



# A History of Easter in New Zealand

*Exploring the tradition of Easter*

April 2020

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## Exploring the tradition of Easter – from the time when the idea first arrived here with the European settlers until today.

As is the case with Christmas, we all know that Easter was primarily regarded in New Zealand as a religious holiday. But it wasn't always a 'holiday' as such – Good Friday was regarded by Catholics and Anglicans (the two religious groups who recognised Easter in 19th century New Zealand), to be the most solemn day of the year. Good Friday represents the crucifixion day of Jesus, and was traditionally preceded by a (very un-festive) 40 days of Lent, which involved fasting, celibacy and no celebration to speak of. Possibly not unexpectedly, this practice didn't really catch on with other religious groups in New Zealand – even Anglicans didn't adhere to Lent with as much fervour as the Victorian Catholics (Clarke 2007: 123-124).

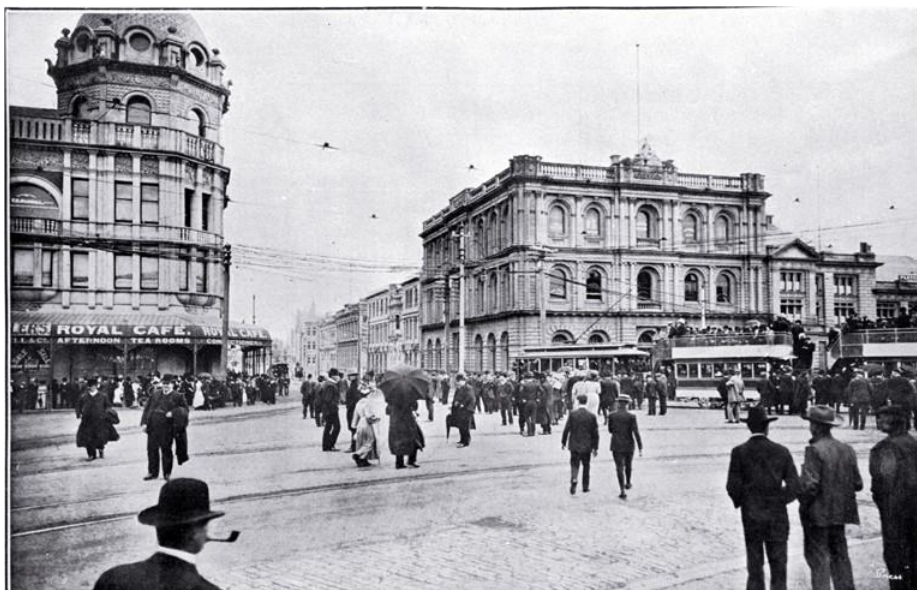
Of course, this doesn't mean that colonial New Zealand was more secular than the home country, just that attitudes toward religious belief valued the idea of religious freedom. Even though Anglicans were the largest religious group in 19th century

New Zealand, they made up less than half of the Pākehā population, and it was hard for any one church to impose their ideas onto communities with such diverse views (Clarke 2007: 120).

It also must have been difficult to get into the spirit of a festival that was supposed to celebrate the start of spring – during New Zealand's autumn. The name 'Lent' comes from 'lengthen' (West Germanic), and 'lencten' springtime (Old English), reflecting the start of spring when the days become longer (Clarke 2007: 120). It made good sense for the Europeans to fast at the end of winter, when food supplies were lowest, but in the southern hemisphere, Easter falls at the end of summer, when food was most abundant (Clarke 2007: 120).

## The evolution of the Easter break

**The evolution of the Easter break turning into just that – a break – happened in New Zealand before the same occurred in the motherland.** New Zealand was first to introduce Easter Monday as a day off work, which was a result of the Easter holiday being slowly adopted by New



Easter Monday in Cathedral Square, Christchurch (1907). Image: Christchurch City Libraries, File Reference: The Weekly Press 10/4/1907: 50

Zealand Presbyterians, Baptists and Congregationalists in the 20th century, as they mixed with Catholic and Anglican communities (Swarbrick 2012).

With the introduction of the five day, instead of six-day, working week, the introduction of Easter Monday as a holiday offered the opportunity of an extended break for holidaymakers (Clarke 2007: 161). It was declared to be the “second carnival day of the year” in 1881, “the close of the summer and the precursor to the winter season” (New Zealand Herald 19/4/1881: 4). This idea was also a carryover from Lent, when feasting, sport and recreation followed the end of the fasting (Clarke 2007: 151). Travelling out of town for the long weekend was well ingrained in our national psyche by at least the early 20th century – the advertisement top right represents one of many that were directed toward Easter holidaymakers.

Holidaying was not the only leisure activity typically enjoyed by the Easter crowds. Sports like hunting were popular activities among men and boys of most backgrounds (Star 21/4/1897: 4). It was possibly so desired by the colonists because hunting was very restricted by England’s poaching laws during the 19th century and long before – at a time when this activity was only available to the wealthy (Clarke 2007: 155). In New Zealand, anyone could hunt or fish within the (much more lax) game laws, and licences were so affordable that most people had the opportunity to shoot or fish legally (Clarke 2007: 155). But let’s not forget sports that involved women!

### Racing and golf tournaments over the Easter break were also plentiful.

RIGHT: Miss Cowlshaw competing in the Christchurch Golf Club’s Easter Tournament held on the Shirley Links (1908). Image: Christchurch City Libraries, File Reference CCL PhotoCD 11, IMG0073.

## Davis & Boyd,

HASTINGS - SOLE AGENTS.

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TURNER AND BUTLER, WAIPUKURAU.  
HENNING AND JENNINGS, NAPIER.

### Travelling at Easter.

HERE ARE TRAVELLING REQUISITES.

If you are going to visit friends, or see a bit of New Zealand's fine scenery this Easter, perhaps you will need a new Bag, Trunk or Suit Case. Rug and Luggage Straps—can you find them? They are usually missing when they're wanted. See now whether you will need new travelling requisites—and come and select from our excellent stock. We have Leather Trunks and Tin Trunks, Suit Cases, Kit Bags, Rugs and Rug Straps in a good variety. You have our assurance as to the splendid qualities, and you will agree that the prices are very fair indeed!

COME BEFORE EASTER COMES.

LAND & HEIGHWAY, THE SADDLERS,  
HASTINGS.



(Hastings Standard 13/4/1916:2).



## Easter revellers

Military training camps were also a weekend activity undertaken by Easter revellers. These represented the predecessors to today's territorial forces, and included 50 to 100 volunteers per camp (Clarke 2007: 156). During the mid 1880s, 8000 men were part of this nation-wide force. Some Māori participated alongside Pākehā, and some made up distinctively Māori corps, such as the Thames Native Rifle Volunteers (formed 1874; Clarke 2007: 156). But it wasn't all target practice and taking orders – these groups were as much social clubs as serious military forces (Clarke 2007: 156).

## Parades and drills

Demonstrations were held by the Police each Easter at a few locations around the country. The weekend schedule consisted of drills on Thursday and Good Friday, a parade on Sunday, and the celebrations culminated on Easter Monday with a major field exercise or sham-fight (Clarke 2007: 157). But all the fun wasn't just to be had by the men-at-arms, many spectators attended, and some camps included contests, bands and balls (Clarke 2007: 158). Nearby hotels also made roaring trades in the evening from associated celebrating (Clarke 2007: 159).



*A view of the camp of the Blue Force at Sheffield. Webb and Bunz (photographer). Image: Christchurch City Libraries, File Reference: The Canterbury Times, 10/4/1907: 45.*



*The Easter manoeuvres of the Canterbury volunteers at the Sheffield Camp. 31 Mar. 1907 Webb and Bunz (photographer). Image: Christchurch City Libraries, File Reference: The Canterbury Times, 10/4/1907: 45.*

# But what about the chocolate? And the bunny who brings the chocolate?

**Like Easter itself, the tradition of the humble Easter egg has its birth in Europe too.**

During the middle ages, eggs were included in the long list of foods that were forbidden to be consumed during Lent – until Henry VIII relaxed these uncomfortable rules to only exclude meat. (Clarke 2007: 120).

The chocolate covered treats that we know today are a 20th century invention, as is the fluffy bunny who carries them. However, both ideas do have their roots in history which pre-dates Christianity – the name ‘Easter’ derives from the pagan fertility goddess ‘Eastre’ – who was a figure of worship relating to spring harvest rituals and celebrations. She was associated with rabbits (due to the speed in which they multiply), and eggs are also commonly associated with fertility and rebirth (Holloway 2014).

## And the chocolate balls of joy?

The little chocolate balls of joy began life in Germany and France during the late 18th century, but their association with Easter didn’t become widely spread until the late 19th century when technological advances allowed for mass production. Instead, it was common to decorate eggs – probably often with coloured dyes. Such festive eggs were given as gifts to children at Easter time, and the happy recipients would play games with them such as rolling them down hills (Clarke 2007: 148).

Unfortunately, we have never found any evidence of these festive eggs on a Christchurch archaeological site. The closest things we’ve found are decorated egg cups, which were commonly used as part of a breakfast table setting. Less commonly, we also come across undecorated ceramic eggs – thought to have been used in chicken coops to encourage hens to lay their eggs in a common place.



*Eastre – pagan goddess of spring.*



*Egg cups and an undecorated ceramic egg.*

It's probable that real eggs were the ones that were decorated at home for the season (Clarke 2007: 148), although it's also possible that pre-decorated ceramic eggs may have had their place among the Eastertide celebrations of the wealthy.

## Hot cross buns, one a penny, two a penny

### Eggs and bunnies aren't the only Easter traditions that have origin in pagan belief.

This article published in the Evening Post outlines the hot cross buns classical roots – linked with fertility, hunting and the Moon:

**Hot cross buns were originally made in the spring by the priests of ancient Rome in honour of Diana. The bun represented the moon and the cross its four quarters; the moon was worshipped by Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians.**

We can't argue that today the common belief is that hot cross buns reflect the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross. This was also obviously the common conception of our ancestors, but it seems that some of our predecessors had a few different ideas regarding the origin of the tasty treats.

This article also touches on the superstition that hot cross buns were baked on Good Friday because it was considered lucky. Bread that was baked on this day was thought by some to not spoil and have magical healing properties. Again, this superstition pre-dates Christianity (Clarke 2001: 150).

They were so well loved that one's Thursday night pre-orders were not always safe. Newspapers report an 1890s Easter crime spree – describing thieves who followed a baker's delivery man doorstep to doorstep, stealing the buns on Easter morning (New Zealand Times 5/4/1890:5).

## ORIGIN OF HOT CROSS BUNS

The application of hot cross bun to Good Friday certainly dates from the Middle Ages, when it was considered that bread baked on Good Friday and kept during the year was a specific for almost any ailment. But it owes its present-day popularity as a delicacy to worthy Richard Hands, who opened the Chelsea Bun House nearly two centuries ago. People came from all parts of the town to procure his spiced hot cross buns, and every pleasure garden in Chelsea and its vicinity was filled on Good Friday with crowds of folks eating his tasty buns. Although the solemn eating of hot cross buns is a custom unknown on the Continent, the custom seems to have originated in Scandinavia. However this may be, in England, at least, the practice is universally persistent.

## HOT CROSS BUNS.

Owing to numerous customers being disappointed last year through not being able to secure some of our famous "Hot Cross Buns." The public will oblige by placing their orders early at Dustin's, Avenno and Ridgway Streets. No order too small, none too large.

# Easter in 2020

## The commercialisation of Easter

**In the increasingly secular and culturally diverse New Zealand, Easter has become commercialised, with the sale of hot cross buns and marshmallow Easter eggs already spotted in some supermarkets in January.**

For many, it's all about the Easter weekend off work, with families socialising and heading to their baches for the last of the autumn sun and with the consumption of Easter eggs and chocolate bunnies sometimes well in advance of Easter Sunday. Most retail stores and hospitality industries are closed on either Good Friday or Easter Sunday but even this tradition (by law) is being increasingly ignored.

## For practicing Christians

**For practicing Christians in New Zealand who participate, Ash Wednesday, Lenten simplicity, Holy Week and Easter** are about recalling the focus of Jesus' teaching, as well as all the events of Jesus' last days on earth, and the early Christian community's experience of the Risen Christ's presence particularly when the community members were together.

Whilst there are a variety of interpretations, this cycle of activities can be seen as being a sample of all human encounters. Events in that week show the effect of times when we are influenced by the accumulation of possessions, collective group influence, our personal needs and ego which can distract us from simplicity, generous love and healing concern for others.

This conflict of influences and values then impedes our ability to live into our full human identity as justice-seeking peacemakers and loving participants in community.

Anglican Christians deliberately engage with each aspect of this Holy Week narrative (known as the Passion narrative) in worship events to reflect

personally about societal behaviour and personal priorities that might repeat these patterns today. Many parishes consider the following aspects of the Passion narrative (back page) as they conduct worship events:

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Written by Chelsea Dickson, adapted by The Selwyn Foundation.

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# Easter for practicing Christians



## Palm Sunday

The crowd enthusiasm of Palm Sunday as Jesus enters Jerusalem and everyone joins in the event and shouts “Hosanna”.



## Maundy Thursday

Jesus teaches his friends about servant leadership by washing their feet, they share a Passover meal and the cup of wine and flat bread is passed around following Jesus’ instruction “My body and blood is given for you, when you do this remember me”.

A night of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane where no one stays awake to keep Jesus company until a member of his group of friends betrays him for a sum of money (and perhaps political influence). Jesus is arrested by the Jewish leadership, and tried for his teachings that challenge their religious and political certainties.



## Good Friday

Once found guilty without a proper defence, Jesus is passed over to Roman authority to be condemned to death. No one in the crowd that shouted ‘Hosanna’ a few days earlier seems to find the voice to speak publically in support of Jesus when asked by Pilate the Roman governor. So on (Good) Friday Jesus is put to death. Before dusk, he is pronounced dead and his body is removed to a friend’s family tomb.



## Holy Saturday

Saturday is a pause when time is suspended whilst Jesus experiences and embodies the place of death.



## Easter Sunday

On Sunday morning, the women in his group of friends and family discover that his body is no longer in the tomb, and one woman who was a close friend has an encounter with Jesus that begins the experience we now share in: that “the love and presence of God cannot be put to death”.

Easter Sunday then becomes a celebration, when we realise that we too can leave old behaviours behind, acknowledge our shortcomings and commit (again) to the example and call of the Risen Christ.