



## ON THE TWELFTH TRADITION OF CHRISTMAS

*Christmas in Britain, like many places, is a big holiday full of fun and festive traditions.*

*Although each family may have different rituals or customs, some traditions are a constant practiced from one generation to the next. Just how did they start? Below are the origins of 12 British Christmas traditions.*

### **Advent**

What is now a chocolate, or cheese-filled, countdown was actually a period where Christians would fast before Christmas; it is said that monks fasted in preparation for the coming of Christ as early as 597 AD. Advent as we know it now was a tradition started by the Germans who made chalk marks or lit candles in the days leading to Christmas. The treat-filled calendar is considered to have been started by German-born Gerhard Lang, who created the staple inspired by his childhood where his mother had stuck sweets onto a card-board calendar.

### **Carols**

The word ‘carol’ meant to dance in a ring and it was the Pagans who invented carols, as they would sing folk songs and

dance in praise and joy. This practice was then adopted by Christians who sung at social gatherings and outside the church, which became an integral part of the Christmas service. Carols have been written throughout the centuries but the most familiar date from the Victorian times. Pop songs, such as ‘White Christmas’ by Bing Crosby and ‘Merry Xmas Everybody’ by Slade, are now just as much a part of Christmas as carols.

### **Crackers**

Tom Smith first invented the Christmas party staple in the late 1840s. The London-based sweet maker took inspiration for the crackers from French paper-wrapped bonbons, and it wasn’t until he managed to find a way to make them crack did sales take off. Mr Smith first filled the crackers with riddles and mottoes, then later his sons Tom, Walter and Henry added the novelty gifts and hats that each person will traditionally sport during dinner.

### **Christmas cards**

There are two names that come up when thinking of who started the Christmas card – Henry Cole (the mastermind) and John Horsley (the designer). Mr Cole, who had helped to set up the Public Records Office (now the Post Office) and had a part in the introduction of the first postage stamp, had the idea of a Christmas card in order to encourage people to use the postal services, as well as being able to write to all of his friends in an easy way. So, he commissioned Mr Horsley to design a card with the words

“A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year To You”. By 1900 the custom of sending cards had spread throughout Europe. Although e-cards may be more popular now, everyone can appreciate a festive Christmas card.

### **Christmas pudding**

The pudding synonymous with Christmas, also known as plum or figgy pudding, has roots as far back as the Middle Ages when it was then known as frumenty, a wheat-based pottage. With the addition of eggs, dried fruit, spices and alcohol the pudding had developed into a thicker dessert by the mid-17th century. Christmas pudding was a Victorian favourite where it was a custom to put a silver coin in the pudding and it was said it would bring luck to whoever found the “six pence”, which nowadays would be a five pence piece.

### **Christmas tree**

To decorate a tree sets the tone and introduces the Christmas season with the act of putting up the tree usually done at the beginning of December. Although it had been around for a millennium across Northern Europe, it wasn’t until Prince Albert, a German, brought the tradition to the UK by putting up the first Christmas tree in Windsor Castle in 1841, that it became a widespread custom.

### **Boxing Day**

The day after Christmas where everyone runs into town for the sales and to make

returns was thought to be the day to get rid of all the boxes and packages that contained their presents. Historically, however, Boxing Day was a day off for servants and they would receive a Christmas box with small gifts from their masters.

## Holly and Ivy

The evergreens were originally used in pre-Christian times to celebrate the winter solstice and are now synonymous with Christmas. Hollies, in the form of a circular wreath, were said to represent the crown of thorns that Christ was forced to wear on the cross. As meanings have changed, now wreaths, holly and ivy are used to mark the Christmas spirit, welcome visitors and add a splash of colour to the darkest month.

## Mince pies

Before becoming the fruit-filled sweet pies we know them now, mince pies used to be filled with various meats such as: pigeon, hare, pheasant rabbit, ox, lamb or mutton and mixed with fruits, sugar and spice. Meat had disappeared from the recipe by Victorian times, although beef suet is often still used. Mince pies are thought to be a modern

descendant of the Christmas Pye, where the oblong shape it would be presented in was said to represent the cradle that nestled Christ.

## Mistletoe

According to a Norse myth, the evergreen has been associated with life and fertility, based on a legend where Goddess Frigg cried white berries in devastation of losing her son, who was killed by a mistletoe arrow. He was brought back to life and in sheer happiness Frigg blessed the plant and promised to kiss anyone who passed beneath it. From there mistletoe would be hung and visitors would have their hands kissed, which then developed into the full smack on the lips we have today.

## Turkey

Before turkey became the staple meat during Christmas, a head of a boar, roast goose or pheasant would have been the centrepiece at the dinner table. That was until William Strickland, a trader, had imported turkeys and sold them in Bristol in 1526. The bird gained a following as they were tasty, more practical than cows which were more useful alive and cheaper than chickens.

Henry VIII was the first English king to enjoy turkey, but it was Edward VII who made it tradition for the poultry to be eaten at Christmas, particularly for the middle class. Turkey gained its popularity across societies much later, as before then it was difficult for people who didn't have money or the room to refrigerate such a large bird.

## Xmas

An alternative name for Christmas in Britain is considered to be a handy abbreviation as it is fewer characters to write or type – however it does have a religious meaning. The 'X' came from the Greek letter Chi, the first letter of Χρῆστος, which means Christ.

*Christmas customs may change and adapt to the time but to know the reasoning and beginnings of some of these traditions is all part of the festive fun.*

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