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Why pancakes?

The Church of England gives the kitchen reason in a single official sentence, and it is a good one.

“Shrove Tuesday is the traditional last opportunity to celebrate before the beginning of Lent.” For many centuries, the same page says, it has been the custom to observe some form of fasting during Lent. “Shrove Tuesday is the opportunity to use up rich food, including eggs and fat which could be used in making pancakes — hence the nickname, ‘Pancake Day’.”

The parish of St Peter and St Paul, Olney, tells the same story: household stocks of fat and sweet ingredients were exhausted in the making of pancakes, in readiness for Lent. That tradition, the parish says, also provides the name for Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday, in other parts of the world.

The parish also explains the older English words: “Shrove” and “Shriving” arise from “Shriven,” in which sins, failings and mistakes are brought to God. The Church of England Lent page used here does not itself use those words. Both official pages are doing their own work.

The day before Lent

Ash Wednesday, the Church of England says, is the first day of Lent, remembering the forty days Jesus fasted in the wilderness. Sundays, which always celebrate the resurrection, are excluded from that total of forty.

A short quiz

1. What official nickname does the Church of England give for Shrove Tuesday?
2. What foods does that page mention as being used up in pancakes?
3. What other name does the Olney parish give for the same Tuesday, elsewhere in the world?

Answers. 1. Pancake Day. 2. Eggs and fat. 3. Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday.

Wording from the Church of England, “Common questions about Lent and Easter,” and St Peter and St Paul, Olney, Shriving Service, checked 17 November 2026.
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