



the case for establishing a nationwide

# **HALLOWE'EN FESTIVAL**

**in ireland**

## samhain | the ancient gathering

Samhain, the ancient festival celebrated to mark the fault-line between two halves of the year, was at its core a regathering of clan and of kin. It took place at a time when it was believed the natural order of things was 'suspended' for one night - the living world mixed with the dead as light gave way to darkness. Tribes and clans gathered at the end of harvest time, campaigns of war were suspended and enormous celebrations were held.

Today we have an opportunity to initiate a new regathering centred on what Hallowe'en has come to represent over the many centuries and cultures which have shaped it - a widely marked secular event which retains an essential theme of darkness and celebration of the otherworldly to it which goes right back to its Samhain roots.

In this vein, Hallowe'en can still very legitimately be identified as historically Irish in origin. We should seize this opportunity to create a new, nationwide **Hallowe'en/Samhain Festival** which can incorporate the myriad of events which already take place in every part of the country, whilst drawing interest from other

parts of the world where Hallowe'en is already widely celebrated.

By establishing a second, large-scale uniquely Irish holiday approximately 7 months from the St Patrick's Day Festival, one which is already celebrated widely around the world and particularly by large sections of the American and British populations, tourism income would stand to gain significantly in late October and early November period. The existing funding and sponsorship model for large scale festivals operated by Fáilte Ireland and a range of private sources serves as a good template upon which to base the funding of any new Hallowe'en/Samhain Festival.

## origins | a mix of celtic and early christian

Samhain, as most people understand, was one of the four great seasonal events celebrated by the pre-Christian inhabitants of this island (along with Imbolc, Lughnasagh and Bealtaine). Historically, Samhain marked the beginning of dark winter months and the end to harvest time, and the evidence suggests that the festival was also a time to celebrate and remember the dead.

It's also apparent that Samhain marked the end of 'wartime' – the summer months being the only suitable time for conquest or dispute-resolution with neighbours – and so as a result became a time for large tribal gatherings to take place before settling in for a long, dark winter.

This 'clan and kin' sensibility was ingrained profoundly on the pre-christian inhabitants of Ireland, it can be seen in the development of Brehon law & custom which was at least partially observed until as late as the 17th century.



The following extract from *Tlachtga: Celtic Fire Festival* by John Gilroy (Pikefield, 2000) outlines the nature of the festival at the time:

*"The Fires were in all likelihood lit in honour of the sungod - here manifesting as Mog Ruith, but certain other of the trappings are clearly associated with the Lord of the Dead. The idea that Samhain is a juncture between the two halves of the year saw it acquiring the unique status of being suspended in time - it did not belong to the old year not the new. It could be said that time stood still on this night and the implications of this were immense. During this night the natural order of life was thrown into chaos and the earthly world of the living became hopelessly entangled with the world of the dead. But the world of the dead was itself a complicated place, peopled not only by the spirits of the departed, but also with a host of gods, fairies and other creatures of uncertain nature."*



The observance of Samhain and similar end-harvest festivals as a major point in the calendar was well-established in pre-Christian Europe by the time Christianity spread and consolidated itself. Holy days and observances were a central feature of the spread of Christianity in the early Middle Ages, and the christianisation of established holidays - whether by accident or by design - was common.

The feast of All Hallows, from which the name Hallowe'en derives, was initially set in May by Pope Boniface IV in c. 610, and later moved to



November 1st by Gregory III. There is evidence that, although observed widely on the continent, in Ireland Samhain continued to be celebrated separately to All Hallows' Day & for some centuries afterwards the latter was marked in May.

By the time of the counter-reformation however, All Saint's Day and All Souls' Day on November 1st and 2nd had become firmly established, albeit with many of the traditions of Samhain continuing to be observed.

It's from this mix of ancient celtic and mediaeval christian traditions that the modern idea of Hallowe'en emerged. Customs we know today - trick or treating, costume wearing, party games, lighting lanterns and candles, and the embrace of the macabre - can all be traced back to similar customs that had emerged by the middle ages and into the 19th century.

One further essential element in the creation of the Hallowe'en festival we know today resulted from the mass emigration by many Irish and Scottish poor to the New World in the 19th Century. Although founded by christian Europeans, the Pilgrim Fathers actively discouraged the superstitious celebration of Hallowe'en and it was not until the arrival of immigrants from Ireland and Scotland that the traditions we recognise today properly arrived.

As with Christmas, though perhaps not on as large a scale, the holiday slowly began to spread and to be observed by catholic and protestant alike, and eventually by all faiths and none.

In the period after the Second World War, the observance of Hallowe'en grew even further. It's not until the last 15 years however, that Hallowe'en has grown into a secular mass consumer event, with spending and themed events increasing dramatically in just the last decade in the US, the UK and in Ireland.



## the right type of festival | the practical case in favour

Establishing a larger festival around Hallowe'en in Ireland, given the existing widespread celebration of the event, does not pose the same challenges as creating a new holiday entirely. Hallowe'en of course is well established, but there are a number of other practical factors which taken together add strongly to the case for enhancing the holiday.

- ⇒ October 31st is ideally situated 7 months from St Patrick's Day and falls seven weeks away from Christmas.
- ⇒ There is already a public holiday associated with the day, though not officially linked.
- ⇒ Observance is very high. Some Local Authorities coordinate celebrations in their areas, such as South Dublin County Council and Meath County Council
- ⇒ Events at Hallowe'en are often arranged for children and families, as well as events for adults.
- ⇒ It is almost entirely a secular event, crossing religious, national and ethnic lines.

⇒ It is a versatile holiday - although there are traditional customs associated with the day, all things horror, macabre and dark have grown to become associated with it.

⇒ Ireland itself has a rich tradition of the macabre outside of Hallowe'en. Pagan myth is replete with stories of dark mysticism surrounding figures such as the banshee, for example. Although images like this have been considered twee and derogatory - that is a corruption of their true origin. In the modern era, Ireland has produced masters of gothic horror fiction such as Bram Stoker and Sheridan LeFanu, who are known internationally for their works of vampire fiction.

Finally, as outlined already above, Ireland is uniquely placed to claim the historic origin of many of the observances and themes associated with Hallowe'en.

## legitimising celebrations | reducing social cost and encouraging greater responsibility

There is no doubt that some of the celebrations around Hallowe'en at present do result in anti-social behaviour and damage to property. It's well-known that our emergency services, first responders and A&E staff feel the strain of this every year.

Rather than seeing this as a reason to discourage the celebration of Hallowe'en however, it can be seen to be an opportunity to legitimise the holiday, bring a degree of control to events and raise much needed funds to pay for the adverse consequences - particularly clean up costs. South Dublin County Council has led the way already in this regard, pioneering the annual 'Hallowfest' to try and reduce the almost €1m annual clean up bill.

## administration and funding model

Using the St Patrick's Day Festival as a model, a central umbrella brand can be developed which can be applied to existing and new events, to hotels and hostels, to restaurants and to sites of historical and tourist interest. The existing funding model for large scale festivals - whereby funds are sourced through Fáilte Ireland and a range of other private sponsors - serves as a good template in this respect.

With the right level of funding and the correct targeting, new initiatives can be encouraged and already successful initiatives can be given a lifeline. Given the right advice, directors of the festival can ensure that it does not become overtly commercial and the sensibility remains firmly rooted in genuine and legitimate celebrations arising from our various traditions, both here and in other countries.

## appendix 1

### a selection of current hallowe'en themed events in ireland

#### Hallowfest - South Dublin

<http://www.hallowfestdublin.com/>

#### Spirits of Meath Hallowe'en Festival

<http://www.spiritsofmeath.ie/>

#### Bram Stoker Festival

<http://www.bramstokerfestival.com/>

#### Glasnevin Cemetery Children's Tour

<http://www.familyfun.ie/ghastly-glasnevin-cemetery-childrens-ghoulish-graveyard-tour/>

#### Dublin Ghost Bus (all year round)

<http://www.dublinsightseeing.ie/ghostbus/index.aspx>

#### Hallowe'en at the Wax Museum

<http://www.familyfun.ie/halloween-wax-museum-dublin/>

#### Frankenhouse - Lighthouse Cinema

<http://www.lighthousecinema.ie>

#### Otherworld Festival Ballymun

<http://www.otherworldfestival.com/home.html>

#### Irish Film Institute Horrorthon

<http://www.ifi.ie/horrorthon>



Hallowe'en Haunted History Tour & Hellfire Excursion,  
Dublin (Along with a range of other events)

<http://www.hiddendublinwalks.com/>

Other places which are holding events this Hallowe'en

Hallowe'en at the National Museum of Archaeology

Leixlip Castle, Kildare

Hallowe'en at Malahide Castle

Dracufest, Donegal

Fireworks Extravaganza, Mayo

Marlay Park, South Dublin

Botanical Gardens

Dublin Zoo

Cliffs of Moher

Bunratty Folk Park

Lough Gur Hallowe'en Storytelling Festival

Bog of Allen, Kildare

Dead of Night Hallowe'en Carnival, Longford

Ballina Hallowe'en Festival

Red Mountain Open Farm Event, Meath

Birr Castle

## appendix 2

### consumer spending in the US and UK at hallowe'en

The popularity of Hallowe'en has shown no sign of deterioration over the past 50 years, particularly in the United States.

Spending on Hallowe'en appears to have ballooned in recent years. The National Retail Federation of American estimated that spending on Hallowe'en in the US has risen 55% since 2005.<sup>1</sup>

The NRF also estimated that in 2012, 71.5% of Americans took part in Hallowe'en related activities - which equates to a market of 225,000,000 people approximately with an average spend per person of just under \$80. In the same year, US consumer spending on Hallowe'en related activities was conservatively estimated at US\$8billion.

In 2011, the American Haunted House Association estimated that they alone sold \$400m - \$500m in ticket sales for their nationwide events that year.

In the same year, the Agricultural Marketing Centre of the United States estimated that \$113m was spent on

---

<sup>1</sup> National Retail Federation of America *Halloween Spending Survey 2013*  
<http://blog.nrf.com/2013/09/25/the-not-so-spooky-stats-for-halloween-2013/>

pumpkins.

In Britain, similar levels of spending can be seen. In 2011, Planet Retail, a British retail research organisation, estimated that GB£315m was spent on Hallowe'en.<sup>2</sup> Most interestingly, the same study shows that spending on Hallowe'en in the UK in the 10 year period from 2001 - 2011 rose to that figure from approximately £15m - a 2,100% increase. This is a single study and should be subject to the usual caveats of course, however the trend is clear and strong in both countries.

---

<sup>2</sup> Planet Retail Halloween Spending (Press Release - October 2011)  
<http://www.planetretail.net/Presentations/PressRelease-Halloween.pdf>

## image credits

images reproduced under creative commons licence

Hill of Tara Aerial Image - Eriksen Family/Flickr

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/eriksens/>

Bonfire image - Mik Efford/Flickr

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/strangejourney>