

Saint Patrick's Day

Saint Patrick's Day or the **Feast of Saint Patrick** is a cultural and religious holiday celebrated on 17 March. It is named after Saint Patrick (c. AD 385–461), the most commonly recognised of the patron saints of Ireland.

Saint Patrick's Day was made an official Christian feast day in the early seventeenth century and is observed by the Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion (especially the Church of Ireland), the Eastern Orthodox Church and Lutheran Church. The day commemorates Saint Patrick and the arrival of Christianity in Ireland, as well as celebrates the heritage and culture of the Irish in general. Celebrations generally involve public parades and festivals and the wearing of green attire or shamrocks. Christians also attend church services, and the Lenten restrictions on eating and drinking alcohol are lifted for the day.



Saint Patrick depicted in a stained glass window at Saint Benin's Church, Ireland

Saint Patrick's Day is a public holiday in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Newfoundland and Labrador and Montserrat.

It is also widely celebrated by the Irish diaspora around the world; especially in Britain, Canada, the United States, Argentina, Australia and New Zealand.



Traditional St Patrick's Day badges from the early 20th century

Saint Patrick

Little is known of Patrick's early life, though it is known that he was born in Roman Britain in the fourth century, into a wealthy Romano-British family. His father was a deacon and his grandfather was a priest in the Christian church. At the age of sixteen, he was kidnapped by Irish raiders and taken captive to Ireland as a slave. It is believed he was held somewhere on the west coast of Ireland, possibly Mayo, but the exact location is unknown. According to his Confession, he was told by God in a dream to flee from captivity to the coast, where he would board a ship and return to Britain. Upon returning, he quickly joined the Church in Auxerre in Gaul and studied to be a priest.



A St Patrick's Day religious procession in Downpatrick

In 432, he again said that he was called back to Ireland, though as a bishop, to Christianise the Irish from their native polytheism. Irish folklore tells that one of his teaching methods included using the shamrock to explain the Christian doctrine of the Trinity to the Irish people. After nearly thirty years of evangelism, he died on 17 March 461, and according to tradition, was buried at Downpatrick. Although there were other more successful missions to Ireland from Rome, Patrick endured as the principal champion of Irish Christianity and is held in esteem in the Irish church.

Traditions and celebrations

Wearing of the green

Over the years the colour green and its association with Saint Patrick's Day grew. Green ribbons and shamrocks were worn in celebration of St Patrick's Day as early as the 17th century. Saint Patrick is said to have used the shamrock, a three-leaved plant, to explain the Holy Trinity to the pagan Irish, and the ubiquitous wearing and display of shamrocks and shamrock-inspired designs has become a feature of the day.



According to legend, Saint Patrick used the three-leaved shamrock to explain the Holy Trinity to Irish pagans.

Festivals

Saint Patrick's feast day, as a kind of national day, was already being celebrated by the Irish in Europe in the ninth and tenth centuries. In later times he became more and more widely known as the patron of Ireland. Saint Patrick's Day thus became a holy day of obligation for Roman Catholics in Ireland. It is also a feast day in the Church of Ireland. In 1903, Saint Patrick's Day became an official public holiday in Ireland. The first Saint Patrick's Day parade was held in Dublin in 1931. In the mid-1990s the government of the Republic of Ireland began a campaign to use Saint Patrick's Day to showcase Ireland and its culture. The first Saint Patrick's Festival was held on 17 March 1996. These days, this festivity includes concerts, outdoor theatre performances and fireworks.