being of particular significance. In Strathspey people would make hoops of rowantree which they would then make sure their cattle passed through in the morning and evening of Beltane, and crosses of rowan were also made to act as protective talismans. Hawthorn is heavily associated with Beltane due to its association with fertility, and was often used as decorations and symbols during weddings.



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It was also common in places for 'healing wells' to be drunk from on Beltane, such as in Killin, where it was a hotspot for the young people, and the water was believed to have restorative powers. However there was a stranger superstition attached to water in Lewis, where in Barvas it was recorded that *'On the first day of May a man went across the river there to prevent any female from passing over it first, otherwise the natives believed that the salmon would be hindered from coming into the river during the rest of the year.'*

**With credit to the School of Scottish Studies Archives**