

April brings St George's day and spring is in full bloom. The Elevate artists discover the multiculturalism behind the patron saint and find words and images that celebrate this month.



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St George's Day

David Davies



Saint George and the Dragon by Paolo Uccello (1397 – 1475)

The story of Saint George has travelled through time and across continents and has compelling themes that reflect our modern times.

St George's Day is celebrated in England on 23rd April 2021, but whilst Saint George is seen by many as a symbol of nationalism in England, his life-story seems to represent times of cultural diversity and change not unlike today. George was born to a Greek family in the 3rd century AD, in what is now modern-day Turkey; his parents were originally from central Turkey and Palestine. He served in an Italian army and lived and died (in AD303) in what is modern-day Israel. Quite a multi-cultural story...

Today, George is an astonishingly popular saint across the world: his patron

connections include Brazil, Bulgaria, Ethiopia, Greece, Lithuania, Palestine, Portugal, Russia and Spain. Diversity seems to go hand-in-hand with St George's story.

He is, of course, well known for his dragon slaying and rescuing of princesses in many of these places (though most of the dragon stories were added about 500 years after his death). George rides into a city tormented by a tyrannical dragon, rescues a maiden and offers to kill the dragon if the people convert to Christianity. The image of good triumphing over evil and, in a military context, bravery vanquishing a terrible enemy became set in the stories of many nations.

An immigrant himself, George travelled between the provinces of the vast Roman Empire to find employment. George is famous because he spread, what were then, new Middle Eastern religious ideas from abroad to western civilization – controversial because the Roman Empire had worshiped its native pagan gods for centuries. As an immigrant with a foreign religion, George ended up at the receiving end of discrimination and persecution from the Roman authorities increasingly wary of Christianity's growing power.

'April showers bring May flowers'



River Avon, waiting for the cuckoo to arrive

'The first of April, some do say,
Is set apart for All Fool's Day,
But why the people call it so,
Nor I nor they themselves do know.'

Poor Robin's Almanack 1760

So much to look and listen out for this month. I wonder what you look for or associate with April?

'April showers bring May flowers'

The showers are sometimes brief flurries of snow or hailstones followed by intense sunshine, but hidden in the green of the hedgerows and woodlands the first violets are carpeting the ground. Scentless, but beautiful are purple and white dog violets. The ancient Greeks thought of violets as



April violets in the undergrowth

symbols of fertility and romance, and in The Victorian Language of Flowers a purple violet indicated that the sender's thoughts were 'occupied with love' for the recipient.

'Violet is for faithfulness,
Which in me shall abide:
Hoping likewise that from your heart
You will not let it slide.'

As we shelter from the showers it's astonishing to think that the cuckoo is on its way and to reach us it has survived sandstorms, hailstorms, exceptional cold, a wet summer, predators over the Mediterranean and in the Congo rainforest and has crossed the Sahara Desert in a continuous 50 -60 hour flight!

'The cuckoo comes in April,
Sings the month of May,
Changes its tune in the middle of June
And July it flies away.'

Listen out for the call of the cuckoo, the winged clock of spring!

"O Cuckoo! shall I call thee Bird,
Or but a wandering Voice?"

William Wordsworth 'To The Cuckoo'

If you hear the cuckoo on 14th April, St Tiburtius' Day, turn out all the money in your pockets, spit and do not look at the ground. If you are standing on soft ground you will have good luck but if you spit on hard ground the cuckoo call will bring you bad luck!

I am hoping that the damp grass by the river counts as soft as I definitely heard



Stephanie Jalland is waiting for the cuckoo to arrive and delighting in the sights and sounds that April brings

the cuckoo on the 14th April last year after it arrived here in Downton on 11th

April. The cuckoo heralds the onset of good weather and not more than a century ago farmers would sow barley when the first cuckoo was heard to insure a full crop. Meanwhile down by the river in the reeds it is only the male bird who says cuckoo, the female makes a laughter-like chuckling, bubbling sound!

'When swallows fly high the weather will be dry'
The swallows, also a sign of spring, return to swoop and dive following the gnats and flies.

'My little bird of the air,
If thou dost know, then tell me the sweet reason
Thou comest always, only in thy season
To build and pair'

From To an Early Swallow by Alice Cary

As you watch the birds, think of violets and shelter from the showers you could listen to a few April tunes. If you have online access try YouTube or Spotify:

'April in Paris'
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mur2DI1BlnE>

'Drip, Drip, Drop Little April Showers' from the Walt Disney film Bambi
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-FUcrQhTBY>

'On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring' Frederick Delius
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xHlhcstxUM>

With apologies to William Wordsworth

I wandered lonely from the crowd
'Midst nature's glorious Springtime
frills -
Primmies, bluebells, cowslips too
All around my feet were strewn when,
At once me thought, all clamouring
loud
A host of birds - some
chiffchaff tweets,
some blackcap trills.



Gorgeous blossoms
bursting forth against
Bright skies so clear,
so blue.
Graceful gowns cascade tall tree, then next
A ballet tutu - frothing free! BEWARE -
Cold winds from East and North may
Whisk away your beauteous hue.

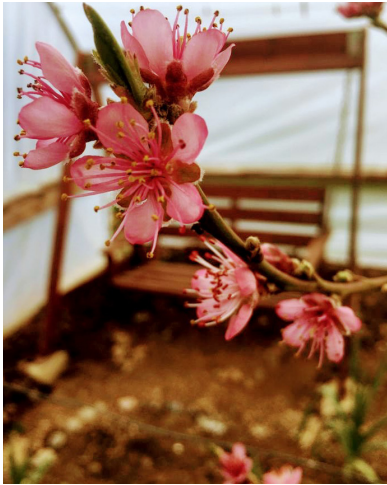
I feast my eyes and fill mine ears, and think
On Family, Friends and HOPE
With spirits raised and heart full
swelling
Count my Blessings: head for dwelling.
Assured; tho' moments dark, or bowed
with fears
Such sights as these will help us cope.

Patricia Hewitt

Would you like to contribute a poem, image or your thoughts on spring in to summer for a future edition? See back page for details.

Springtime at an off-grid small holding

Hannah Lefeuve



At last, spring is in full bloom and in nature, at least, things are set to get more desirable for many months to come. Now we can look forward to more blossom, flowers, fruits,

vegetables, daylight and warmer weather. To say that it has been a difficult twelve months, is a vast understatement for so many. We all have our comforts, and for me, nature and creativity have been consistent touchstones throughout. I hope that reading our piece will give you some comfort and that you too, will have ways to connect with what matters to you.

As you read this, I hope to be at home, convalescing after major surgery. I will sleep downstairs, next to a large window, where I can awaken to the dawn chorus. Our forest garden provides ample food sources for birds, with large enclosures to safely nest, resulting in a rich cacophony of sounds. Our recently introduced bird table has brought many welcome guests to our dining window and we are gradually learning bird song. From the garden, we still have ample parsnips, brassicas, spinach, chard, garlics, fruit and tomato preserves, frozen squash and fresh salad.

At the beginning of April, vegetable seedlings fill our living room shelves and blossom bursts from many of the Magnolia, Amalanchier, Prunus and Blackthorn trees. Daffodils have injected colour into large parts of the garden and everything feels ready to regrow. With additional daylight, solar electricity is no longer scarce, and the

raeburn use has lessened. Weather forecasts are closely monitored and lessening frost damage is crucial.

Our polytunnel peach and apricot trees are an ongoing experiment, as they are mostly frost-proof, but need pollinators. We faithfully open the polytunnel doors each day and in previous years, hand-pollinated with paintbrushes. However, we gave up on the latter method, after a year of no fruit, with the doors shut.

Meanwhile, I still enjoy craft projects in the lighter early evenings. This year, I have initiated a 'decorate the village' plastic-free Easter trail and made miniature Easter baskets as gifts. Corn from a neighbour's thatched roof has resulted in a number of corn-dolly experiments and pieces of old worn crockery from last year's beach combing have been used as mosaic on large stone eggs. I do hope you enjoy the photographs.



Thanks for reading. It's been good to be in touch. Contribute your own reflections, a poem or image for our next edition on the general theme of summer and holidays?

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