

St George's Day (23 April)



How could a fourth-century Greek in the Roman army become the patron saint of England? Admittedly, it isn't so obvious ...

Actually, very little is known of St George's history, indeed it was said by Pope Gelasius that George is one of the saints "whose names are rightly revered among us, but whose actions are known only to God". This means that most stories about his past are mythologised and may or may not be true. However, it is thought that George was born in what is now Turkey, and he became a successful Christian officer in the Roman army.

The Emperor at that time, Diocletian, demanded that all soldiers make sacrifices to pagan gods. George refused so he was tortured (quite hideously) but did not die. Finally he was beheaded - on 23 April 303 - but not before his fame had become widespread and he was recognized as one of the first Christian martyrs.

Fast forward to 1222, where the Synod of Oxford was trying to find a unifying saint for England, but not somebody who would have any national or local cult, such as Thomas á Becket. St George was well known in England and indeed he had (apparently) appeared before the crusaders in Jerusalem in 1099. He was greatly admired by European knights and his image appeared on their banners. The synod agreed on St George and declared that **St George's Day** should become a feast day in England. For the next few hundred years, St George's Day was a major feast day, similar to Christmas, but by the end of the 1700's it had almost finished, due to the union of Scotland and England.

There is a famous quote from *Henry V*, written by William Shakespeare (who, incidentally, was born and died on 23 April – St George's Day) where Henry cries before the Battle of Agincourt "God for Harry, England and St George!" This is quite an accurate image of St George, who was known as an armed warrior famous for his military conquests. St George was certainly no animal-loving, caring saint like St Francis of Assisi.

Perhaps the best-known legend connected with St George is the story of the slaying of the dragon. While there are several versions of this story, the most popular in the UK is this one: A town called Silene in Libya was terrorized by a dragon. Every day the dragon demanded a young woman to be sacrificed for him. After some time, there was only one young woman left - the king's daughter. By chance, George was travelling nearby and on hearing of this situation, George said he would kill the dragon if the remaining population of the town agreed to become Christians. They hastily agreed and he immediately killed the dragon and saved the princess.

But what about the current situation in England? Is St George celebrated now? The celebrations that do take place are usually rather low key and there is no public holiday. Some English people say that it is unfair that the other three countries of the UK have their own patron saints and holidays (St Andrew, 30 November in Scotland; St David, 1 March in Wales and St Patrick, 17 March in Ireland) while England does not have the real opportunity to celebrate its Englishness. The drink and catering industry are, not surprisingly, very enthusiastic to support any kind of festivities, seeing it as a way to increase business.

The biggest controversy concerning St George's Day is that it has been linked to the right-wing political fringes. Nationalism, jingoism (especially amongst sports fans) and anti-immigration have all been associated with the resurgence of interest in St George. Furthermore, many people argue, the patron saint of a country should have some relevance to the country. St George never visited England and indeed has no historical connection with the country. And what is more he does not belong exclusively to England – he is the patron saint of twelve other countries, including Georgia, Canada, Lithuania and the Catalan region of Spain.

So, there has been discussion about trying to find a new symbol of Englishness – St Alban, the first English Christian martyr and St Edmund a ninth-century King of East Anglia have both been suggested. In a recent poll on the Huffington Post, the person most voters would like to see as England's new patron saint is Winston Churchill.

Click here to find out more about St George's Day around the world
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_George's_Day.

And click here for more information about St George's Day (and all things English)
<http://www.stgeorgesday.com/>.

If you would like to use St George's Day as a topic in your lesson from A2.1 upwards, we have provided you with a reading and comprehension activity.

You'll find all this in the following **Teacher's notes** and on the two **Worksheets**.

Teacher's notes

Activity (level A2.1 and upwards; 25+ mins)

- Ask students if they know of any Saint's days. You could encourage St Nicholas 6 December, St Patrick 17 March. Ask if they know which country St Patrick is the patron saint of (Ireland). Then ask about the countries in the UK: Scotland - St Andrew (30 November), Wales - St David (1 March) and England - St George (23 April).
- Tell students they are going to read a text about St George's Day.
- Distribute the texts (see Worksheets 1 and 2) and help with any vocabulary.

to torture - foltern | a sacrifice - Opfer | to demand - fordern, verlangen | to worship - verehren, anbeten | successful - erfolgreich | right-wing - rechtsstehend | to be frightened of - Angst haben vor, sich fürchten vor

- When students have finished reading the text, explain they are going to complete five questions about **St George's Day**. Monitor and help as necessary. Check that everyone has written the correct questions.
- When each student has written his / her five questions, an A Student should find a B Student and in pairs, they ask and answer each other's questions. Check answers together.

Key

Partner A

- 1a) When is St George's Day? - 23rd April.
- 2a) Where did the dragon live? - Near Silene, in Libya.
- 3a) Who did George rescue? - The king's daughter.
- 4a) Which groups support St George? - Nationalist and right-wing groups.
- 5a) Who was the first English martyr? - St Alban.

Partner B

- 1b) Where was George born? - In Turkey.
- 2b) When did George die? - On 23rd April 303.
- 3b) What did the dragon demand every day? - A young woman as a sacrifice.
- 4b) Did George come to England? - No, he never came to England.
- 5b) When is St Edmund's Day? - 20th November.

- **Extra:** If you think your students are interested, ask them to research a legend of their choosing to present to the class the following week. Ideas could include The Loch Ness Monster; Robin Hood; King Arthur; Romulus and Remus; St Patrick; and the Devil's footprint in the Frauenkirche, Munich.

Worksheet 1 - Partner A

St George's Day

Did you know that St George is the patron saint of England and St George's Day is on 23rd April? St George was born in Turkey and was a successful soldier in the Roman army. At that time, the Emperor wanted his soldiers to worship Roman gods and George said no, because he was a Christian. He was tortured and he was killed on 23rd April 303.

There is also a famous legend about St George. He was travelling in Libya, when he heard about a dragon which lived near the town of Silene. All the people were very frightened of the dragon because every day he demanded a young woman as a sacrifice. On the day George arrived, the king's daughter was the sacrifice. George killed the dragon and rescued the young woman. The people in the town were very happy and thanked George.

Today in England, many people want a new patron saint. There are two main reasons: firstly, there is no real connection between George and England. George never came to England and many countries have St George as their patron saint, including Canada and Lithuania. And secondly, some right-wing and nationalist groups support St George and many people think this is wrong.

The two most popular choices for the new patron saints are St Alban, the first English Christian martyr and St Edmund, a ninth-century king. So in the future, perhaps England will celebrate on 22nd June (St Alban's Day) or 20th November (St Edmund's Day).

You have five questions to complete. Use the words given.

1a) When / be / St George's Day? When is St George's Day? _____

2a) Where / dragon / live? _____

3a) Who / George / rescue? _____

4a) Which groups / support / St George? _____

5a) Who / be / first English martyr? _____

When you have written your questions work with Student B and answer his / her questions.

Answers to Partner B's questions:

1b) _____

2b) _____

3b) _____

4b) _____

5b) _____

Worksheet 2 – Partner B

St George's Day

Did you know that St George is the patron saint of England and St George's Day is on 23rd April? St George was born in Turkey and was a successful soldier in the Roman army. At that time, the Emperor wanted his soldiers to worship Roman gods and George said no, because he was a Christian. He was tortured and he was killed on 23rd April 303.

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You have five questions to complete. Use the words given.

1b) Where / George / born? *Where was George born?* _____

2b) When / George / die? _____

3b) What / dragon / demand / every day? _____

4b) George / come / England? _____

5b) When / be / St Edmund's Day? _____

When you have written your questions work with Student A and answer his / her questions.

Answers to Partner A's questions:

1a) _____

2a) _____

3a) _____

4a) _____

5a) _____