

## Why does the UK tax year start on 6<sup>th</sup> April?

Let's begin by asking a question about dates in eighteenth century England. **The year was 1750 and the date was Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> March; what was the full date of the following day?**



If your answer was 25<sup>th</sup> March 1750, you were wrong. The right answer is Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> March **1751**.

That may sound puzzling, but the explanation is a relatively simple one: in Europe we now count the 1<sup>st</sup> January as the beginning of the “new year”, a time of year when the short winter days start to get a little longer each day. But until the eighteenth century in England the “new year” was officially counted from spring time, the time when the countryside springs into new life.

To be precise the change from one year to the next took place on an important religious festival: *Lady Day*—25<sup>th</sup> March—, also known as the *Feast of the Annunciation*, when the Angel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary that she would bear a child. In a way that makes sense, because the Annunciation is the festival which marks the real beginning of the Christian era.

So that is the reason why **24<sup>th</sup> March 1750** was followed by **25<sup>th</sup> March 1751**.

And now we come to a second question: **why was the year 1751 unique in English history?**

It was unique because it was only 282 days long. The following year, 1752, began not on Lady Day but on 1<sup>st</sup> January. Every year since then has also begun on 1<sup>st</sup> January.

But why did this change take place? The reason is that the government decided to line itself up with the *Gregorian calendar*, which was already in use in many other countries. The Gregorian calendar had been introduced by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 as a reform of the *Julian calendar* introduced by Julius Caesar in 45 BC. Countries like France and Spain adopted it immediately. Other countries took longer to accept the new calendar and England did not introduce it until 1752.

Here's a third question: **what happened in England on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1752?**

September 1752						
Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
-	-	1	2	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

The answer is “nothing” because that date (and the ten days after it) did not even exist. Although 1752 started in England on 1<sup>st</sup> January, the country was still not in line with Gregorian calendar: the English were 11 days ahead. As a result 11 days had to be missed out. Wednesday, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1752, was followed by Thursday, 14<sup>th</sup> September 1752.

## The tax year

A curious effect of the move to the Gregorian calendar lives on in the United Kingdom to this day. Taxes and contracts used to be organised from one Lady Day to the next. And even after the change to the new calendar, the new tax year continued to be on Lady Day. However, there was a potential problem: if the old tax



year in 1752 had ended on 24<sup>th</sup> March, people would have had to pay the usual amount of taxes for a year which had in fact been eleven days shorter than usual.

To keep tax payers happy, the government introduced a compromise. They continued to reckon the tax year according to Lady Day as it had been in the Julian calendar. From that day to this, the new UK tax year starts eleven days later, on 6<sup>th</sup> April.

## **Other Contracts**

Lady Day was also the infamous day when new contracts for tenant farmers and farm workers started. As a result it was the day when some farm workers lost their job or moved to a new farm; if they didn't have another job to go to, they were also homeless from that day, because farm labourers lived in so-called "tied cottages" in which they were only allowed to live as long as they worked on the farm. Like the tax year, agricultural contracts continued to expire on 5<sup>th</sup> April for many years after the Gregorian calendar was introduced.