

May Day has been celebrated in Britain for many years, certainly for over two thousand years, taking us well into pre-Christian times. May 1st is often thought of as the first day of summer and many towns and villages still have traditional rites and celebrations, including Morris dancing, crowning of a May Queen and dancing around a Maypole. It is a time to look forward with joy and hope as warmer weather comes, trees blossom and flowers grow.

A Morris dance is a traditional folk dance with the dancers wearing costumes with bells on their knees and carrying swords or sticks, usually accompanied by music played on an accordion, concertina or fiddle. The earliest record of Morris dancing is thought to be in 1448 and was certainly very popular in Tudor times. However, under Cromwell, it was frowned upon and actively discouraged.

The May Queen leads the May Day parade, usually wearing a long white dress and a crown of flowers. The following year she returns to crown the new May Queen. In 1833 Lord Tennyson wrote a famous poem about the May Queen which begins,

You must wake and call me early, call me early, mother dear;
To-morrow 'Ill be the happiest time of all the glad New-year;
Of all the glad New-year, mother, the maddest merriest day;
For I'm to be Queen o' the May, mother, I'm to be Queen o' the May.

From The May Queen by Alfred Lord Tennyson



Photo by Mike Goren

A Maypole dance takes place round a tall pole which has coloured ribbons hanging down from it. The long ribbons are held by the dancers as they weave in and out and around the pole; often the dancers are children.

You may also hear the term 'Mayday' as a distress signal used by sailors or aircraft pilots when in trouble. The term is always said three times (Mayday,

Mayday, Mayday) so that it cannot be mistaken for any other phrase when communications are poor. This phrase has nothing to do with the spring May Day, but comes from the French term, 'venez m'aider' meaning 'come help me'.



Answer these questions in full sentences.

1. For how long has May Day been celebrated?

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2. Where might you see May Day celebrations taking place?

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3. What might you see in a May Day celebration?

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4. Describe the appearance of a Morris dancer.

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5. When is the earliest record of Morris dancing thought to be?

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6. What does the May Queen traditionally do the following year?

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7. Who wrote the poem, 'The May Queen' from which a short extract is given?

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8. Describe a Maypole dance.

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9. What do you think the Maypole would look like after the dance is finished?

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10. What is the other meaning for the word 'Mayday'?

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Answers

1. May Day has been celebrated for over two thousand years.
2. You might see May Day celebrations taking place in many towns and villages in Britain.
3. You might see Morris dancing, crowning of a May Queen and dancing around a Maypole in a May Day celebration.
4. A Morris dancer might be wearing a costume with bells on the legs and carrying a sword or stick.
5. The earliest record of Morris dancing is thought to be in 1448.
6. The May Queen traditionally returns the next year to crown the new May Queen.
7. The poem, 'The May Queen' was written by Alfred Lord Tennyson.
8. A Maypole dance takes place round a tall pole which has coloured ribbons hanging down from it. The long ribbons are held by the dancers as they weave in and out and around the pole; often the dancers are children.
9. The Maypole might have many ribbons twisted around it in a plaited pattern.
10. The other meaning for 'Mayday' is used as a distress signal by sailors and aircraft pilots when in trouble.