

February 2026: Shadows of spring?

Candlemas, on 2nd February, celebrated Jesus's presentation to the temple, at forty days old, and the 'purification of Mary'. Simeon, having been told he would live to see Christ, recognised him, and his words gave us the liturgical prayer, '*Nunc Dimittis servum tuum, Domine*' often sung at Evensong (and funerals) to settings by [Orlando Gibbons](#), [Thomas Tallis](#), [Charles Villers Stanford](#), [Gustav Holst](#) and [Geoffrey Burgon](#) (just to list some English composers). It is also a 'quarter day', exactly half way between the winter solstice and spring equinox, and so has long signified a, if not the, beginning of the traditional farming year. As such it coincides with the old Celtic festival of *imbolc* (a word that might be derived from a still older word for lambs) and, in Ireland, it's St Brigid's day (Brigid, however and perhaps suspiciously, has the same name as a Celtic goddess).



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In any case, Candlemas is commonly associated with the beginning of spring and weather forecasting. John Skelton wrote in 1523:

*'Men were wonte for to discern
By candlemas day what wedder shulde holde.'*

The idea is that good weather at Candlemass is bad news. As John Ray wrote in 1678:

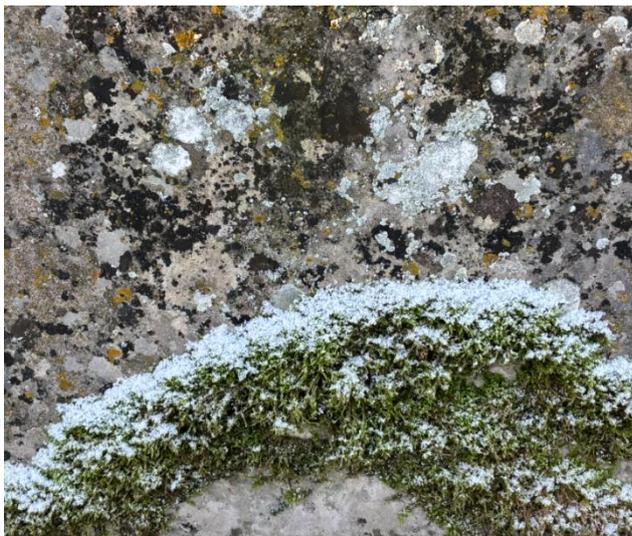
*If Candlemas day be fair and bright
Winter will have another flight
If on Candlemas day it be showre and rain
Winter is gone and will not come again.*

In North America, it's also Groundhog Day. Groundhogs (this painting is by [Audubon](#)), or woodchucks, are a type of marmot, or ground squirrel. The basic idea behind groundhog day is also weather forecasting; if the groundhog casts a shadow, then the weather is unseasonably good, and so there will be at least six weeks more winter. Across the USA and Canada, local groundhogs compete for the title of most accurate weather forecaster, including Potomac Phil, who is now dead and stuffed but is still (literally) wheeled out to see if he casts a shadow. Statistics, it must be said,



show groundhog-based predictions are rubbish¹.

The American tradition seems to have started around three hundred years ago when German and Swiss settlers, escaping religious persecution at home, migrated to what is now called Pennsylvania, a colony founded by the Quaker William Penn but named after his father². These settlers spoke a variety of German dialects which merged to form 'Pennsylvanian [Dutch](#)', still spoken today by Amish and Mennonite communities. The immigrants seem to have brought with them old Candlemas traditions from home, although there are no marmots in northern Germany, and the original tradition was associated with badgers. If badgers emerged by Candlemas, then further bad weather was on the way. Interestingly, [German Canadians](#) in Nova Scotia (who were sent there as Hannoverian British military to help keep out the French) used to call Groundhog Day *Daksday*. *Dachs* is German for badger; those cuddly dachshunds were bred to be the shape they are in order to go down badger setts. Strangely there are no stories of European marmots making similar predictions in the Swiss Alps – although I recently read something about blackbirds in the Italian Alps.



Of course, we don't have marmots in Gretton, but we do have badgers. I can't find anything about badgers predicting the weather in this way in the British Isles, though. Rather, there are stories of hedgehogs weather forecasting, particularly in the west. This might make sense since, as we've discussed before, our maritime climate means that badgers don't really hibernate here, and they often pop out even

during snow if the ground isn't frozen. But hedgehogs do hibernate and do sometimes emerge in early February – perhaps more frequently in the west owing to the warm Gulf Stream.

While people around the world invoke animals as short-term forecasters of weather, in warmer countries, where animals tend not to hibernate, linking animal appearance at Candlemas to predictions of spring weather perhaps wouldn't be expected. My Spanish friend Amelia couldn't think of any equivalent stories from Spain. However, Matyas, from Hungary, tells me that for him it's bears. If a Hungarian bear peeks out from hibernation at Candlemas and the weather is good, after a brief scratch and stretch it

¹ Potomac Phil [cast no shadow in 2026](#), predicting an early spring in America. He did the same last year, though, and got it badly wrong.

² William Penn encouraged religious freedom, and even seems to have negotiated fair-ish treaties with local American tribes. The land was granted by Charles II to his father, Admiral Sir William Penn (a friend and neighbour of Samuel Pepys) in lieu of debts.

goes straight back to sleep as that means more bad weather is on the way. While marmots, badgers and hedgehogs are pretty 'cool', bears are seriously so, and thus, while it's not a competition, if it were then Mat would have won (as he always does with wildlife stories).

This year it's been a mixture of cold, mild and wet in the run-up to candlemas – bees have even been out after the snowdrop nectar.

We put camera traps out in the churchyard to see what's out and about over Candlemas. No badgers or bears, just a fox and some muntjac, and somebody's cat. I doubt this tells us anything about early or late springs - we'll just have to wait to see ...

