Gloves and Cauliflowers, a history of St.Valentine's Day in England

Presented by Dr Sally White

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This was a lovely talk by Dr White about a subject with which we're all familiar and the majority take part in each year but know very little of its history. Slides showed examples of cards, many of which had come from the museum archives in Worthing.

The origins according to the oldest surviving literature, the Nuremberg Chronicle of 1493, date events to Roman times, when Emperor Claudius Gothicus (ruled 268-270) struggled precariously in power. The empire had broken up into three governing entities in the 260s and so his desperate need of soldiers led him to ban them from marrying. However, a priest called Valentine disobeyed these orders and continued to marry them. Either that activity, or a general persecution of Christians, or a refusal to deny Christ before the Emperor (as told by the Golden legend of 1260) led Valentine to be beaten with clubs and then beheaded.

Pope Gelasius I first established the feast of St.Valentine on 14 Feb 496.

In the Middle Ages St.Valentine's day was regarding as a very serious affair in finding a partner to marry. By the C16[th], Ben Johnson considered St.Valentine's day as having been corrupted and that one should mark virtues instead, such as helping the poor.

Various games and sayings developed in the country, such as an equal number of men and women placing their names in separate bags and then drawing lots. Each person ended up with two names, the one they had chosen and the one who had chosen them. If two people had drawn each other directly then that was supposed to lead to marriage! Others included writing names on paper, wrapping them up in small balls of clay and placing them in water. The first to surface was the chosen Valentine. Even the birds that one saw on Valentine's day supposedly foretold the type of person you'd marry.

Cards came later. Charles Duke of Orleans was the first known to have sent a card, in 1415. Oliver Cromwell banned St.Valentine's Day (and Christmas) but it was restored in 1666. It was at this time that Samuel Pepys wrote of giving gloves and garters as a symbol of love, allowing women to show off the former at the Easter Sunday Service as a sign of being cared for.

As publishing developed and expanded there came a number of books on St.Valentine's day, often for a specific sex, which gave verse and advice for sending messages. With the development of the universal postal service the volume of cards and messages grew rapidly. Sailors featured on many cards of the 1840s, presumably drawing upon the success of the Navy as an enticement. The 1840s was also the heyday for publishing books about St.Valentines, with the late C19th seeing the greatest range of cards. It was also during the C19[th] that the cauliflower was seen as a token of love but its origin is unclear. The last C19[th] also saw the production of nasty Valentine's cards, with caricatures or pointed messages aimed at upsetting the recipient.

The C20[th] witnessed great changes in the fortunes of St.Valentine's day. Prior to the Great War it had almost died out, before the firm of Raphael Tuck developed plans to resurrect it to commemorate the golden jubilee of their company in 1916. It was a great success and it reinvigorated the process of sending cards. Commercialisation grew steadily to the level we see today, as soon as the shops

have cleared their shelves of Christmas cards then St.Valentine's day cards are brought out which, in turn, will be replaced by Easter cards on 15th February.

The curious characteristic of St.Valentine's day is that although its origin lay in the Roman Empire, its legacy lies mainly within the English speaking world.

Now, we can all look forward to tomorrow with a new insight into the origin and history of St.Valentine's day.

Leycester Whewell, EHaDPS secretary, 13Feb2014