

Candlemas



Candlemas falls on 2nd February and is a small but very old traditional festival which we have always celebrated in the Sheiling School. It marks the very end of the Christmas period which started two months ago with the first Advent Sunday at the beginning of December.

Over the years we have celebrated in many ways and pupils' always have made earth candles of clay pots and beeswax and placed them into the earth as darkness fell on Candlemas Day, to symbolize giving away the light of Christmas to the whole world as we celebrate it as a land festival.

In the Sheiling School we try to be in close touch with the changing seasons in our beautiful estate and we can experience the stirring of new life in the plant world which begins now.

It is the time when the crystal forms in the earth are most active. Rudolf Steiner told us that it is the time of year to turn our thoughts to the earth. Candlemas marks the end of winter and celebrates the first stirrings of spring.

Another aspect to Candlemas is a centuries-old country ritual "Wassailing" in which many small pieces of white toast are fixed in the branches of the apple trees to encourage birds to come, particularly robins, to stimulate new life and growth

Candlemas marks the presentation of the baby Jesus in the Temple, where Simeon held the baby and called him a 'Light to the World'. It takes its name from the blessing of candles for use in church through the coming year. On Candlemas night, many people place lighted candles in their windows at home.

Candlemas Day is also known as Groundhog (a little furry hibernating animal from N America, also called Woodchuck) Day.

It has been said that when a groundhog comes out of its hole after a long winter sleep, it looks for its shadow. If the groundhog sees its shadow, there would be six more weeks of winter. However, if the groundhog does not see its shadow, then spring would be around the corner.

According to an old English song which we sing:

"When Candlemas day is bright with sun then the winter's but half begun. But when Candlemas day is filled with rain then winter's power is on the wane"

Another story was that Roman legions brought this tradition to the Germans during the conquest of the northern country. The Germans then came to a conclusion that if the sun shined on Candlemas day, a hedgehog would cast a shadow. This would, therefore, predict six more weeks of bad weather. Six weeks was interpreted as a 'second winter'. The tradition was brought over to Pennsylvania from German settlers. There were many groundhogs in the region. They then determined that the groundhog represented the European hedgehog very well and decided that if it were sunny on February 2nd, Candlemas Day, the groundhog would see its shadow and hurry back underground for six more weeks.

Folklore tells us that not only groundhogs but also bears and wolves emerge from hibernation to inspect the weather. If they find sunshine, they will not venture out for at least another 40 days.

What is the significance of 6 weeks or 40 days? Forty has long been an important number both in the Bible and in many other religions: the 40 days of Lent, Christ's 40 days in the desert, 40 days of mourning after death, 40 days of rain before the dove was sent out from Noah's ark. It takes 40 days to mend broken bones or to recover from surgery! In the days of worldwide plague, the quarantine period was 40 days. It takes 40 days to master a new skill.

And the list will no doubt go on.