

# Lughnasadh

**Lughnasadh** is a Gaelic holiday traditionally associated with the first of August. Lughnasadh was one of the four main festivals of the medieval Irish calendar: Imbolc at the beginning of February, Beltain on the first of May, Lughnasadh in August and Samhain in November. The early Celtic calendar was based on the lunar, solar, and vegetative cycles, so the actual calendar date in ancient times may have varied. Lughnasadh marked the beginning of the harvest season, the ripening of first fruits, and was traditionally a time of community gatherings, market festivals, horse races and reunions with distant family and friends. Among the Irish it was a favored time for handfastings - trial marriages that would generally last a year and a day, with the option of ending the contract before the new year, or later formalizing it as a more permanent marriage.

In Celtic mythology, the Lughnasadh festival is said to have been begun by the god Lugh, as a funeral feast and games commemorating his foster-mother, Tailtiu, who died of exhaustion after clearing the plains of Ireland for agriculture. The first location of the *Áenach Tailteann* was at the site of modern Teltown, located between Navan and Kells. Historically, the *Áenach Tailteann* gathering was a time for contests of strength and skill, and a favored time for contracting marriages and winter lodgings. A peace was declared at the festival, and religious celebrations were also held. A similar Lughnasadh festival was held at Carmun (whose exact location is under dispute). Carmun is also believed to have been a goddess of the Celts, perhaps one with a similar story as Tailtiu.

A festival corresponding to Lughnasadh may have been observed by the Gauls at least up to the first century; on the Coligny calendar, the eighth day of the first half of the month *Edrinios*, is marked with the inscription TIOCOBREXTIO that identifies other major feasts. The same date was later adopted for the meeting of all the representatives of Gaul at the Condate Altar in Gallo-Roman times. During the reign of Augustus Caesar the Romans instituted a celebration on August 1 to the genius of the emperor in Lyon, a place believed to have also been named for the Celtic god Lugh.

On mainland Europe and in Ireland many people continue to celebrate the holiday with bonfires and dancing. The Christian church has established the ritual of blessing the fields on this day. In the Irish diaspora, survivals of the Lá Lúnasa festivities are often seen by some families still choosing August as the traditional time for family reunions and parties, though due to modern work schedules these events have sometimes been moved to adjacent secular holidays, such as the Fourth of July in the United States.