

Go wild in the New Year – Dook, Bear, Hurling and Helly!

You've managed to eat your way through Christmas and made some resolutions on New Year's Eve. Now see what awaits you as the new year really gets underway.



It's January, it's miserable outside, the excitement of Christmas is past: How can you bring a bit of sparkle into those first weeks of 2016? Well, have a look at these quirky events going on throughout the UK.

Start the year with **Stoats Loony Dook**, the annual dip in the freezing River Firth, in the shadow of the world-famous Forth Bridges just outside Edinburgh. As the organizers say, 'You don't have to be loony, mad or brave ... but it helps.' The event has taken place for the last 30 years on 1st January. Bagpipes play on the shore as the brave few hundred people put on fancy dress and throw themselves into the freezing cold water of the Firth of Forth at Queensferry. Most of them run in and out again very quickly, but some brave souls really go for a proper swim. And why *Stoats Loony Dook*? *Stoats* is a porridge manufacturer and the sponsor of the swim; *loony* means crazy and *dook* is a local word for dip.

You have to travel across the border for the next tradition on 15th, 16th and 17th January – to Whittlesey in Cambridgeshire. Here you'll find the **Straw Bear Festival** which celebrates the old Fenland custom of parading straw bears around the town every January. Although its exact origins are unknown, there is a newspaper report from 1882 that explains that a straw bear was led around the town to entertain the townspeople on the first Tuesday after Plough Monday (itself a day of feasting). In 2016, you can expect the bear (a man dressed in a straw suit) to appear with over 250 singers and dancers in a procession through the town, a full three-day programme of entertainment and the final night's 'Bear Burning'. This symbolic burning leaves the way open for the following year's bear to be created from the next summer's harvest.

Next up, on 26th January is **Up Helly Aa**, right up north on the Shetland Islands. Winter in this part of the United Kingdom is long and dark – there are only six hours of daylight - so a wild and fiery celebration is in order! Like the *Straw Bear Festival*, *Up Helly Aa* is a relatively new tradition first celebrated in the 19th century. After many tweaks and changes, *Up Helly Aa* has been in its current guise for the past 100 years. Its name refers to any Scottish fire festivals and means 'up holiday all'. There is a torchlight procession, with almost 1000 participants, the burning of a Viking longship and a Scottish ceilidh (a party with music and dancing) which lasts until the wee small hours. Just the thing for a January night.

And finally, on 8th and 9th February, you can travel all the way down to beautiful St Ives in Cornwall to enjoy **Hurling the Silver Ball**. Hurling here in Cornwall is very like rugby (not to be confused with Irish hurling), but instead of a rugby ball, the players chase a silver ball: apple-wood encased in sterling silver. The two teams are made up of countrymen and townsmen from a particular parish and they attempt to take the ball from each other, while running around the town and beach of St Ives. Whoever returns the ball to the mayor on the steps of the Guildhall at the stroke of midday, is the winner and receives a silver coin. The game has been played for many years and celebrates the anniversary of the consecration of the Parish Church of St Eia in 1434 AD.

If you would like more information about the *Stoats Loony Dook*, then click [here](#).

And if you'd like to find out about the *Straw Bear Festival*, then click [here](#).

If you're interested in *Up Helly Aa*, then click [here](#).

And finally, if you'd like to know more about *St Ives Feast* and *Hurling the Silver Ball* in Cornwall, then click [here](#).

And if you would like to use these festivals as a topic in your lesson, then we have provided you with an activity at from A2 level upwards. You'll find it in the following **Teacher's notes** and on the **Worksheet**.

Teacher's Notes**Which festival?** (level A2 upwards, 15+ mins)

- Make a copy of **Which festival?** (see Worksheet) – one for each student.
- On the board write: *Stoats Loony Dook, Hurling the Silver Ball, Straw Bear Festival and Up Helly Aa.*
- Explain that these are all festivals in the first few weeks of the year in the UK.
- Use the [Network Now British Isles map](#) to show the location of the four festivals:
 - Queensferry is slightly west of Edinburgh;
 - Whittlesey is east of Peterborough;
 - the Shetland Islands are the northernmost islands on the map;
 - St Ives is almost at Land's End, just a few miles north of Penzance.

But be careful not to say which festival is where.

- Give out a copy of **Which festival?** to each student.
- Check answers to the task on the Worksheet together in class.
Key: Festival 1-b), Festival 2-c), Festival 3-d), Festival 4-a)
- In pairs, students ask each other the follow-up questions.

Worksheet**Which festival?**

Read about the four festivals. Where does each festival take place?

- a) Queensferry, near Edinburgh
- b) Shetland Islands
- c) St Ives, Cornwall
- d) Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire

FESTIVAL 1: *Up Helly Aa*

In January, there are only six hours of daylight in this part of the UK so people enjoy a lot of fire at this festival. Almost one thousand people walk in a procession holding flaming torches. A Viking boat is burnt and people dance until after midnight.

FESTIVAL 2: *Hurling the Silver Ball*

This is an old festival. Two teams play a game like rugby, but they have a silver ball that weighs about 500g. The game is played in this beautiful town near Land's End. The players run all over the town and beach – and sometimes they run into the sea!

FESTIVAL 3: *Straw Bear Festival*

This is farming country near Cambridge. Every year a man is covered in straw and pretends to be a bear. The festival lasts for three days and there is a lot of singing and dancing - the bear dances, too! On the last day, all the straw is burnt on a big bonfire.

FESTIVAL 4: *Stoats Loony Dook*

This is a swimming festival in the North Sea. You have to be very brave (or stupid!) to take part. Most people jump into the water and then run out again, but some people swim for half an hour in the icy water and look at the Firth of Forth bridges.

Follow-up questions

- Which festival would you like to visit?
- Do you have any festivals at the beginning of the year where you live?