

Introduction: This factsheet is not intended to be definitive guide to Paganism. Alternatively, it attempts to provide basic known facts as well as some information that is perhaps less well-known.

Paganism



The Pagan Pentacle¹

Paganism encompasses a wide range of both related and divergent beliefs. It is very diverse in nature. An essential link between the religious beliefs and traditions is a reverence and adherence to nature and the fact that they have their origins in religions traditional to indigenous peoples throughout the world.

Numbers in the UK

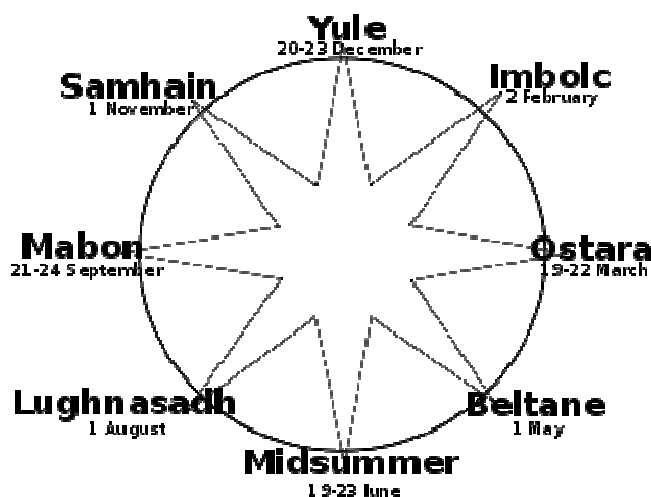
A 2002 estimation of the number of Pagans in the British Isles by the Pagan Federation of Great Britain put the figure at anywhere between 50,000 and 200,000.

Beliefs

Most Pagan religions have a focus on the natural world, its power and spirituality.

Holy Days

The Pagan Calendar is seasonal in focus and comprises eight festivals spread throughout the duration of the year.² This cycle of festivals is often called the Wheel of the Year.



The Wheel of the Year containing the eight festivals³

¹ Author: Nyo. Source: Wikipedia (http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pagan_pentacle_2.PNG)

² Further information on these and other Holy Days can be found in the Interfaith and International Calendar produced by Julian Harrison at Leicestershire County Council.

³ Source: Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Wheel_of_the_Year.svg)

In the Wheel of the Year:

- **Yule** is the Winter Solstice
- **Mabon** is the Autumn Equinox
- **Ostara** is Spring Equinox
- **Midsummer** is the Midsummer Solstice

The Beltane celebration in Edinburgh is particularly famous, though many practising Pagans do not regard as an essentially religious occasion. Every year on 30th April, thousands gather at Carlton Hill to celebrate the coming of summer. The celebration is marked by people dressing as the May Queen and the Green Man (symbolising fertility and growth), the resultant crowning of the latter by the former and then their marriage. The costume imagery of Edinburgh Beltane is derived from Celtic and Scottish folklore, though there are also traces from other indigenous people's traditions. Fire is associated with Beltane, and consequently the Hill is alight with torches and symbolic fire arches.

Worship

Because of the diversity of Paganism as a religion, there is a consequent diversity in the nature and forms of Pagan worship. What is fairly common is an outside location, whether that be in woods, caves, stone circles, on hilltops, by the seashore etc, consistent with the belief in the spirituality of nature. Worship also takes place in private homes and in gardens. There is a strong tendency towards gender equality in Pagan worship, with men and women worshipping together, though in some circumstances women do take a more leading role. A ritual circle or sacred space is often marked out for worshippers to stand around. The significance of the circle is that it has no beginning or end. Nevertheless certain parts of the circle are acknowledged to represent the elements and directions. Ceremonies also involve a wide variety of features, including singing and music, meditating, chanting, prayer, dance, drama and orations, and the sharing of food and drink. In addition to spirituality through nature and a belief in the close connections between human beings and the natural world, Pagan worship also comprises a focus on honouring immanent divinity and showing the connections between nature, their living experiences and the divine. Thus worship for Pagans is an all-encompassing and essentially literal and living experience.

Paganism is NOT Devil Worship

It is a common misconception to equate Paganism with devil worship. Fundamentally, Pagans do not recognise the Devil or Satan as deities. Indeed, it is probably as useful to emphasise what Paganism is not about, as much as its actual strands and beliefs. Paganism is not the occult. Paganism is not the same as Satanism. Pagans are not devil worshippers. They are not evil. They do not practise 'black magic', neither do their practices involve the harming of animals or sexual deviation.

Rites and Rituals

Pagan ceremonies such as marriages, funerals and Druid rituals, as well as Pagan ministers and hospital visitors have become more commonplace. Some Pagan marriages involve the ritual of 'handfasting' in which the couple's held hands are joined together by a cord or ribbon. This practice is the derivative of the term 'tying the knot'. Pagan weddings are individualistic in nature, in that both the words that are spoken and the form of the relationship into which they are marrying are decided by them rather than 'proscribed' by some given format. However, the weddings tend to be similar in location (outdoors) and spatial aspects (the forming of a circle) to general Pagan worship. After the exchange of rings, newly-married couples traditionally 'jump the broomstick', which marks a symbolic boundary between their old lives and the new. Weddings generally end with feasting and general celebration.

Subdivisions

- Paganism has absorbed influences from around the world and this eclecticism has resulted in a wide variety of traditions and religious beliefs and practices coming under the general heading of Paganism.
- Some Pagans do follow their own particular tradition or route and associated practices, known as a 'path', whereas others are more flexible and either change their 'path' or choose to combine different elements of 'paths'.
- Paganism includes Wiccans, Heathens, Shamans, Odinists, Sacred Ecologists, Druids and other Celtic traditions, as well as different practices and specific traditions such as non-Wiccan witchcraft.

- The Goddess Movement emphasises the feminine aspect of the divine. There is a Goddess Temple in Glastonbury in Somerset, a town particularly associated with many Goddesses within Paganism. Goddesses are associated with the cycle of nature, with celebrations for particular Goddesses taking place at specific times within the year. There is a thought, however, that these apparently distinct Goddesses are in fact simply different faces of one Goddess.
- Modern Heathenry takes as its original source and impetus, the religious traditions and practices of pre-Christian Northern Europe (Scandinavia, Germany, Anglo-Saxon England etc). Heathens recognise many Gods and Goddesses and look to build positive relationships between such deities, spirits and ancestors. Such relationships are reflected in their everyday actions and holy rites, including the concept of 'wyrd', a force which connects everything through space and time and thus ensures that all actions have implications and therefore all actors have responsibilities. Of course, such Gods and Goddesses are reflected in our days of the week – Tuesday (Tyr), Wednesday (Woden), Thursday (Thor) and Friday (Frige).
- Wicca is a religious witchcraft tradition that emphasises the significance of magic, spells and rituals and commonly honours a Triple Goddess (Maiden, Mother and Crone) and a Triple God (Hunter, Father and Sage) who together represent the divine. Gerald Gardner (1884-1964), who was a noted writer on Wicca and responsible for its development and popularisation, stated that Wiccan gods were the ancient gods of the British Isles and made reference to the Great Mother goddess and a Horned God called Cernunnos or Herne. It is important to note that there are other forms of witchcraft in Paganism that are not Wiccan. Wiccan worship can be done individually or in covens, comprising traditionally – but not necessarily – thirteen people. There is a strong ethical code in the practice of magic which focuses on the need to help people and not to harm others, and in a general sense, Wiccans believe in the need for people to live in harmony with themselves and with nature.



Illustration of Herne the Hunter by George Cruickshank, from Windsor Castle by Harrison Ainsworth⁴

- Teenage witchcraft has become increasingly popular in the UK, fuelled by a greater knowledge and a visible presence in the media and television. However, it shouldn't be thought that witchcraft has become attractive solely through popular and perhaps more 'superficial' vehicles such as TV shows and films. The focus on nature and the environment, gender, morality and serious aspects of the supernatural have proven to be attractive to some young people turning to this form of Paganism. Most Pagan covens are age-restricted (18 and over) and so young people either worship or practice on their own or with other people of their age.

⁴ The illustration dates from the 1840s. Source: Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Herne_the_Hunter.jpg)

- Animism refers to the belief that souls also exist in non-human forms. Animists therefore believe that in addition to human beings, spiritual life exists in animals, plants and in natural phenomena such as rocks, hills, mountains, rivers, lakes and indeed in elements of nature such as thunder and lightning. Though animist belief can be found within the broad spectrum of paganism, it can also be found in other religions and belief systems, Shinto and Shamanism being good examples.

Leicestershire Contacts

The Pagan Federation in the UK is divided into districts. The East Midlands Pagan Federation has a weblink on the main Pagan Federation site (www.paganfedeastmids.co.uk/). The Leicestershire and Rutland contact can be contacted via the website. Though a national networking organisation, the Pagan Network has its operational base in Leicester.

The Leicester Pagan Alliance is based in the City of Leicester, holds monthly moots (gatherings) and has its own website (<http://leicesterpaganalliance.wordpress.com/>). In addition there are other Pagan groups within Leicestershire. An example would be The Beltane Spring Fayre Group (<http://www.beltanefayre.org/>).

Credits and Sources⁵ of Further Information⁶

General:

BBC – A Basic Introduction to Paganism (www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/classic/A1032166)

BBC – Religion and Ethics (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/paganism/)

The Pagan Federation (www.paganfed.org/)

Pagan Network (www.pagan-network.org/site/)

Pebble (www.pebble.uk.net/)

UK Pagan Links (www.ukpaganlinks.co.uk/)

Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Handfasting> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wicca>)

Wicca and Witchcraft:

The Museum of Witchcraft (www.museumofwitchcraft.com/)

Druidry & Celtic Studies:

The Druid Network (<http://druidnetwork.org/>)

Folklore:

Encyclopedia Mythica (www.pantheon.org/mythica.html)

The Goddess and Women's Mysteries:

Covenant of the Goddess (www.cog.org/)

Earth/Environmental:

Sacred Sites Project (www.sacredsites.org.uk/)

Publications:

Pentacle Magazine (www.pentaclemagazine.org/pn760/index.php)

We are very grateful to local Pagans, including members of the Leicester Pagan Alliance, for their advice and guidance in the production of this factsheet.

⁵ Many of the following sources were recommended by a member of the Leicester Pagan Alliance.

⁶ Details of other organisations and sources of information can be found by contacting Julian Harrison at Leicestershire County Council. He has a database containing contact details of faith organisations nationally and internationally.