

What are ‘The Wakes’ and why do we have a ‘Wakes Weekend’?

The Wakes week is a holiday period in parts of England and Scotland. Originally a religious celebration or feast, the tradition of the wakes week developed into a secular holiday, particularly in the north west of England during the Industrial Revolution. Although a strong tradition during the 19th and 20th centuries, the observance of the holiday has almost disappeared in the UK.

One dictionary definition offers: *an annual festival and holiday held in some parts of northern England, originally one held in a rural parish on the feast day of the patron saint of the church.*

Every church at its consecration was given the name of a Patron Saint, and either the day of the saint’s feast day became the church’s festival. Church services began at sunset on Saturday and the night of prayer was called a vigil, eve or, due to the late hour “wake”, from the Old English *waecan*. Each village had a wake with quasi-religious celebrations such as rushbearing followed by church services then sports, games, dancing and drinking.

In Alstonefield, our church is dedicated to St Peter, so we celebrate our Wakes as near to June 29th each year, the feast of St Peter and St Paul.

In the past this village would hold a procession from the school to the church. The children would wear new clothes, the girls in starched new dresses and petticoats and highly polished new lace up boots. The procession was led by a band, in their time the Alstonefield Band, singing hymns. The children would carry baskets of eggs or fruit, which would subsequently be taken to Ashbourne Cottage hospital.

After the church service, a series of events took place including sports events, tea parties and fancy dress.

In more recent years we have continued to mark Wakes in a similar way, although now restricted the weekend nearest to 29 June. Activities over the weekend have included sports events, street parties, fancy dress competitions, men versus ladies cricket matches, band concerts and afternoon teas. On Sunday evening a church service is held on the green outside The George. The service starts with a procession from the village hall, normally led by Warslow Silver Band. After the service we are treated to a concert by the band whilst villagers sit in the sun and enjoy a drink or two with friends.