

“Sumer is icumen in”

"Sumer is icumen in, Lhude sing cuccu!", is an anonymous mid-13th century six-part round, written for four tenors and two basses; sometimes known as the Summer Canon or the Cuckoo Song or the Reading Rota, because it was discovered in Reading Abbey. Now you could be forgiven for thinking it is to welcome summer in; but ‘No’, the Middle-English translates as, ‘*Summer has come in, Loudly sing Cuckoo.*’ There is also a later Latin version of the text expounding Christ’s crucifixion. This Rota or Round, is important, because not only is it the earliest known example of musical notation of its kind, but also because it would have been sung by English peasants during the Roman occupation, when Norman French was the accepted language, thus helping to keep English alive. It has been used and parodied many times in poems and songs and films.

However it does raise the question of how we define ‘summer’. ‘The warmest season of the year ... from June to August’. ¹ ‘Yes,’ but we all know summer is the period between the Summer solstice - Fathers’ Day (21st June), and the Autumn equinox (21st September). But the Meteorological Office measures summer from 1st June until 31st August, the warmest months. And the cuckoo? Well traditionally the first time you will hear the cuckoo is on St. Tiburtius Day (14th April), and spring has not officially sprung until you actually *hear* the cuckoo; and just to confuse you further, the earliest recording of a cuckoo was on 18th April 1843! Summer? I don’t think so!

You might further be forgiven for believing summer starts on 1st May, the date of the pagan Summer Finder festival leading up to the Summer solstice (*sun stands still*). ‘It is the time of year when warmer weather begins and flowers and trees start to blossom.’ ² Think of choristers on the tower of St. Mary Magdalen in Oxford. Think of May poles, May queens, Morris dancers, village greens, dressing up, Well-Dressing, flowers and greenery, the Roman goddess Flora being replaced by the Virgin Mary, when St. Augustine came to England in 597, advised by Pope Gregory to ‘change’ the pagan customs, rather than destroy them. However I digress, ‘cos that’s about spring, although we all got sun-burnt once on a May Day Parish walk.

Then there are the three Rogation days immediately prior to Ascension Day (14th May), and the Beating of the Bounds to demark parish boundaries, except that Rogation Day is 25th April. And how come Midsummer’s Day (St. John the Baptist Day) comes just three days after the summer solstice, on 24th June? Whatever.

How would *you* define summer, at least in your mind and memory, if not in fact? Is it long, warm evenings sipping Pimms in the garden of an English country pub; BBQs and the tantalising aroma of burnt flesh; the lazy hum of insects, the croaking of frogs, or the song of birds? Is it holidays and the opportunity to get away from it all, with wet Bank Holidays, traffic jams, swarming, sweaty airports and delayed or cancelled flights, fractious kids, “Are we nearly there Mum?”, Spanish tummy, cheap booze and unfamiliar food, sun-burn, mosquito bites and wasp stings? Or the sound of leather against willow? The sea-side; bikinis, suntan lotion, buckets and spades, sand and rock-pools, ice-cream and candy floss, promenades, piers and Pierrots, boats, and snorkels ...? Or is it the traditional English Season, the Epsom Derby, Trooping the Colour, Royal Ascot, the Chelsea Flower Show (oops, sorry, that’s 19th-23rd May) Wimbledon, Glastonbury, Henley, the Oxford and Cambridge Boat race (Er ‘No’, that’s 11th April, sorry) Silverstone Grand Prix, the British Open, Badminton, Hickstead, and Goodwood, Garden Parties at Buckingham Palace, the Proms, Cowes Week, the Edinburgh Festival and

Tattoo... English Heritage and the National Trust. Ah ‘...this sceptre’d isle ... this other Eden...’³

George Gershwin penned ‘Summertime, and the Livin’ is Easy’ in 1935, Delius composed ‘In a Summer Garden’ in 1908, ‘Summer Night on the River’ in 1912 and ‘A Song of Summer’ in 1930. Vivaldi’s ubiquitous ‘Four Seasons’ concerto number two, ‘Summer’, is prefaced with, ‘*Languor caused by the heat*’. My sister hated, ‘June is busting out all over,’ for reasons I’m sure you can work out for yourself! Shakespeare wrote, ‘Can I compare thee to a summer’s day?’ and Frederick Leighton painted ‘Flaming June’ in 1895. Ah ‘Yes’, Oxfordshire’s ‘Art’s Week’; it has become so popular, it has been expanded to ‘Art Weeks’. In 2011 Summer was the 30th most popular girl’s name. There are reputedly in excess of 1000 films (movies) with Summer in their title, and 161 book titles.

Pottering in the garden or the allotment, mowing, weeding, growing flowers; herbaceous borders and the childhood sunflower competition. Vegetables; cutting your own lettuce, pulling your own radishes and carrots, tending and picking your own runner and broad beans. And your soft fruits; what about your strawberries, and raspberries, and black and red currants; the summer fruits and summer pudding. Summer fruits are mentioned in 2 Samuel, ch 2 vv 1&2, where David meets a servant carrying them, and ‘...bunches of raisins (grapes)...for the young men to eat.’ (c.f. 2 Samuel ch 16 vv 1&2!) And the Lord showed Amos a basket of summer fruits. (Amos ch 9 vv 1&2). And Jesus said, “Learn a parable of the fig tree. When his branch is still tender, and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near.” (Matthew ch 24 v 32 & Luke ch 21 v 30) And God Said, “While the earth remains ... summer and winter ... shall not cease,” (Genesis ch 8 v 22) echoed in Psalm 74 verse 17, “...you created both summer and winter.” But the Psalmist laments, “The sap in me dried up as in summer drought.” (P32 v 4) In proverbs the humble “... ants (‘...having no strength!...’) prepare their store of food in the summer.” (Pr 30 v25) and in Proverb 10 v 5, the sage agrees, “ a prudent son gathers crops in summer

So The Witney Feast, which started in 1243, *is* held during the summer, but not according to the Met. Office. However, it’s a lovely way to round off the summer holidays, and start the autumn term.

I leave you with the thought of William Walsham How, and his hymn ‘Summer suns are glowing, over land and sea’; I wish!

Happy Holidays!

1. Advanced English Dictionary
2. Project Britain Life and Culture
3. Richard 11, Act 2 William Shakespeare

Howard Brayton