

Christmas Customs

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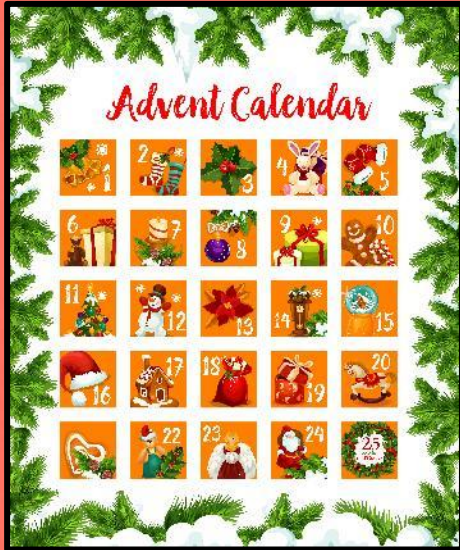
Traditions



Advent

2

Advent refers to a period including four Sundays before Christmas. The Advent season and its celebration has changed over the years from a more serious, sombre character (including giving up things, as is done during Lent) to one of a more joyous nature — including such treats as chocolate-filled Advent calendars.



The Crib

3

It is believed that the tradition of using the Crib to tell the story of the Nativity was first started in the 13th century by St Francis of Assisi. He used real animals and local people to depict the birth of Jesus in a stable, emphasising a humble birth in poverty. Over the centuries, the tradition evolved to using statues to represent all the characters in the scene.



Christmas Day



In approximately the year 300 A.D., the birthday of Jesus was determined to be on December 25, the day that has been celebrated from then till this very day. It is thought that this day was selected to reflect the ancient festivals of Winter Solstice, Saturnalia and Yule which, in ancient times, all took place around this time.



Boxing Day

In English-speaking countries, the day following Christmas Day is sometimes called 'Boxing Day'. This word comes from the custom which started in the Middle Ages around 800 years ago: churches would open their 'alms boxe' (boxes in which people had placed gifts of money) and distribute the contents to poor people in the neighbourhood on the day after Christmas.



Hunting the Wren

6

Hunting the Wren is a tradition in some parts of Ireland on the day after Christmas Day, St. Stephen's Day. Those engaged in the hunt — the Wren Boys — dress in straw suits or other costumes and go from door to door, beating drums and playing whistles, asking for money for the wren. Usually, this money goes to charity. Hunting the Wren is believed to be an ancient ritual — in its original form a wren was hunted, killed and hung on a holly bush. According to legend, the wren had earned this punishment by betraying the hiding place of St. Stephen — the first martyr.



Three Wise Men

7



After Jesus was born, the bible tells us that Three Wise Men from the East came to look for the baby Jesus, from an area which is now in either Iran or Saudi Arabia. The initials of the Three Kings — C + M + B (Caspar/Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar) — plus the year are inscribed in chalk over doorways in German-speaking countries on the eve of January 6 to protect house and home.



Little Christmas

8



Little Christmas — also known as Women's Christmas (Nollaig na mBan) falls on January 6th. This marks the official end of the Christmas season. Traditionally, the men of the house take over for the day — preparing meals and allowing the women to have a rest. Little Christmas is also the day when the tree and all the Christmas decorations are taken down and put into storage for another year.



The Christmas Tree

9



The tradition of the Christmas tree in Protestant countries was attributed to Martin Luther. In Catholic countries the custom was unknown up to the past century. In England the tradition was popularised by the German Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria. The German immigrants brought the Christmas tree to America in the 17th century. Public outdoor Christmas trees with electric candles were introduced in Finland in 1906, and in New York, USA, in 1912.



Santa Claus

10



The origin of Santa Claus begins in the 4th century with Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, an area in present day Turkey. By all accounts St. Nicholas was a generous man, particularly devoted to children. Dutch settlers brought the tradition of Sinterklaas (the Dutch name for St. Nicholas) to America where he was known as a gift-bringer. Over time, this name evolved into Santa Claus.

The Holly Wreath

11



A berry filled holly wreath on the front door of the house is a very popular decoration. It is a tradition passed down through the years when long ago poor people would use it to decorate their homes at Christmas. It became popular in Victorian England as a sign of Christmas welcome and has been an established Christmas tradition ever since.



The Christmas Candle

12



A lighted candle in the window is a tradition in Ireland at Christmas time. Many homes continue to observe this tradition on Christmas Eve. The lighted candle is a symbol to welcome strangers and to remember those who are far away from home. It is also in remembrance of the journey Mary and Joseph had to make on the first Christmas Eve.

Christmas Cards



The custom of sending Christmas cards started in Britain in the 1840s when the first 'Penny Post' public postal deliveries began. It is believed that Sir Henry Cole was the first person to send Christmas Cards in 1843. As printing methods improved, Christmas cards were produced in large numbers from about 1860. The Hallmark company first introduced "book style" cards in 1915.



Christmas Cards

The first director of London's Victoria and Albert Museum, Sir Henry Cole found himself too busy in the Christmas season of 1843 to compose individual Christmas greetings for his friends. He commissioned artist John Calcott Horsley for the illustration for a Christmas card. The card featured three panels, with the centre panel depicting a family enjoying Christmas festivities and the card was inscribed with the message "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You."



Christmas Carols

One explanation for the term, "Christmas Carol", originates from England. According to this English story, a young girl named Carol got lost in the streets of London on a cold winter's night. In an attempt to find her, her friends went from house to house, similar to the way carol singers do during Christmas. After this episode, the term "Christmas Carol" supposedly became widespread.



Christmas Carols

Another explanation for the term "carol" is that the word comes from the Greek dance, "Choraulein", which is accompanied by flutes. Later, the Frenchmen replaced the flutes with singing and named it, "caroller", which means, "to dance around in a circle".



Carol Singing

The tradition of singing carols is said to be traced back to the monk, St. Francis of Assisi in the 13th century. He introduced the singing of carols in church ceremonies. The first carol singers were known as "wassailers". Many of the most popular and well-known Christmas carols were written in the 19th century.



Christmas Dinner

18



A traditional Christmas dinner in early England was the head of a pig prepared with mustard! It is thought that the modern Christmas dinner evolved from ancient pagan midwinter feasts. However, it was during the Victorian era that turkey became popular for the Christmas feast. Nowadays, traditional Christmas dinner includes turkey, ham, roast potatoes, brussels sprouts and roast vegetables.



Plum Pudding



Plum Pudding is a dessert associated with Christmas. It probably comes from “plum pottage” which was a savoury porridge in medieval times. Some Christmas carols refer to it as “figgy pudding” because of dried fruits and especially figs which were used in the dish. It is sometimes said that the modern plum pudding contains 13 ingredients – representing Jesus and the 12 apostles. It is traditional for children to stir the plum pudding mixture clockwise and make a wish before it is cooked.



Mince Pies



Eating mince pies at Christmas time is a tradition in many countries. They are believed to have evolved from medieval “Christmas pies” which were filled with meat, fruit and spices. By Victorian times, sugar and spices had become more common. Meat was dropped from the recipe, keeping the sweet, spiced fruit filling (mincemeat) in a pastry case. Some people believe that the shape of a mince pie represents the manger and a star is sometimes placed on top of the pie representing the star over the stable.



Gingerbread House

21



The Christmas tradition of Gingerbread Houses has its origin in 16th century Germany where elaborate cookie creations were made. After the Grimm brothers published the story of Hansel and Gretel in 1812, which featured a witch's house made of treats, houses made from gingerbread and icing became more popular. The tradition spread throughout Europe during the 19th century, eventually spreading worldwide into the gingerbread houses tradition that we know today.



Candy Canes

22



Legend has it that during the 17th century, craftsmen created white sticks of candy in the shape of shepherds' crooks at the suggestion of the choirmaster at Cologne Cathedral in Germany. Many years later in the USA, red stripes were added and the name "candy canes" was first used in 1866. Originally, they were sugar flavoured but a peppermint or wintergreen flavour became more popular.



Holly

23

Legend has it that holly sprang from the footsteps of Christ as he walked the earth. The pointed leaves were said to represent the crown of thorns Christ wore while on the cross and the red berries symbolised the blood he shed. Bringing holly inside became a tradition to welcome the festive season, where it is often used to decorate pictures and fireplaces. It is traditional to remove the holly only after Little Christmas on January 6th.



Mistletoe



Scandinavians associated the mistletoe plant with Frigga, their goddess of love, and it may be from this that we derive the custom of kissing under the mistletoe. Those who kissed under the mistletoe had the promise of happiness and good luck in the following year.



Poinsettia



A native Mexican plant, poinsettias were named after Joel R. Poinsett, U.S. ambassador to Mexico who brought the plant to America in 1828. Poinsettias were likely used by Mexican Franciscans in their 17th century Christmas celebrations.



Jingle Bells



The Christmas tune, “Jingle Bells”, was originally named, “One-Horse Open Sleigh”. It was written by James Lord Pierpont some time in the 1850s and was most likely written for Thanksgiving, not for Christmas! It later became associated with the Christmas season after being recorded. “Jingle Bells” was one of the first songs broadcast from space in 1965.



Elf on the Shelf

27



The Elf on the Shelf comes from a 2005 book from Carol Aebersold and her daughters Chanda Bell and Christa Pitts. The elf was inspired by Carol's childhood elf, Frisbee. After the publication of the book, the Elf on the Shelf became a worldwide Christmas tradition where the elf is reputed to be a scout elf who reports to Santa Claus on children's behaviour each evening. The elf moves to a new spot in the house each day.

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