

Christmas in England*

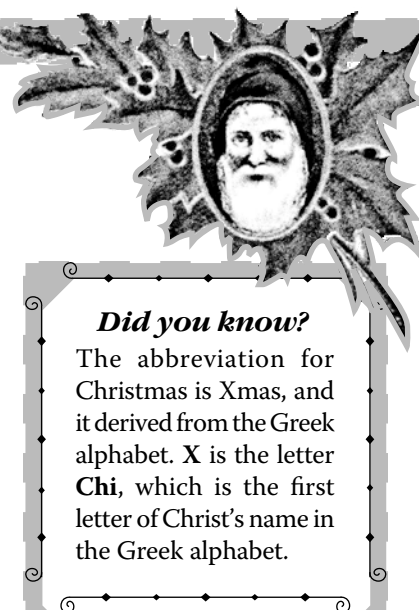
On what day is Christmas celebrated in England?

Christmas is the time when Christians around the world celebrate the birth of Jesus.

In England Christmas is celebrated on the *25th of December*, with a Christmas dinner for the whole family.

The word Christmas (or Christ's Mass – a church service for Christ) comes from the Old English name *Cristes Maesse* – Christ's Mass – and is the celebration of the birth of Jesus. The first recorded observance occurred in Rome in AD360, but it wasn't until AD440 that the Christian Church fixed a celebration date to December 25.

Christmas is a truly magical season that brings families and friends together to share the much loved customs and traditions which have been around for centuries. Most people in England are on holiday and stay at home with their family on Christmas day.



Did you know?

The abbreviation for Christmas is Xmas, and it derived from the Greek alphabet. X is the letter **Chi**, which is the first letter of Christ's name in the Greek alphabet.

What is the start of the Christmas season called?

Advent is the start of the Christmas season in England. The first sign of Christmas in an English home is the children's Advent calendar. It starts on the first day of December. The calendars are a fun way to help children to know when Christmas Eve will arrive, an important night for them because *Father Christmas* will visit them bringing gifts.

An Advent calendar is a poster or card with twenty-four small doors, one to be opened each day from December 1 until *Christmas Eve*. Each door conceals a picture. Every morning children open 1 window of the calendar to see a pretty picture or find a chocolate inside.

This popular tradition arose in Germany in the late 1800s and soon spread throughout Europe and North America. Originally, the images in Advent calendars were derived from the Hebrew Bible.

Many Advent calendars today have no religious content. Now, alongside traditional Advent calendars depicting angels and biblical figures are those whose doors open to display teddy bears, pieces of chocolate, or photos of pop stars.

An *Advent Candle* has 25 marks. Every day it is lit and is burned down by one mark each day.

What takes place in most primary schools in England at Christmas time?

At Christmas time, it is traditional in England for Primary schools to put on a *Nativity play*. The Nativity play recreates the scene of Jesus' birth in the stable and tells of how Mary and Joseph were visited by the Shepherds and Wise Men. The parts of Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds and the Wise Men are played by the children.

St Francis of Assisi is said to have created the first Nativity performance in Italy in about 1223. In those days, many people were unable to read or write so they couldn't read the Christmas story in the Bible themselves. Also many of the church services were in Latin which they didn't understand.

St Francis decided to change all that. He wanted not only to tell the story of the first Christmas but to show people what it must have been like on that night in Bethlehem when Jesus was born so he set up a nativity scene. He got hold of some live animals, a manger and some hay. Then he asked people from his village to take the parts of Mary and Joseph and the Shepherds.

Did you know?

Animals are not mentioned in the Bible stories about Christmas. It all started twelve hundred years after the birth of Christ when a carol described how the donkey carried Mary to Bethlehem and the other animals looked after her and the new baby in the stable.

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What is a traditional British Christmas play called?

A *pantomime* is a traditional British Christmas play. They are an important part of Christmas festivities. They traditionally start on Boxing Day and run for two or three months in theatres around the country. Nowadays, pantomimes are great family entertainments and pop stars, comedians, sports people and TV personalities often take part in them.

Originally silent productions, the pantomimes are a mix of fairy stories, folk tales and much loved cartoons, which encourage audience participation. The audience becomes very involved in the performance, with lots of hissing and booing of the villain and cheering for the hero. Some pantomimes include a song for the audience to join in with, and others invite children up on stage to chat to one of the performers.

In pantomimes the male roles are often played by women and female roles by men. This makes the audience laugh more. Favourite pantomimes are *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Peter Pan*, and *Puss in Boots*.

Which colours are the traditional colours of Christmas?

Red and *green* are the traditional colours of Christmas. *Green* represents the continuance of life through the winter and the Christian belief in eternal life through Jesus. *Red* symbolizes the blood that Jesus shed at His Crucifixion.

What are traditional Christmas decorations?

In the weeks leading up to and during Christmas, people hang decorations in their homes. These decorations are made of coloured paper and foil. People will also hang greenery around the house, such as *holly* and *ivy*. The needlelike points of holly leaves are thought to resemble the crown of thorns that Jesus wore when He was crucified. The red berries symbolise the drops of blood Jesus shed.

Towns and cities decorate their streets with colourful lights.



Holly, mistletoe and ivy

Evergreen is a symbol of life and is taken from the old midwinter festival which encourages the return of sun which is another reason why we often use holly, mistletoe and ivy to decorate our houses.

Ancient people were fascinated by the way evergreens stayed green through all the bleak days of winter. It proved to them that these trees were still alive and reminded them that spring would come again.

Mistletoe

The Druids, who lived in Britain in pre-Christian times, are responsible for the use of mistletoe at Christmas. They worshipped the oak tree and as mistletoe grew on oak trees they regarded it as a very special plant and thought it possessed magical qualities that kept the sleeping oak alive during the cold winter days. They believed chopping down an oak tree covered in mistletoe promised death to the woodcutter within the year.

Kissing under the Mistletoe

The Druids dedicated mistletoe to the Goddess of Love, which explains the kissing that goes on under it. Originally, when a boy kissed a girl, he plucked a berry from the cluster and presented it to her. When the berries were gone, so were the kisses.

A traditional rhyme about mistletoe is:

*Pick a berry off the mistletoe
For every kiss that's given.
When the berries have all gone
There's an end to kissing.*

Victorians bound the mistletoe to a frame to make a “kissing ring”. Each time a gentleman caught a lady under the mistletoe, he was allowed to claim a kiss.

Poinsettias

The poinsettia originally grew in Mexico; where it was known as the “Flower of the Holy Night”. In the eighteenth century, Mexicans thought the plants were symbolic of the Star of Bethlehem. Thus the poinsettia became associated with the Christmas season. The bright red leaves are often mistaken for petals, when in fact the actual flower is the yellow centre.



Decorating the outside of houses

Christmas lights are put up in homes all over the country during the festive season – but some families go one step further than just decorating the Christmas tree.

Ten years ago it was a rare sight to spot a brightly-coloured magical front garden filled with festive decorations. But nowadays more and more people are adding dancing santas, flashing stars and giant sledges to the front of their houses during the festive season.

Many of these highly decorated houses attract big crowds of passers-by and are using the opportunity to collect money for local charities.

Even Buckingham Palace entered into the Christmas spirit by being lit up during Christmas 2003. From Christmas Eve, projectors “wrapped” the Palace in a giant Union Jack and wrapping paper.

The effect was part of the Brightening Up London project which also illuminated nine other famous buildings in the city with seasonal images.



When did Christmas Trees and the tradition of decorating them become popular in England?

Most houses in England, will have a tree of some sort or other which they will decorate and will place the presents under. The traditional tree is a fir tree but nowadays more people buy artificial trees to “save the earth”. The decorating of the tree is usually a family occasion, with everyone helping.

The Christmas tree became popular in England in 1841 when Queen Victoria’s husband, Prince Albert, brought a Christmas tree over from Germany and put it in Windsor Castle. The Royal couple were illustrated in a newspaper standing around the Christmas tree with their children, and the tradition of decorating a tree became fashionable.

The Christmas trees, during the Victorian times, were decorated with candles to remind children of the stars in the sky at the time of the birth of Jesus. Using candles was, of course, a great fire hazard.

Christmas trees were also decorated with candies and cakes hung with ribbon. In 1880 Woolworths first sold manufactured Christmas tree ornaments which proved to be very popular.

Today, Christmas trees are decorated with tinsel, lights and small ornaments which hang from the branches. Chocolate coins or chocolate shapes are also hung on the Christmas tree and the presents are put under the tree. An angel or star is usually put on the very top of the tree.



The most Famous Christmas Tree in Britain.

In London, near the statue of Lord Nelson in Trafalgar Square, a giant Christmas tree is set up and decorated with great ceremony each year. The tree is a thank you gift from the people of Oslo, Norway. During the Second World War, King Haakon of Norway was forced into exile in England when the Germans occupied his country. Since 1947, Norway has expressed its thanks for the help of the British people by continuing to send a huge Norwegian spruce to be shared by all.

Did you know?

Trees were decorated with apples, cakes and sweets for many centuries.

Recycling

Christmas trees are biodegradable – the trunk and branches can be used as mulch for gardens. The mulch provides a protect barrier for the roots of other plants and vegetation while preventing weeds from growing. The mulch then decomposes, providing the nutrients plants need to thrive.

When was the first Christmas card sent and who printed it?

The first Christmas card was created and sent in 1843. A man named John Calcott Horsely printed the first Christmas card for Sir Henry Cole, the friend who had given him the idea. The card depicted a typical English family enjoying the holiday, and people performing acts of charity. An important part of Victorian Christmas spirit. A thousand copies of the card were printed and sold for one shilling. This is reportedly the first Christmas card to be produced and sold to the public.

Traditionally, Christmas cards showed religious pictures of Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, or other parts of the Christmas story. Today, pictures are often winter pictures, Father Christmas, or jokes.

Did you know?

The average person in Britain sends 50 Christmas cards each year.

What are the songs sung at Christmas time called?

Special songs sung during the Christmas season are known as *carols* and they are about when Jesus was born. They were written for a special purpose, often to accompany performances of religious dramas dating from medieval times.

Caroling is one of the oldest customs in Great Britain, going back to the Middle Ages when beggars, seeking food, money, or drink, would wander the streets singing holiday songs.

In the Middle Ages, carols were dances accompanied by singing. It is thought that they were introduced to England from France.

Over the years, the word "carol" changed its meaning, referring only to certain kinds of songs, the word carol became known as Christmas songs.

People go "carol singing". This is where people will go from house to house singing carols and collecting money for charity.

The traditional period to sing carols was from St Thomas's Day (December 21) until the morning of Christmas Day.

Probably the most famous carol service is "The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols" held in King's College Chapel, Cambridge. It takes place on Christmas Eve and always begins with the carol, "Once in Royal David's City" sung by a solo chorister.



Did you know?

St Francis of Assisi introduced Christmas Carols to formal church services.

The word comes from the ancient Greek choros, which means "dancing in a circle," and from the Old French word carole, meaning "a song to accompany dancing."

Christmas carols were banned between 1647 and 1660 in England by Oliver Cromwell who thought that Christmas should be a solemn day.

The tradition of carol singers going from door to door came about because they were banned from churches in the Middle Ages.

White Christmas by Irving Berlin is the biggest-selling Christmas song of all time. It is estimated to have sold approximately 350 million copies on record and sheet music.

Christmas Carol

Away in a Manger

Away in a Manger was first published in an 1885 Lutheran Sunday School book by James R. Murray (March 7, 1841 – March 10, 1905), but the author of the first two stanzas is unknown. It is certain that stanza three was added in 1904 by Dr John McFarland of New York City.

Some have attributed the song to Martin Luther himself. The confusion may have began because Murray published it with the subtitle "*Luther's Cradle Hymn* (Composed by Martin Luther for his children and still sung by German mothers to their little ones)."

(From Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia)

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.
The stars in the sky looked down where he lay,
The little Lord Jesus asleep in the hay.
The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
But little Lord Jesus no crying he makes.
I love Thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky
And stay by my cradle til morning is nigh.
Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay
Close by me forever, and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in thy tender care,
And take us to heaven, to live with Thee there.



Music composed by William J. Kirkpatrick
(1838–1921) in 1895



Why is Christmas Eve an exciting time for children in England?

Christmas Eve (December 24) is traditionally the day for decorating churches and homes. It marks the beginning of the period formally known as *Christmas-tide*.

Eve is not short for evening, it refers to the day before an important day.

Night time on Christmas Eve is a very exciting time for young children. It is the time when Father Christmas / Santa comes.

The children leave mince pies and brandy for Father Christmas, and a carrot for the reindeer.

Children hang their Christmas stockings or bags up ready for Father Christmas, who will hopefully fill them up with presents, if the children have been good. The children then go to sleep and wait for Christmas morning to see if he has been.



Why do the children in England hang up Christmas stockings?

From 1870 children have hung up Christmas stockings at the ends of their beds or along the mantelpiece above the fireplace.

Father Christmas once dropped some gold coins while coming down the chimney. The coins would have fallen through the ash grate and been lost if they hadn't landed in a stocking that had been hung out to dry. Since that time children have continued to hang out stockings in hopes of finding them filled with gifts.

Carol Service

Christians go to a special carol service at their church on Christmas Eve night. There are usually two carol services. The first one is for children and may be a candle lit service where the congregation hold a candle each whilst they sing Christmas songs (carols) and watch a Nativity performed by children. The second one is closer to midnight (called Midnight Mass), so that people can welcome Christmas Day in and rejoice in the coming of our Lord.

What happened on Christmas Eve during the First World War?

On the stroke of midnight on Christmas Eve 1914, firing from the German trenches suddenly stopped. A German brass band began playing Christmas carols. On Christmas morning, the German soldiers came out of their trenches, approaching the allied lines, calling "Merry Christmas". At first the allied soldiers thought it was a trick, but they soon climbed out of their trenches and shook hands with the German soldiers. The truce lasted a few days, and the men exchanged presents of cigarettes and plum puddings, sang carols and songs. They even played a game of Soccer.

What are Christmas Eve Superstitions?

- An old wives' tale says that bread baked on Christmas Eve will never go mouldy.
- At midnight, a certain rose slowly opens and re-closes its petals to salute the birthday of Jesus.
- Also at midnight, all the sheep in the fields turn and bow towards the East.

What is a Traditional Christmas Eve Drink?

To add good cheer to the merry-making of English Christmases, posset was drunk on Christmas Eve. It was made of hot ale combined with spices, lemon and sugar, and bits of oatcake and bread were added. The posset was taken with a spoon, and lucky, indeed, was the fortunate youth or maiden who drew out the lucky coin or the wedding-ring which had been dropped in the posset-pot!

During the 19th century, on Christmas Eve, the custom was to offer each caroling guest a posset cup and a piece of apple pie or tart.

4 cups milk
4 tablespoons sugar
4 slices toast
1 teaspoon cinnamon
4 cups of beer (preferably ale)

Heat the milk, sugar, and toast in a saucepan, but don't let it boil. Stir the cinnamon and beer together in a punch bowl.

Discard the toast. Pour the hot milk over the ale and stir. Drink from mugs while warm.

Serves 8–10.

Some possetts contained raw eggs. The egg-nog (eggs beaten with sugar, milk or cream, and some kind of spirit) is a modern form of this drink. (*In Britain, nog is slang for ale.*)

Who is Father Christmas?

Father Christmas is an English version of Santa Claus. He is an old jolly man with white hair, a beard and a moustache. He is dressed in a red suit outlined in white. Father Christmas and his elves make all the toys for Christmas in his home in the North Pole.

The red coat is "new". Images of Father Christmas prior to about 1880 most pictures showed him with a green coat. The red became the most popular colour after the US introduction by Coca-Cola during the 1930s.

We owe much about what we know about Father Christmas today to the Americans of the 19th century. In 1822, Clement Clarke Moore described what he imagined Father Christmas to look like in a poem.

The poem is often referred to as *The Night Before Christmas*, but originally it was titled *A Visit from St Nicholas*.

*He was dressed all in fur from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a pedlar just opening his sack.
His eyes how they twinkled! his dimples how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry;
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
And the beard on his chin was as white as the snow.
The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
And the smoke it encircled his head like a wreath.
He had a broad face, and a little round belly
That shook when he laughed like a bowl full of jelly.
He was chubby and plump, – a right jolly old elf –
And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself.*

*Written by Clement C. Moore in 1822
as a Christmas present to his children.*



History of Father Christmas in England

Father Christmas was originally part of an old English midwinter festival, normally dressed in green, a sign of the returning spring. Santa Claus, the man we know today dressed in red, became known in England during the 1870's. His name comes from the Dutch name for St Nicholas which is Sinter Klaas.

What happens before Christmas Day?

In shops or at children's parties, someone dresses up as Father Christmas and gives small presents to children and ask them what gifts they want for Christmas.

How do children write to Father Christmas?

Children write letters to Father Christmas to tell him what they would like for Christmas. Some children will send their letters by post or e-mail but the more traditional way is to throw the letters into the back of the fireplace. The draught then carries the letters up the chimney to Father Christmas.

What happens on Christmas Eve?

On Christmas eve Father Christmas piles all of the toys onto his sleigh and rides across the sky with his reindeers. The most famous one is Rudolf, the reindeer at the front who leads the way with his red nose.

He enters our houses down the chimney at midnight and places



presents for the children in stockings (large socks) or bags by their beds or in front of the family Christmas tree.

Who was he?

Father Christmas is based on a real person, St Nicholas. He was a very shy man and wanted to give money to poor people without them knowing about it. It is said that one day, he climbed the roof of a house and dropped a purse of money down the chimney. It landed in the stocking which a girl had put to dry by the fire! This may explain the belief that Father Christmas comes down the chimney and places gifts in children's stockings.

What are the different names of Father Christmas?

Father Christmas is called different names around the world. The most popular name nowadays is Santa Claus.

- Austria: Christkind (Christ child)
- Belgium: Sinterklaas
- Canada: Santa Claus; Père Noël (Father Christmas)
- Denmark: Julemanden
- Estonia: Jõuluvana
- Finland: Joulupukki
- France: Père Noël (Father Christmas)
- Germany: Weihnachtsmann (Christmas Man); Christkind in southern Germany
- Hungary: Mikulás (Nicholas); Jézuska or Kis Jézus (child Jesus)
- Italy: Babbo Natale (Father Christmas); La Befana
- Netherlands & Flanders: Sinterklaas (not with Christmas but on December 5th)
- Norway: Julenissen
- Portugal: Pai Natal ("Father Christmas")
- Russia: Ded Moroz (Grandfather Frost)
- Spain: Los Reyes Magos (The Three Kings; Magi)
- Sweden: Jultomten
- Switzerland: Christkind
- United Kingdom: Father Christmas; Santa Claus
- United States: Santa Claus



What traditionally happens at three o'clock on Christmas Day?

A traditional feature of Christmas afternoon is the Queen's Christmas Message. At three o'clock in the afternoon, the Queen gives her Christmas Message to the nation which is broadcast on radio and television. The Queen's message is also broadcast throughout the British Commonwealth. The custom was begun by King George V in 1932.

The Queen has made a Christmas Broadcast to the Commonwealth every year of her reign except 1969, when a repeat of the film "Royal Family" was shown and a written message from The Queen issued.

What is a traditional Christmas dinner?

A traditional English Christmas dinner consists of roast turkey and stuffing, roast potatoes and vegetables, bread sauce, cranberry sauce and gravy, followed by Christmas pudding with brandy butter.

*Christmas is coming, the goose is getting fat
Please put a penny in the old man's hat...*

Traditional, English

In the Past

In Medieval England, peacocks and swans were eaten only by the rich at Christmas but boar's head was the main course. In the 18th century, turkey along with beef, slowly replaced the boar's head as most people's Christmas meal in Britain. By Victorian times, people were usually eating either turkey or goose at Christmas.

A turkey tradition

A Christmas tradition involving the turkey is to pull its wishbone. This is one of the bones of the turkey which is shaped like the letter 'Y'. Two people will each hold an end and pull. The person left with the larger piece of the bone makes a wish.

The Christmas Pudding

The Christmas pudding known today began life as Christmas porridge called *Frumenty*, a dish made of wheat or corn boiled up in milk. As time went on, other ingredients, such as dried plums or prunes, eggs, and lumps of meat were added to make it more interesting. When cooked, it was poured into a dish. This pudding was called *plum pudding*. The name 'plum pudding' continued to be used even when people used raisins, currants, and sultanas instead of prunes.

Today, a Christmas pudding is a brown pudding with raisins, nuts and cherries. It is served with custard or brandy butter. Often brandy is poured over the pudding, which is then set alight as it is carried to the table. The lights are turned off so people can see the flames.

Traditionally silver coins were hidden in it. A silver coin brought good fortune to whomever was lucky enough to find it when the pudding was cut.

The traditional time for making a Christmas pudding is *Stir Up Sunday* at the beginning of advent. A proper Christmas pudding is always stirred from East to West in honour of the three wise Men and traditionally made with 13 ingredients to represent Christ and His Disciples. Every member of the family must give the pudding a stir and make a secret wish.

Christmas Crackers

Traditionally a Christmas cracker is placed next to each plate on the Christmas dinner table. When the crackers are pulled, out falls a colourful party crown, a toy or gift and a festive joke.



Did you know?

It was the custom to eat goose at Christmas until Henry VIII decided to tuck into a turkey.

93 per cent of the population in the UK will eat turkey on Christmas Day; this means 11 million turkeys being cooked!

The turkey was imported to France by the Jesuits and it is still known in some French dialects as a 'Jesuiste'.

Christmas pudding was first made as a kind of soup with raisins and wine in it.

One notable medieval English Christmas celebration featured a giant, 165-pound pie. The giant pie was nine feet in diameter. Its ingredients included 2 bushels of flour, 20 pounds of butter, 4 geese, 2 rabbits, 4 wild ducks, 2 woodcocks, 6 snipes, 4 partridges, 2 neats' tongues, 2 curlews, 6 pigeons and 7 blackbirds.

The afternoon / evening meal contains mince pies and a Christmas cake. This cake is a rich baked fruit cake with marzipan, icing and sugar frosting. It is traditional to pull *Christmas Crackers* before the meal.



Did you know?

Mince pies became a regular part of Christmas celebrations as early as the 16th century (Tudor times), when mince pies were coffin or cradle shaped, rather than round as they are now. At that time, they contained quite a bit of shredded meat in addition to the usual melange of dried fruits.

The crusaders returned from the Holy Land with spices, and it was deemed appropriate to celebrate Christ's birthday with a pie containing

spices from His native land. It was important to add three spices (cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg) for the three gifts given to the Christ child by the Magi.

It was thought lucky to eat one mince pie on each of the twelve days of Christmas (ending with Epiphany, the 6th of January). Alternatively to refuse one would lead to bad luck.

What are Christmas crackers?

Crackers are very popular and accompany many meals over the Christmas period and especially on Christmas Day. A Christmas Cracker is a brightly coloured paper tube, twisted at both ends. There is a banger inside the cracker and when it is pulled by two people, the cracker snaps in half with a bang. Inside the cracker there is a tissue paper hat, a joke and a little gift.

Christmas crackers were invented by *Thomas Smith in 1846*. He had imported some French novelties to sell as Christmas gifts, but these were not popular until he wrapped them up and added a snapper.

The custom of pulling crackers came to Britain in the 1860s.

The traditional way to pull a cracker is crossing your arms and pulling a whole circle of crackers all around the table. Everyone holds their crack in their right hand and pulls their neighbours cracker with the free left hand.

**W**hat is Boxing Day?

Boxing Day is the following day after Christmas Day. Like Christmas Day it is also a national holiday in England. The name goes back to medieval times, more than 800 years ago, when alms boxes were placed at the back of every church to collect money for the poor. Traditionally, it is on this day that the alms box at every English church is opened and the contents are distributed to the poor.

Historians say the holiday developed because servants were required to work on Christmas Day, but took the following day off. As servants prepared to leave to visit their families, their employers would present them with Christmas boxes.

During the late 18th century, Lords and Ladies of the manor would "box up" their leftover food, or sometimes gifts and distribute them the day after Christmas to tenants who lived and worked on their lands.

The tradition of giving money still continues today. It is customary for householders to give small gifts or monetary tips to regular visiting trades people (the milkman, dustman, coalman, paper boy etc.) and, in some work places, for employers to give a Christmas bonus to employees.

Boxing Day is also known as *St Stephen's Day* (when Good King Wenceslas looked out).

*"Good King Wenceslas looked out,
On the Feast of Stephen..."*

Stephen lived in Rome and was the first man to be killed for believing in the teachings of Jesus. His story is told in the Acts of the Apostles 6: 1 to 8: 2.

Some people claim that he shares this day with another St Stephen, who came from Sweden. St Stephen of Sweden is the patron saint of horses. Boxing Day has long been associated with outdoor sports, especially horse racing and hunting.

Did you know?

The Christmas boxes were made from clay and were not made in the shape of a box. They were hollow clay balls with a slit in the top.

Boxing Day Hunts

Traditionally Boxing Day is a day for fox hunting. Horse riders dressed in red and white riding gear with a pack of hounds chase foxes through the country side.

Before a Boxing Day Hunt, the huntsmen and huntswomen drink hot wine. But the tradition of the December 26th hunt is changing. The "sport" is slowly dying out due to the growing support for the fox.

Family Time

Boxing Day is usually the day when families travel to meet together if they spent Christmas Day at their own home. It is a day of watching sports and playing board games.

Shopping

Recently some shops have broken from tradition and started opening on Boxing Day to start the New Year sales. Hundreds of people now spend Boxing Day morning in queues outside shops, waiting to be the first to dive for the sales racks as the doors opened.

Hunting of the Wren

It is unlucky to kill a wren on any day apart from Boxing Day. A tradition not carried out today was the Hunting of the Wren on Boxing Day. Groups of young boys would hunt a wren and then tie the dead bird to the top of a pole, decorated with holly sprigs and ribbons. With blackened faces, the group would sing at houses in hopes for coins, gifts or food.

Those that gave money to the boys would receive a feather from the wren as thanks. The collected money was then used to host a village dance.

This odd ritual was not restricted to England. It was prevalent in some continental countries on Boxing Day as well as the Isle of Man, Wales and Ireland.



*"The wren, the wren, the king of all birds,
On St Stephen's Day was caught in the furze,
Up with the penny and down with the pan,
Give us a penny to bury the wren."*

Interesting Facts about Christmas

- England has only known seven white Christmases in the entire twentieth century. According to the records of the Meteorological Office in London, snow fell on Christmas Day only in 1938 and 1976. (The definition of a white Christmas in England is when one snowflake falls on the roof of the London Weather Centre.)
- The Queen's Christmas speech was televised for the first time in 1957.
- Each year between 34–36 million Christmas trees are produced to cope with the holiday demand.
- In 1647, the English parliament passed a law that made Christmas illegal. Christmas festivities were banned by Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell, who considered feasting and revelry on what was supposed to be a holy day to be immoral. Anybody caught celebrating Christmas was arrested. The ban was lifted only when the Puritans lost power in 1660.
- Electric tree lights were first used just 3 years after Thomas Edison has his first mass public demonstration of electric lights back in 1879. Thomas Edison's assistant, Edward Johnson, came up with the idea of electric lights for Christmas trees in 1882. His lights were a huge hit. It took quite a few years, however, before they would be made available to the general public.
- In 1895 Ralph Morris, an American telephonist, invented the electric Christmas lights similar to the ones we use today. The actual strings of lights had already been manufactured for use in telephone switchboards. Morris looked at the tiny bulbs and had the idea of using them on his tree.
- December 25th was not celebrated as the birthday of Christ until the year AD 440.
- Father Christmas has two addresses, Edinburgh and the North Pole. Letters addressed to "TOYLAND" or "SNOWLAND" go to Edinburgh, but letters addressed to "THE NORTH POLE" have to be sent there because there really is such a place!
- The first Christmas stamp was released in Canada in 1898.
- The popular Christmas song "Jingle Bells" was composed in 1857 by James Pierpont, and was originally called "One-Horse Open Sleigh". It was actually written for Thanksgiving, not Xmas.
- Postmen in Victorian England were popularly called "robins". This was because their uniforms were red. Victorian Xmas cards often showed a robin delivering Xmas mail.
- In Italy it isn't Santa who brings gifts for the children but kindly witch La Befana.