



Ding dong merrily on high

Since moving to London, I have created my own Christmas traditions. One of my favourites is to attend at least one carol service. Churches all over London hold all kinds of carol services open to the public. Sometimes they are sponsored by corporations, sometimes they feature guest choirs, but they are always a magnificent way to enjoy a traditional Christmas.

A brief history

Carols have a long history, going back to when pagans sang songs for celebration. Despite common belief, Oliver Cromwell didn't outlaw Christmas entirely, but he did outlaw carols in 1656. He enjoyed singing in private but thought it was not appropriate to sing in church. You could worship freely if there was a Catholic church attached to an embassy and embassy chapels had such great music, that Protestants also attended.

Where to go?

The search begins in early November, when you should comb the internet and websites of all the churches in London. If you aren't familiar with churches in your area, hop onto Google maps and type 'churches'. Then click on their website to see if they are holding a carol service. Some churches operate by volunteers and often their websites don't have the information up until

later. Just keep coming back if you find a church you like.

What to expect

On arrival at a carol service, you will be given a programme of service. This will let you know what is in store for you. There are a few different types of carol services, but the most common will be one of Nine Lessons. This is where a carol and a lesson (or reading) are alternated. Since there are nine, you'll hear many carols. Some carols will be sung by the choir only, others will invite the congregation to join in. The words are always provided, and you can always lip sync if you are not familiar with the song.

US vs UK carols

Americans who attend their first carol service will be a little thrown by some of the songs. On paper, your eyes will delight that they are going to sing "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem". However, the tune is very different. It turns out there are many songs that Americans sing at Christmas that have completely different tunes here in England. It goes back to a combination of wanting to break away from Britain (even changing songs!) and composers taking an old tune and giving it new life with a new melody.

Amber Raney-Kincade is the American Tour Guide in London, offering walking tours and private hire to those looking to explore on foot. Find out more at www.AmericanTourGuideInLondon.com or follow her on Twitter [@AmericanLDN](https://twitter.com/AmericanLDN)

Things to look for

The church of St Bartholomew the Great have recently offered two services that are very enjoyable to attend. One is a Christmas carol service using only American songs (see above for explanation). The other is a German carol service, where the songs are sung in German and are popular tunes from that country. Be sure to arrive early as these events are becoming very popular. Another service to watch for are the services held on Sundays, to mark each week of Advent. There are also 'crib services' to prepare the cradle for Jesus that include children and sometimes live animals.

Something different

St Clement Danes and St Brides Fleet Street (and a few others, too) offer carol services that end with mulled wine and mince pies. If you are wanting something completely different, Organoke is held at St Giles Church Camberwell. They play the organ, hosted by music hall turned rap star Ida Barr, and sing all the contemporary Christmas songs that are played on the radio. Belt out your heart to "Last Christmas", or sing "Fairytale of New York" in the most peculiar setting. Of course, they end with Mariah Carey's "All I want for Christmas is You". Tickets sell out in September but they sell 100 tickets locally and you can still grab some if you are lucky.