

St. Patrick Patron Saint of Ireland

17th March

Patrick, Patron Saint of Ireland, is a figure wrapped in mystery and legend. For several hundred years he was believed to have been born in Scotland, then learned opinion switched his birth-place to Wales. The most recent scholarship now places him as being born in Cornwall in about 373 AD. I favour the Cornish theory. One reason for this is that I always favour Cornwall in all circumstances, reasonably or not; the second reason is far more academic!

So many stories link Cornwall's introduction to Christianity with saints who came from Ireland (on mill stones, ivy leaves and other odd conveyances) that it would be good to think that the island which gave the faith to Cornwall received her main missionary from Cornwall. But this is a digression.

Wherever he came from it is pretty generally accepted that Patrick was kidnapped at about fifteen and carried off into slavery in Ireland. Here he worked as a swineherd for five years until he seized the opportunity to escape on a boat travelling back to his homeland. He wrote later that while in Ireland he "felt the Spirit burning" in him and gave his life to God. Once safely home he tried in vain to settle. Each night he was troubled by dreams in which he heard the Irish people calling to him to come back and "henceforth walk among us...." Disregarding the pleas of his family he returned to Ireland and attempted to work as a missionary.

After some time he realised that his knowledge and scholarship were not deep enough to work successfully and he travelled to Europe to study under, among other scholars, Germanus. He was received into the Church and took Holy Orders and after some years returned to Ireland as a Bishop. Here he worked for over fifty years for much of the time opposed by the High King, a pagan strongly influenced by the "band of wizards" he kept about him. One of the best-known stories tells how Patrick, determined to celebrate Easter in a worthy manner, defied the King's injunction that all lights and fires should be extinguished and no fire rekindled until the court wizards had lit the "Fire of Magic". In Tara Patrick built and lit the Easter Flame which, miraculously, could be seen all over Ireland. So impressed was the High King that he cancelled the Death Sentence which was the usual punishment for an illegal fire and allowed Patrick to continue his work. One of his best known teaching illustrations was his use of the shamrock to illustrate the Trinity.

*There's a dear little plant that grows in our isle,
'Twas St. Patrick himself sure that set it;
And the sun on his labour with pleasure did smile,
And with dew from his eye often wet it.
It thrives through the brake, through the mireland;
And he called it the dear little shamrock of Ireland-
The sweet little shamrock,
The dear little shamrock,
The sweet little, green little,
Shamrock of Ireland*

Andrew Cherry – Irish playwright (1762-1812)

He died in 463AD and left Ireland a Christian country. And, of course, according to the most popular legend, he also left Ireland snake free.

SOME SHAMROCK FACTS and FOLKLORE...

1. Shamrock is the English form of the Irish word seamrog which means 'little clover' or 'young clover'
2. Shamrock was first used as a plant name by the English herbalist, John Gerard in 1596 when he wrote that meadow trefoils are called Shamrocks
3. In 1988 a survey conducted at the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, Dublin revealed that when Irish folk wear shamrock it can be one of four common clovers or trefoils – lesser trefoil, white clover, black medick or red clover!
4. Shamrock is not the official emblem in the Republic of Ireland – the state emblem is the 12 stringed harp.
5. The custom of wearing the shamrock dates back to the late 1600s.
6. In 1900 Queen Victoria instructed that all Irish soldiers serving in the British regiments should wear shamrock on St Patrick's Day in memory of those who died during the Boer War. This custom continues today.....but is the reason remembered?