

5 minutes on... **Mother's Day**

Different countries acknowledge society's deep debt to mothers on various days of the year because the day has a number of different origins. One school of thought claims the day emerged from the custom of mother worship in ancient Greece.

Mother worship – which kept a festival to Cybele, a great mother of gods, and Rhea, the wife of Cronus – was held around the Vernal Equinox in Asia Minor and eventually in Rome from the Ides of March (March 15) to March 18.

The Romans also had another holiday, Matronalia, that was dedicated to Juno. Juno was the sister and wife (yes, I know, I know, it's not my fault, I just read this stuff out) of the ruler of the gods, Jupiter, and the mother of Hebe, Vulcan and Mars.

Mother's Day, as it is celebrated in Britain, is properly called Mothering Sunday, and the first records of it being celebrated in Britain date back to the beginning of the 17th century.

In those times, many people, especially those who worked as servants and apprentices, lived many miles away from their families.

It was considered important for people to return to their home and "mother" church at least once a year. So each year in the middle of Lent, a day was given where servants and apprentices were given leave to return to their homes.

The majority of historians think that it was this return to the 'mother' church which led to the day's name, which came to be observed on the fourth Sunday in Lent.

Another theory is that the name comes from one of the Bible readings often used for that day, Galatians 4:26, which reads:

But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all...

The returning family often brought a gift with them, often a 'mothering cake', known as Simnel cake

A proper Simnel cake is a fruit cake with two layers of almond paste, one on top and one in the middle. The cake is decorated with 11 balls of marzipan icing representing the 11 disciples. (Judas is omitted, because he is a baddie). Sugar violets would also be added.

A common explanation for how Simnel Cake got its name is that a man called Simon and his wife Nell argued over whether the cake for Mothering Sunday should be baked or boiled. In the end they did both, so the cake was named after both of them – 'Sim-Nell'.

The story is, of course, rubbish, Simnel is taken from the Latin word *simila* which is a fine wheat flour used as the main ingredient in Simnel cake. But that's quite a dull explanation, so I thought I'd keep the Sim-Nell story alive.

Furmety, a sweetened boiled cereal dish, was often served at the family dinner during Mothering Sunday celebrations.

Mothering Sunday was also known as Refreshment Sunday because the fasting rules for Lent were relaxed that day.

Mothering Sunday has become a time when children say 'Thank You' to their mums for all they've done for them, and lavish them with praise, hugs, kisses, presents, flowers, and cards.

In the United States, Mother's Day is completely separate from the British Mothering Sunday.

It's origins can be traced back 150 years when Anna Jarvis, an Appalachian homemaker, organised a day to raise awareness of poor health conditions in her community, a cause she believed would be best advocated by mothers. She called it "Mother's Work Day."

Fifteen years later, Julia Ward Howe, a Boston poet, pacifist, suffragist, and author of the lyrics to the 'Battle Hymn of the Republic', organised a day encouraging mothers to rally for peace, since she believed they bore the loss of human life more harshly than anyone else.

In 1905 when Anna Jarvis died, her daughter, also named Anna, began a campaign to remember the life work of her mother. Anna began to lobby prominent businessmen and politicians to support her campaign to create a special day to honour mothers.

At one of the first services organised to celebrate Anna's mother in 1908, at her church in West Virginia, Anna handed out her mother's favourite flower, the white carnation. Five years later, the House of Representatives adopted a resolution calling for officials of the federal government to wear white carnations on Mother's Day. In 1914 President Woodrow Wilson signed a bill recognizing Mother's Day as a national holiday.

At first, people observed Mother's Day by attending church, writing letters to their mothers, and eventually, by sending cards, presents, and flowers. With the increasing gift-giving activity associated with Mother's Day, Anna Jarvis became aware that the day's sentiment was being sacrificed at the expense of greed and profit.

In 1923 she filed a lawsuit to stop a Mother's Day festival, and was even arrested for disturbing the peace at a convention selling carnations for a war mother's group..

Despite Jarvis's misgivings, Mother's Day has flourished in the United States. In fact, the second Sunday of May has become the most popular day of the year to eat out, and telephone lines record their highest traffic, as sons and daughters everywhere do the right thing (and avoid a right-royal ear bashing later) by phoning their mums to wish them happy mother's day.