

# Harvest Time!

Through September and October, British churches of most denominations have a Harvest Festival, but the modern Harvest Festival is mainly a Victorian development based on biblical themes.

Feasts connected to harvest are mentioned in the Bible. the Feast of Weeks (Shavout) marked the start of harvest when the first-fruits were gathered in, and the Feast of Ingathering (Sukkot) marked when all was gathered in at the end of harvest. Exodus 23:16 says "You shall keep the feast of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labour". It is described in Exodus 34:22, where it is called the "Festival of Ingathering at the year's end". It marked the end of the harvest and thus the end of the agricultural year.

The Book of Common Prayer, used by the Church of England, provides for special Thanksgiving prayers for specific occasions such as thanksgiving at times of rain after drought, times of peace, deliverance from plague, and for thanksgiving for plenty.

Thanksgiving Days were called nationally in England by the Privy Council and the Church of England, which set a special national Thanksgiving Day for England and Wales, and separate ones were also called in Scotland. A national Thanksgiving Day was like a public holiday, except in addition there was a special church service when a liturgical prayer of thanksgiving was read out. Sometimes it was the set prayer from the Book of Common Prayer, and sometimes it was one specially written for that year.

The first church to make the Harvest Thanksgiving an annual service is believed to be the church of St Mary and St Giles at Buckerell, near Honiton in Devon. Revd Edwin Coleridge held a Harvest Thanksgiving at Buckerell on Friday, 14th October 1840, and then held one every year when the parish church was decorated with fruits of the harvest.

In times before mechanisation, agriculture employed much of the local community in rural areas. At harvest the whole community, including children, were needed to help right up until the end. Schools broke up in August to allow teachers and children to assist with the harvest, which is the origin of the long school summer holidays.

Of course, we still celebrate Harvest Festivals today, although our focus may have changed from the Victorian era. However, it is still an opportunity to celebrate our belief that "all good gifts around us are sent from Heaven Above".

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