

# Ancient Holidays

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Objective:** To understand the seasons and the origins of modern holidays, you will calculate the dates of the ancient English/Druid holidays and compare them with our holidays today.

**Background:** The Druids were religious shamans of the ancient Celtic peoples who lived on the British Isles before the spread of Christianity. Like all ancient people, they paid careful attention to the seasons and the position of the sun. Stonehenge, although built before the Druids, was used by them to mark the position of the winter solstice and probably other seasonal dates as well.

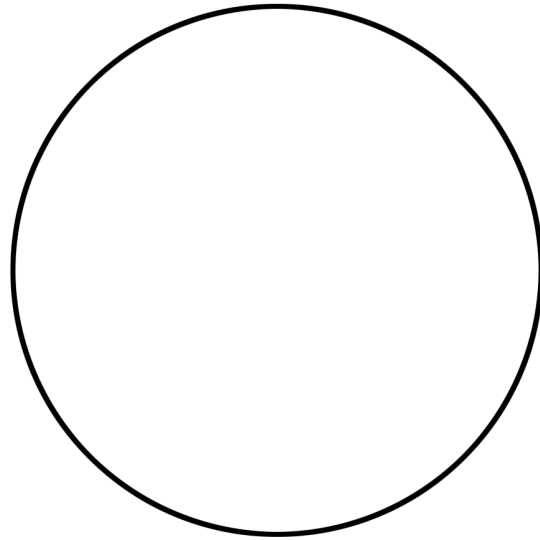
Many of the ancient holidays have faded away, but surprisingly many of them are still observed in some fashion today, although you may not know their origins. The Druids observed holidays on the solstices and equinoxes and also at the halfway points between them. Your job is to figure out the dates of these holidays and see if there is any corresponding celebration today.

1.) On the circle at right, make four marks each 90 degrees apart and mark them with the solstice and equinox names and dates.

2.) Now count the number of days between each mark. Remember that some months are longer than others. Then write the number of days down on the circles between the marks.

3.) Now calculate the halfway point for each season and count the days from the end of each mark to the next halfway point.

For example, the Autumnal Equinox falls on Sept. 22 and the Winter Solstice is on Dec. 21. Adding up, there are 9 days in Sept., 31 in Oct., 30 in Nov., and 21 in Dec. That gives 91 days for autumn. Half of that is 45.5 days. Counting from Sept. 22, we get a halfway point of around Oct. 31/Nov. 1. The dates of the other points are: Vernal Equinox = March. 20, Summer Solstice - June 20. (Note: these dates change slightly depending on leap year and the exact position of the sun).



## Show your calculations here:

Number of days between Autumnal Equinox  
and Winter Solstice:

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Halfway date:

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Number of days between Winter Solstice  
and Vernal Equinox:

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Halfway date:

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Number of days between Vernal Equinox  
and Summer Solstice:

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Halfway date:

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Number of days between Summer Solstice  
and Autumnal Equinox:

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Halfway date:

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The Druids celebrated the beginning of seasons at the halfway points. Other holidays were celebrated at the solstices and equinoxes. For example, the start of autumn was celebrated on the evening between Oct. 31 to Nov. 1. It was called the festival of Samhain or "Fleadh nan Mairbh," the Festival of the Dead. Do some research on the Internet and find out how the Celts celebrated Samhain. What modern holiday is celebrated at that time? What features of Samhain are still celebrated today on that night?

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The other holidays were called Yule (Winter Solstice), Imbolg (between Winter Solstice and Vernal Equinox), Ostara (Vernal Equinox), Beltaine (between Vernal and Summer), Litha or Midsummer (solstice), Lughnasadh or Lammas (between summer and fall), and Mabon (autumn equinox). What were the traditions and features of each holiday, and do we have anything today that is similar?

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