

## Topic Page: [Bonfires](#)

Definition: **bonfire** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

**1.**

a large fire in an open place, for entertainment, celebration, or as a signal.

**Plural:** bonfires

**2.**

any fire built in the open.

**Plural:** bonfires

**Etymology:** earlier *bonefire*; heaps of wood and bones were burnt at certain old festivals



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Summary Article: **Bonfires**

From *The Halloween Encyclopedia*

Once one of the most popular Halloween celebrations throughout the British Isles, bonfires are now confined largely to civil celebrations or Guy Fawkes Night.

There is considerable speculation over the meaning of the word “bonfire” itself. The earliest known instance of the derivation of the word occurred as *ban fyre ignis ossium* in the *Catholican Anglicum*, although some scholars

believe it might be derived from *Bane-fire* (where *Bane* is a derivation of *Baal*, the name of a pagan deity); “boon-fire” (from the idea that neighbors all contribute a “boon”); or “bone-fire” (from the idea that pagans once threw bones into the fire). The likeliest suggestion is that the word probably comes from a Christian celebration, that of St. John the Baptist's birth; he was born in mid-summer, and it is believed that the saint's bones were burnt by the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate in the mid-fourth century a.d. A mention from a 1493 accounting of royal expenses notes “the making of the bonefuyr on Middlesomer Eve, 10s.” The original spelling of the word was “bone-fire,” with “bonfire” a relatively recent derivation.

Bonfires are often built with kindling collected or even begged specifically for that purpose, and collecting the materials may be an element of souling or begging. Bonfires lit in celebration of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day were usually lit on hillsides, but Guy Fawkes bonfires were often simply large piles of kindling assembled in the streets of a town.

Bonfires originated as a Halloween custom with the Celts, who lit bonfires on their two greatest festival days, Beltane (May 1) and Samhain (November 1). Celtic lore records the kindling of fires at Tlachtga each Samhain; all other fires were extinguished and re-lit with embers from the new fire. Celtic bonfires have also been explained as tributes to the sun, as protection against evil spirits, and as beacons to friendly spirits returning home on Samhain, but any such explanations are largely theories or suppositions. Bonfires may also have been used for animal and human sacrifice by the Celts and their priests the Druids (sometimes involving construction of a huge “wicker man” into which the victims were placed). In a pageant presented at Sherbourne in 1905, two early (A.D. 705) British tribesmen

who have recently been converted (not very successfully) to Christianity have this dialogue explaining bonfires:

*The Chieftain. Thou knowest, Gurth, the old gods are dead.*

*2nd Attendant. I know we have ceased to worship them. But I fear them still. For dead they are not. Now they haunt the woods as evil spirits.*

*(The others assent)*

*1st Attendant. Wherefore, O Chieftain, turn away their anger.*

*The Chieftain. Why, kindle a fire, then...*



*Tar barrels are lit on Guy Fawkes Day in this 1853 newspaper illustration*

In fact, this passage probably contains more poetry than truth. More likely, Celt bonfires also had a practical side: Not only were taxes charged for the kindling of the Samhain fires on Tlachtga, but the ash was probably used as fertilizer in their fields.

One of the best explanations of the undying fascination with bonfires may be that given by Thomas Hardy in Chapter Three of his novel *The Return of the Native*, wherein he describes a Guy Fawkes Night celebration, with thirty bonfires blazing on hilltops all over one district. Although Hardy suggests that the custom comes from “Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies,” he goes on to suggest that “to light a fire is the instinctive and resistant act of man when, at the winter ingress, the curfew is sounded throughout Nature. It indicates a spontaneous, Promethean rebelliousness against the fiat that this recurrent season shall bring foul times, cold darkness, misery and death. Black chaos comes, and the fettered gods of the earth say, Let there be light.”

The Christian third Council of Constantinople (A.D. 680) tried to abolish bonfires, and inadvertently provided a look at early bonfire customs: “Those fires that kindled ... over which also they use ridiculously and foolishly to leape, by a certaine antient custome, we command them from henceforth to cease.” It is still a popular custom to leap over bonfires or dance around them, and may date back to a Druid ritual of driving livestock between two fires to ensure fertility or safety from evil forces. Another attempt to abolish bonfires was made in a.d. 742, when the practice of kindling by “need-fire” (friction) was condemned as a pagan practice.



*Children prepare for a bonfire (photograph by Sir Benjamin Stone)*

Another early look at bonfires is provided by traveler Thomas Pennant, who in 1772 wrote of the Scottish parish of Maylin, near Pitlochrie: “Hallow Eve is also kept sacred; as soon as it is dark, a person sets fire to a bush of broom fastened round a pole, and, attended with a crowd, runs about the village. He then flings it down, heaps great quantity of combustible matters on it, and makes a great bonfire.”

If the Christian third Council was unsuccessful in abolishing bonfires, later church officials fared somewhat better when they complained that Halloween bonfires had become nothing but an excuse for drunkenness and recklessness—by 1860 Halloween bonfires in Scotland, which were once an adult activity, were set exclusively by boys, a custom which largely prevails to this day. Bonfires are not without specific dangers as well: Yarmouth in Great Britain, for example, suspended bonfires in 1893 after one toppled down on a spectator, killing him,

There are numerous different fire customs recorded throughout the British Isles. They may involve the belief that fire is a protective force: For example, in many areas of Scotland children carried blazing torches and, after sunset on Halloween, ran around the boundaries of their land to protect them from fairies and other malicious supernatural forces, and to ensure fertility (it was crucial that the boys ran in the direction of the sun, or *deas-iuil*, not “widdershins” or *tuath-iuil*). Special attention was given to huts or houses wherein resided mothers and children young enough to be snatched by fairies.

One peculiar bonfire custom occurs in Hatherleigh, Devon, Great Britain, shortly after Halloween (actually on the night before the first Wednesday after Guy Fawkes Day). Two sledges carrying a total of six tar barrels are dragged to the highest point in town, and at dawn the first sledge is set afire and dragged around the streets. At 8:30 that evening the second sledge is set alight and also paraded through town before ending in a bonfire. Similar practices are recorded at the Scottish celebration of Hogmanay: “Burning the clavie” involved carrying a torch (the “clavie” was the wood for the torch) and burning a tar barrel.

On the Isle of Wight, after the November 5th bonfires were lit, male spectators hurled fire-balls into them; the fire-balls were made of finely-packed oakum, and were held in wire casings with handles.

In the parish of Logierait in Scotland, faggots of heath and broom flax were carried aflame on poles by men who ran round the village. In the northeast of Scotland boys went house-to-house and begged a peat from each householder, saying “Ge’s a peat t’ burn the witches.” When the fire was going, each boy in turn would lie down as near to the fire as possible, and others ran through the smoke and jumped

over him. At the end of the fire, the boys scattered the ashes ritually by kicking first with the right foot and then with the left; a game was to see who could scatter the most. In Aberdeenshire, as soon as the last spark died out the boys would cry “The devil take the hindmost!” and run. In Wales, when the last spark of a Halloween bonfire went out, everyone ran shouting, “The cropped black sow seize the hindmost!”

One peculiar bonfire-like custom was practiced in a Lancashire field near Poulton called (appropriately) Purgatory Field. On Halloween, men assembled there in a circle and threw forkfuls of burning straw into the air, while onlookers fell to their knees and prayed for the souls of the departed in Purgatory. Farmers who participated also believed that the procedure was useful against the weed darnel.

The samhag was a bonfire built on Halloween by families, usually on the highest point on or near their land. Part of the samhag custom involved marking stones and throwing them into the fire; the next morning the ashes were examined carefully, since a missing stone indicated the death of its owner within the year.

In Lancashire Halloween fires were sometimes called either *Beltains* or *Teanlas* (or tindles), and were considered to be largely a Christian practice.

In Duffield, Derbyshire, a bonfire unrelated to Halloween or Guy Fawkes was held each year during the first week in November. Every night during the first week of the month, all the young men of the area yoked themselves to carts, and, proceeded by horns, collected trees and other wood along the lanes; on the first Monday of November, they built a great bonfire with the collected wood. The “wakes of Duffield” finished on that Monday night with the young men engaging in a “squirrel hunt,” in which they all took pots, pans, and other noisemakers, went to Kedleston Park, and created a din with the intention of frightening squirrels into falling from the trees.

In America (mainly on the east coast), Halloween bonfires serve chiefly to entertain children, who often roast hot dogs or marshmallows over them. In France, Halloween bonfires were often used to roast chestnuts. In a Welsh custom, nuts thrown onto a bonfire predict the future: If the flames dance about when the nuts are thrown in, the coming year will be full of fun and excitement; but if the flames don't change, the coming year will be dull.

Bonfires are also recorded in some celebrations of the Japanese Bon Festival.

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Bonfires. (2011). In Morton, *The Halloween encyclopedia* (2nd ed.). Jefferson, NC: McFarland.  
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## MLA

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