

VALENTINE'S DAY

Like many other holidays, Valentine's Day has its roots in a pagan festival which dates back to the Roman Empire. On February 14th, the ancient Romans honoured Juno, a goddess of women and marriage, and on the following day they celebrated Lupercalia, a festival of love dedicated to Lupercus, a Roman god of fertility.

As part of the celebrations, names of young men and women were written down on slips of paper and put into a jar. Then, they were drawn like a lottery to match couples that were supposed to be partners for the duration of the festival. Sometimes they would even fall in love and eventually get married.



When Christianity became the official state religion, the Catholic Church in Rome tried to uproot the pagan customs by substituting them with more appropriate rituals and turning the heathen festival into a Christian celebration. The task became possible thanks to a fortunate coincidence and a Christian martyr who had died on February 14th.

The martyr's name was Valentine and, according to legend, he literally sacrificed his life on the altar of love. As the story goes, under the rule of Emperor Claudius II in the 3rd century AD, Rome was involved in many bloody wars that cost numerous lives and required a steady supply of new soldiers. At one point, attracting young recruits to continue the emperor's military campaigns became very difficult, and the Roman ruler suspected that men were reluctant to join the army because they did not want to part with their girlfriends and wives. As a result, the emperor took extreme measures; he imposed a ban on marriages.

Valentine, who was a priest, disobeyed the law, and despite the risk involved he continued to marry couples in secrecy. Alas, his disobedience was soon exposed and punished with cruelty. Valentine was arrested, beaten to death and beheaded. The execution is thought to have taken place in the year 270 AD, on 14th February.

Pope Gelasius recognised the priest's sacrifice and established the day of St Valentine on 14th February in 496 AD. As the memory of Lupercalia faded, Valentine's Day became more popular during the Middle Ages, and the custom of choosing a sweetheart started to spread throughout Europe and then across the Atlantic, where it is continued to this day. Cupid, the Roman god of love, depicted as a chubby little boy with a bow and an arrow is now the only reminder of the holiday's true origins.

Recently, Valentine's Day customs have changed; from writing sweet poems and romantic love letters, to sending messages or pictures over the Internet. Sadly, the mystery and anonymity of Valentine's Day have dwindled through the age of technology, as the practice of hiding one's identity and creating romantic tension through handwriting is hard to imitate digitally.