

Raising Children in the Early 17th century: Celebrations

Events can be celebrated or observed by an individual, family, church, community or nation. The following are some of the notable events of 17th-century English or colonial life and how they were observed.

Birth

A successful childbirth was an event to be celebrated. A woman giving birth would be attended, not only by a midwife, but also by her close women friends and relations. After the child was born and taken care of, the new mother and her female companions would enjoy a special meal provided by the husband. Sometimes other women would come to enjoy the food, drink and gossiping, but men, even the husband, were not allowed. Common wisdom insisted that the mother be kept awake for the first few hours after the birth and entertained.

Christenings

Christenings marked the child's entry into the Christian community, and generally took place on the next Sunday or holy day after birth in front of the whole congregation. The mother, still recovering, was rarely present. In the approved Church of England service, the father's only role was to arrange for the baptism. The infant was usually brought to church by the midwife and attended by three godparents, two of the child's sex. It was a godparent who gave the child a Christian name, and promised to oversee its religious education. Puritans, as part of their efforts to reform the English church and bring it back to biblical practices, disapproved of someone else taking what should be the parent's place, and assigned the father a more prominent role. He would be up at the font as well, give the child its name and promise to raise it as a Christian. The term "godparents" was replaced by "sponsors," "attendants," etc. Under whatever name, these individuals were expected to give the children gifts, not only at the baptism but throughout life, as well as monitor their upbringing.

Christening parties were equally famous for the food as for their drink. Sweets seem to have been a major part of the offerings. Neighbors often baked cakes and pies to contribute as well. The conversation was generally light gossip. Women talked about "labours and child-beds, children and nurses, and household servants, and of preserving, and such like discourses ..."

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Birthdays

Birthdays were not generally celebrated in the early 17th century. Some people marked the anniversary of their baptism, as the day of their birth as a Christian. It was a day of retrospection, of prayer and meditation, rather than a public celebration.

Breeching

Boys and girls were dressed much the same for the first six or seven years of life. They wore (unisex) gowns, or the boy wore a doublet and separate skirt. Thereafter he was "breeched" – dressed in smaller versions of men's clothing. This event called for celebration and congratulations. It was a time for the boy to show off his new clothes and enjoy his rise in status.

Apprenticeships

Boys were frequently bound as apprentices, during which they lived with their master's family and learned a craft. Most apprenticeships ran seven years. By law, apprentices were not supposed to gain their freedom until the age of twenty-four. The majority of them therefore began their apprenticeships around seventeen. At the end, they were often given new clothes and a set of tools. This would mark their entry into the world of wage-earners.



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Betrothals

A betrothal was a ceremony in which a couple formally promised to become husband and wife. While it could be done privately, betrothals, also known as handfasting or “making sure,” were customarily done in the presence of witnesses. The ritual involved joining of hands, preferably by the bride’s father. The couple made their pledges orally, a ring or some other appropriate token was given and then the couple kissed. If there was a written contract, it was signed at this time. Besides rings, another popular token was a coin, which was broken in half, with the man and the woman each keeping half.

Weddings

In England, weddings were to happen between 8:00 am and noon, in the parish church, and performed by a minister in front of witnesses. Prior to the ceremony, the forthcoming marriage was to be announced in the parish church(es) of the couple for three successive Sundays. This “calling the banns” could be dispensed with by the purchase of a license from the bishop, which also allowed couples to marry elsewhere or at another time of day. Separatists, such as those that founded Plymouth Colony, felt that marriages were civil matters, and weddings were performed by magistrates rather than minister.

However the wedding was performed, there were usually some sort of festivities afterwards. At the most modest, there was food at a local alehouse or tavern for the couple and witnesses. Celebrations at the other end of the social scale could involve days of feasting for the wedding party and guests, with music, dancing and other entertainment.

Other public celebrations

These included harvest festivals, militia musters and holidays. Food always featured prominently on these days. Harvest festivals celebrated the bringing in of the crops. Besides food and drink for the workers, there were often dancing, games and contests of strength. Militia musters were held to provide the community’s military bands with training. This was an occasion for women, children and other non-soldiers to gather and watch, and it became a virtual holiday for all.

The major holidays were Easter, which brought an end to Lenten fasting; May Day, celebrated with May poles, dancing and gathering of greenery from the woods; Christmas to January 6 was a general time of feasting, dancing, games, visiting, etc. with New Year’s Day being the day to give gifts. Civic holidays, such as November 5th (Gunpowder Plot) and November 17, Queen Elizabeth I’s accession, were celebrated with the ringing of church bells, firing cannons, bonfires and feasting.



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