

*Our resident etymologist, **Simon Horobin**, looks at the names of the months*

Like the days of the week, the English names for the months are derived from those used by the Romans. January is named after the Roman god Janus; this was particularly appropriate since he was the doorkeeper of heaven and the protector of entrances and doorways. February is from Latin Februa, the name of a purification feast that was celebrated on the fifteenth of this month. March is named after Mars, the Roman god of war, since several festivals were celebrated in his honour during this month, probably as preparation for upcoming military campaigns. The alternative term *hlyda*, possibly related to *hlud* ('loud'), was also used by the Anglo-Saxons.

April is borrowed from the Latin Aprilis, used alongside the vernacular *eastermonað* ('Easter month') in Old English. The fifth month of the Julian and Gregorian calendars was known to the Romans as Maius, derived from the name of the Classical goddess Maia, one of the Pleiades and mother of Hermes. The origin of this goddess's name lies in the Greek word *mater* ('mother'), reflecting her association with motherhood and fertility. June takes its name from Juno, the Roman goddess of marriage and childbearing, and wife of Jupiter. July differs from those we have considered so far in being named after a historical figure, Julius Caesar. The earlier name for the month was Quintilis, meaning 'fifth'. This may seem odd, since this is in fact the seventh month; it relates to an earlier calendar that began in March and which comprised just ten months. The calendar was expanded in 153 BC, when January and February were added to the end, although we now consider them to be the beginning of the year. The Anglo-Saxons used the vernacular term *liða* for June and July; related to the word 'lithe', the name referred to the comparatively mild climate.

Originally known as Sextilis ('sixth'), August was renamed in honour of the first Roman emperor Octavius Caesar in 8 BC, using his title Augustus (from the Latin word meaning 'revered, venerable'). The final four months of the year continue the prosaic numeration of the earlier Roman names. September is from Latin *septem* ('seven'), October from *octo* ('eight'), November from *novem* ('nine') and December from *decem* ('ten'). The Anglo-Saxons also called September *hærfestmonað*, since that was when the harvest was gathered in. The term 'harvest' is of Germanic origin (compare modern German *Herbst*, meaning 'autumn') and descends from an Indo-European root reflected in the Latin verb *carpere* ('to pick, pluck'), and in the Greek *karpos* ('fruit'). December was also known as *geolmonað* ('Yule month') or *ærra geola* ('first month of yule'), which was followed by *æfter geola* ('second month of yule'), i.e. January, which takes us back to where we began. ¶