

St George's Day <<

St George

England's national emblem, the St George's Cross, has suffered from negative associations in recent times. Since being unofficially hijacked by some far-right political groups towards the end of the last century, even a photo of the white-and-red flag is capable of sparking a political storm on Twitter (much to foreigners' bemusement).

However, as the next St George's Day approaches, flying the flag for English values is becoming a source of pride once again. The independent St George Unofficial Bank Holiday group is calling for us all to take the day off work as a show of support for our patron saint. Lorraine Kelly, Stephen Fry, Amir Khan and Ant & Dec are among celebrities who have pledged support for a day when everyone who calls themselves English (regardless of colour, religion or sexuality) should celebrate their common heritage and future together.

You can visit www.stgeorgholiday.com to find out more about the campaign and find out about events

across the country. Group chairman Graham Smith said: "Most people in England are confused about their nationality – am I English or British? Support for St George's Day has grown recently, since Scottish independence seemed likely. For us, 'Englishness' has nothing to do with religion, where you were born or the colour of your skin.

"St George is a great symbol of modern England. Born overseas, he was welcomed by the English and integrated so well that he has become an English icon."

In fact, England's patron saint was Turkish. Born in Cappadocia in the third century BC to well-to-do Christian parents, he became a Roman soldier and protested against the army's persecution of Christians. He was imprisoned and tortured, but stayed true to his faith and has since been honoured in this country by having more churches (not to mention pubs) named after him than any other saint. As further proof of his multicultural credentials, George

**'The game's
afoot: Follow your
spirit, and upon this
charge cry 'God for
Harry, England, and
Saint George!'**

Henry V, William Shakespeare

is also the patron saint of Bulgaria, Ethiopia, Greece, Palestine, Portugal and Slovenia, to name but a few, as

Liz Nicholls flies the flag for a positive, inclusive celebration of Englishness in time for St George's Day on April 23rd, which is also William Shakespeare's birthday.



well as being the patron saint of soldiers, archers, cavalry, chivalry, farmers and, in some quarters, being considered the patron saint of same-sex marriages (some religious texts describe him as 'the bride of Jesus'). The myth of St George slaying a dragon originated from a story written by Richard Johnson in 1596 called *The Seven Champions* in which George is kidnapped by a witch and sails to foreign lands to rescue a princess – taken as a folkloric parable of good triumphing over evil.

The patron saint does, of course, mean a great deal to pupils and staff at St George's School, Ascot, established in 1877, which holds a St George's day run every year. Headmistress Rachel Owens says: "We are a very English school and love singing *When a Knight Won His Spurs* – we can all slay our dragons if we put our minds to it! As a school, we cherish the English values of tolerance and respect – we have a vibrant international community too, who are drawn to

us by our Englishness. St George's Day here is, of course, a celebration, with a service, feast, gallop (in Houses, so house spirit is high), cakes bearing the St George cross and dragon's head in the dining room!"



One young designer who shows a pride for English craftsmanship is Olivia Scott-Taylor (pictured). Olivia, who lives between London and Bledlow Ridge, is an actress who has starred in *Wild at Heart* and *Doctors* before collaborating with her mum Lesley Scott for a range of English-made retro-style school chairs. To the delight of both mother and daughter, Olivia was selected as one of the youngest discoveries of Best of British Open Call organised by iconic department store Liberty in Regent Street, which now stocks her range. "When we came up with the idea of doing our own interpretation of this British classic, it went without saying that it had to be a 100% British-manufactured product," says

Olivia. "English craftsmanship has always been of an incredibly high standard and we are renowned for our



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quality products, from ships to cricket bats to, hopefully, chairs! In fact, the elderly owner of the 'tube-bending factory' in Sheffield, where our frames are bent and welded by hand, tells how he used to make the frames for the originals back as an apprentice in exactly the same way! "It is important to not let these traditional trades die out as it is a part of our heritage. If I can do my little bit to carry on the great British tradition of craftsmanship, I am very proud to do so." Visit www.oliviascott-taylor.com and/or take a trip to Liberty.

April 23rd, as well as being considered the official date of George's martyrdom, is also the reputed birth and death date of William Shakespeare. Many facts about his life remain a mystery but he is known to have died on April 23rd, 1616, at the age of 52 and famously bequeathed his 'second-best bed' to his wife Anne. On Saturday, April 26th, at 4pm, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in his birthplace – Stratford-upon-Avon – will hold an evening of words and music in his honour.

Closer to home, Progress Theatre are busy preparing to stage an open-air production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* this summer, very much considered 'The Berkshire Play', as Tony Wernham of Progress explains.

"The play includes Shakespeare's only reference to Reading, as well as a number of other Berkshire towns,

Windsor aside, including Maidenhead and Colnbrook." *The Merry Wives of Windsor* arrives at Caversham Court Gardens this July. Visit www.progresstheatre.co.uk to book. Also, make a date for a Chapterhouse Theatre Company's open-air garden tour of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which arrives at Claydon House near Waddesdon in Buckinghamshire on Saturday, 4th July – call 0844 249 1895 or visit www.nationaltrust.org.uk/claydon to book.



William Shakespeare

And, if you want to get into the swing of things for some traditional fun, Hurst Morris People are reviving a 15th century English tradition – a mummers' play – on 23rd April, at the Castle Inn, Hurst.

The play has been written by HuMP dancer Nic Yannacopoulos who said: "St George and the Turkish Knight fall out and have a fight in which George is killed. The doctor then uses his quackery to bring St George to life and peace prevails. It's in more or less rhyming couplets and ends in traditional song. It's a lot of fun to do – and, we hope, to watch!" Just a few mummers' plays are performed each year in Berkshire. It is more than ten years since HuMP did one. To join in with Morris dancing (whether you're male or female, young or old), call Ian on 0118 926 8187 or visit www.hump.org.uk

Happy St George's Day!