

Saint Patrick's Day Traditions

In the 1680s, an English traveler in Ireland, Thomas Dineley, noted that Irish people wore shamrocks and crosses on St Patrick's Day.

The Wearing of the Green

One of the oldest and most enduring St Patrick's Day is 'the wearing of the green', which means sporting a sprig of shamrock in honour of St Patrick.

At the end of the day, adults removed the sprig of shamrock from their coats and put into a glass of punch. When it had been drunk the wet sprig was taken from the bottom of the glass and thrown over the left shoulder. This custom became known as 'drowning the shamrock'.

According to legend, while preaching at the Rock of Cashel (Co. Tipperary), St Patrick used a small three-leaved plant, called shamrock, to explain to the pagan Irish the concept of the Holy Trinity – there being three persons (Father, Son and Holy Ghost) in one God, just as there are three leaves on one stem. Through its connection to St Patrick, the shamrock has become a widely used and recognised symbol of Ireland. Interestingly, there is no such thing as shamrock – it derives from the Irish *seamróg* meaning 'young clover'.

In Irish folklore, the rare four-leaved shamrock – *seamróg na gceithre gcluas* – is associated with luck. To say, in Irish, *tá seamróg na gceithre gcluas agat* ('you have the four leaved shamrock') means 'you are lucky'.

St Patrick's Cross

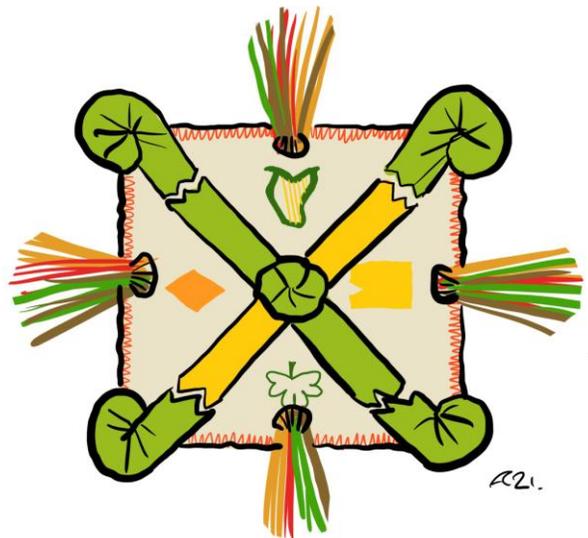
Many people today wear a shop-bought rosette or ribbon – usually green or green, white and orange in colour and featuring a shamrock or harp – on St Patrick's Day.

In the past, however, people wore homemade decorations known as a St Patrick's Cross. In earlier times, these crosses were made from silk and embroidery. These were gradually replaced by square or circular badges (about 8cm to 11cm across), which were made of card, coloured paper, ribbon and other materials.

The badges usually featured a single or double cross, or six-petal symbol, in the centre. They were further decorated by adding emblems, rosettes, bows and tassels. Some were simply made, while others were lavishly decorated.

The badges were made by boys and girls in the run up to St Patrick's Day, and worn on the chest or shoulder.

This elaborate example, from the collections of the National Museum of Ireland, comes from Co. Meath. It was made of green and gold ribbon sewn cross-wise to a piece of white paper, with crozier-shaped pieces of green ribbon sewn at the four corners of the cross. Multi-coloured pieces of woolen thread were affixed as tassels at the centre of each side. It also features emblems (including a harp and shamrock) sewn in the spaces between the arms of the cross.



Illustrated by Allan Cavanagh

Further Reading:

- Kevin Danaher (1972) *The Year in Ireland: Irish Calendar Customs*
- Thomas Crofton Croker (1839) *The Popular Songs of Ireland*
- Mannanaan Mac Lir, (1895) 'The Folk-Lore of the Months. II', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, pp. 553-557