



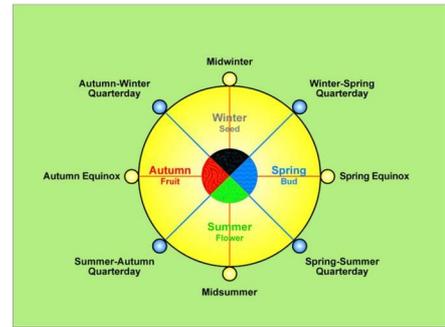
Summer Solstice

Festival of Joy

21-24 June

The summer solstice marks the mid-point of summer and lightest time of the year, when the daylight hours are longest and the night-time hours the shortest.

In terms of observing the Sun at sunrise as the time marker, as the ancients used to do, the solstice occurs when the Sun (in the northern hemisphere) rises at the most north-easterly point that it will reach on any given horizon. The Sun will pause in its sunrise journey north and appear to rise from the same position on the horizon for three consecutive days. Likewise at noon the Sun will reach its highest elevation in the sky and appear at that same elevation for three consecutive days. This is the summer solstice as anciently understood, and the term 'solstice', derived from Latin, means 'Sun stand still'. Nowadays it is calculated exactly using astro-mathematics and usually falls on 21 June.



When the Sun rises on the fourth day (i.e. the day immediately following the three-day solstice), its sunrise position can be observed to have moved a little to the south on the horizon whilst its noon elevation will appear slightly lower in the sky. This heralds the reversal of the sunrise movement and the start of the gradual shortening of the daylight hours, thus a movement towards autumn and winter and the waning of light. This fourth day (24 June), the culmination of the three-day solstice, is called Midsummer Day and has been traditionally celebrated as representing the glory and majesty of light, whilst at its heavenly zenith, beginning its gradual descent into the dark underworld.

Whereas the midwinter festival has its focus for celebration on the family and hearth (or heart) of the home, the midsummer festival focuses its celebration on the greater community and hierarchy of rulership or divinity: hence in the Celtic-Christian tradition Midsummer Day is when King Arthur and his Queen hold their annual feast with their knights and ladies of the Round Table.

The summer solstice and its culminating Midsummer Day festival is one of the two poles of the year (associated in the northern hemisphere with the South Pole of the planet), its complementary polarity being the winter solstice and Christmas festival (associated with the North Pole of the planet). In Christian tradition the two poles of the year are symbolised by John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ (the dates celebrate their birthdays), and by what are known as the two Baptisms, by water and by holy breath and fire. In Freemasonic and an alternative Christian tradition these two poles of the year are represented by the two Johns, John the Baptist and John the Beloved. The midsummer pole is that of John the Baptist and baptism by water, and Midsummer Day is also known as St John's Day (i.e. John the Baptist).

© Peter Dawkins