

CHRISTMAS

Fact File

THE UNITED KINGDOM

BASIC FACTS:

Christmas Eve

24th December

Christmas Day

25th December

Boxing Day

26th December

Christianity is the main religion in the UK. The Office for National Statistics reports in the 2011 census that “Despite falling numbers Christianity remains the largest religion in England and Wales in 2011. Muslims are the next biggest religious group and have grown in the last decade. Meanwhile the proportion of the population who reported they have no religion has now reached a quarter of the population.”

- In the 2011 Census, Christianity was the largest religion, with 33.2 million people (59.3 per cent of the population). The second largest religious group were Muslims with 2.7 million people (4.8 per cent of the population).
- 14.1 million people, around a quarter of the population in England and Wales, reported they have no religion in 2011.

But, despite a quarter of us having no religion, we still love to celebrate Christmas. It has become part of our national culture, not just our religious culture and it is often the only time of year that many professed Christians attend church for the much loved Midnight Mass.

HOW DO THE BRITISH CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS?

Christmas is starting early every year. Often the shops have their decorations up in September. Families tend to wait until after Guy Fawkes Night on the 5th November and, in my family, we wait until after Thanksgiving because of our American connection. An essential component of the decorations is the **Christmas tree**, which always has little fairy lights and baubles as well as tinsel or paper chains and individual hanging decorations that the family has accumulated over the years. As well as the tree, the main room in the house is also decorated with either tinsel or paper chain decorations that are strung along the walls. Strings of Christmas cards are put up as



they are received from friends and relations in the weeks running up to the big day. Outside the house, a wreath of holly with its dark green leaves and red berries, is put on the front door. More recently, some people are starting to copy the American tradition of having lit festive displays on their roofs or in their front gardens but this isn't universally popular.

In the run up to Christmas, each member of the family buys presents for each other, wraps them with labels and puts them under the tree. It is a lot of fun and helps build excitement to see the pile grow without being able to open them.

C.H.R.I.S.T.M.A.S E.V.E

Christmas Eve is traditionally the last chance to go **shopping** before Christmas. As such, the shops are rammed with last-minute present buyers. In the past, this meant paying extortionately inflated prices as the shop owners knew they had you over a barrel but, with the advent of online shopping and the recent financial crisis, the opposite is more likely to be true. If you are willing to wait and risk the present you want being sold out then, these days, you can grab a bargain on Christmas Eve.

Christmas Eve isn't entirely commercial. We also enjoy family time as this is often the first day off work for many people. Families travel around the country to be together causing some immense traffic jams, and those with small children enjoy their excitement about, and anticipation of, the magical **Father Christmas** (also now known as **Santa Claus** as a result of the influence of American movies). The first tradition of the day is writing a **letter to Santa** to post up the chimney listing the presents you hope he will bring you. Then the children **hang up stockings** (or a large sock belonging to Dad) by the fireplace and put out a **mince pie** and sherry for Father Christmas and a carrot for **Rudolph**, his reindeer. Then the children are packed

off to bed and the parents get on with the wrapping while enjoying a few glasses of something bubbly if they're lucky! Later, many people brave the cold and head out to Midnight Mass.

Midnight Mass is a beautiful service celebrating the birth of Christ with traditional songs and often a recounting of the nativity story. The church always has a nativity display and other festive decorations. The vicar (Church of England priest) gives a sermon reflecting on the previous year and helping us to remember the message of humility that Christmas is supposed to be about. According to Bible stories, Christmas is when God's son, Jesus Christ, was born into human form as a sign of God's love for us. In reality, most people go for the carol singing. We have a long tradition of Christmas songs and I have provided a **fun lesson using the 12 Days of Christmas** at the end of this article that you could enjoy with your students.



CHRISTMAS DAY

Christmas Day itself is a national holiday when the banks and all the shops are closed although, it is apparently, not an official Bank Holiday as it has been a customary day off since records began. The town centres are eerily silent as the entire country stays at home with friends and family instead of going to work.

The day usually starts when a child wakes up and discovers that Father Christmas has magically come down the chimney in the night and deposited their stocking, which is now full of little wrapped gifts, on the end of their bed. These presents are unwrapped immediately and the stocking always

contains a satsuma, which is consumed, and a bag of gold chocolate coins, again devoured instantly.

Next, the children go to see what Father Christmas has left for them elsewhere. Here traditions vary between individual families, but in my home this meant a Santa Sack of presents with my name applied on, placed on the sofa.

These presents were either meted out during the whole day or, sometimes, we were only allowed to choose one to open before lunch and then the rest were opened in a frenzy of wrapping paper and ribbons after lunch when the grown-ups wanted to sit down for a while i.e. they all fell asleep!

The family presents under the tree are usually opened in the morning after breakfast but again, every family has its own traditions about present opening.

In many families, everyone (apart from Mum, who is busy cooking) goes to a church service at noon before heading home for the big traditional family lunch in the early afternoon. This service is very family-oriented and, in many churches, the children are given small instruments

to play while the adults, who know the words, sing the hymns and carols.

Christmas dinner is the main meal of the day and is full of traditions. First, is the **turkey**. This is a relatively new tradition and, in the past, other birds were more popular such as goose, duck and pheasant. These are experiencing a resurgence especially among those without children who don't always want an enormous turkey to eat for the next two weeks.

The bird is stuffed and roasted along with plenty of potatoes, parsnips and other roasted vegetables and 'pigs in blankets'. These are simply cocktail sausages wrapped in a slice of bacon, which is held tightly in place during cooking by a cocktail stick. These are a delicacy and fought over when the dish is served. The traditional stuffing for Christmas is chestnut stuffing or sausage meat stuffing. This can be placed inside the cavity in the bird or formed into small balls and placed around it.

Popular side dishes vary from family to family but, aside from the essential roast vegetables, leeks in cream, honey glazed carrots, Brussels sprouts (pronounced *brussel sprouts* — the middle *s* is silent) and whole roast chestnuts are popular. Additionally, it is obligatory to have bread sauce, which is a savoury and very tasty thick white sauce, and cranberry sauce, which is a sweet red berry-based sauce said to complement the flavour of the turkey.

The decoration of the table is very important. Often the turkey is the centrepiece and this is surrounded by large serving dishes of all the sides. The plates are usually special ones only brought out for this meal and the tablecloth usually has a festive pattern. There will often be **holly** sprigs around the room and next to each plate is a **cracker**. This seems to be a peculiarly English tradition and my State-side friends are always intrigued by it. We pull the crackers at the beginning of the meal. To pull the crackers, you must



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hold one end of your cracker in one hand and cross your arms over your body so that your left hand points towards the person on your right and vice versa. With your empty hand you take hold of one end of your neighbour's cracker so that you are holding one in each hand, and so is everyone else around the table. Then, on a cue, everyone pulls and the crackers break apart. Inside they have small gunpowder charges so they make a loud BANG when broken. If you are left holding the larger piece, you win the contents of that cracker. Typically, this includes a paper crown, a small toy or gift and a joke. The jokes are infamous as they are always bad.

Once everyone is wearing their paper hats and the jokes have been read, the turkey is carved. Eventually, the wish bone is revealed and two people take part in the **wish bone** tradition. This is where they each hook their little finger around one half of the wish bone, which looks like an inverted V. They then silently make a wish and pull until it snaps. Whoever is left holding the larger piece of the bone is supposed to get their wish granted but only if they keep it secret.

This meal is always enormous but it still includes pudding, as this is an essential component of most English dinners. At Christmas, **Christmas pudding** is the traditional dessert. This is a rich suet pudding filled with many different dried fruits and candied peel. It also has

a few silver coins stirred into the mix. Christmas puddings are usually made a few months in advance and stored in a cool dry place until the big day. The flavour is supposed to mature during this period but they are only cooked on the day. They are cooked slowly over a basin of hot water to steam them. The **silver pennies** in the pudding are supposed to be lucky and everyone hopes to find one in their slice. But it's not so lucky if you bite into one!

In the evenings, there is usually a buffet or other meal that can be prepared in advance and here the **Christmas cake** makes an appearance. This is similar to Christmas pudding, in that it is a heavy fruitcake, but it is covered in thick marzipan and white icing.

On Christmas Day, it is traditional to **go for a long walk** after the main meal to help the children burn off their excited energy and help dinner go down for the adults. But, in different families, the traditions can vary a lot. My family always used **The Times Christmas Play** to keep the children busy by rehearsing and then performing a short play for the grown-ups. We also play a lot of word games, such as charades, categories and Pictionary. Cards are very popular, too. In fact, many popular board games are often only used at Christmas up and down the country!!



B·O·X·I·N·G·D·A·Y

Boxing Day is an old tradition in the UK. In the past, servants and workers would receive a gift from their employers on this day known as the Christmas Box, hence the name. These days, it is simply a Bank Holiday so it means that most people can enjoy an extra day away from the office without using their annual leave. Since before I was a child, there has been a big tradition with the **Boxing Day sales**.

However, these are, unfortunately in my opinion, creeping forward to begin on Christmas Day itself as the High Street tries to compete with stiff online competition. Every year, crowds of people queue for hours outside popular stores to get in early and grab the best bargains as stores discount stock to clear it.

And that is Christmas in the UK. An orgy of consumerism wrapped up with a bow of religion. Happy Christmas one and all!



12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS LESSON PLAN

You will need:

- A master copy of the lyrics
- Images of each of the 12 events copied into sets for pairs of students
- A Youtube video or a CD of the song. There are many versions, some faster than others so choose one appropriate for your learners' skill level
- A whiteboard and pens for you
- A set of mini whiteboards and pens for the students

Stage 1

With the pictures, elicit or provide the key vocabulary (see Appendix): (a partridge in a pear tree, a turtle dove, a French hen, a calling bird, a gold ring, a goose (plural geese, to lay an egg, a swan, a maid, to milk a cow, a Lady (in the aristocratic sense), a Lord, a piper, a drummer).

Model and drill the key words chorally and individually as necessary.

Play pelmanism with the pictures or a similar game to help the learners' retain the words.

Stage 2

Lay out the picture cards in front of pairs of students in a random order.

Important: do not provide any other lyrics

Play the song. Ask the learners to put the images in the correct order as they listen.

Stage 3

Elicit the verse frame onto the board. They will have heard it 12 times so you should not need to play the song to get this from them but you could always play the first line a few times if necessary.

On the ... day of Christmas my true love sent to me...

Stage 4

Using their mini boards, learners in pairs add the full words for each line of the song. As it is highly repetitive, they get many opportunities to hear each line. Using white boards allows them to correct easily as they improve the accuracy of what they hear each time.

At the end of the song, ask learners to show their boards to the whole class and look around to see how other people's boards are different from / the same as their boards. Give them a few minutes to discuss anything they want to change with their partner / group.

Stage 5

Play the song again. By now, everyone should be starting to sing along. Encourage this by singing yourself! After they hear each new line for the first time, stop the recording and elicit the correct form to the board. You should end up with this

On the ... 1st to 12th ... day of Christmas my true love sent to me

Twelve drummers drumming

Eleven pipers piping

Ten lords a-leaping

Nine ladies dancing

Eight maids a-milking

Seven swans a-swimming

Six geese a-laying

Five gold rings

Four calling birds

Three French hens

Two turtle doves

And a partridge in a pear tree

Stage 6

Play the whole song with the class singing along. The pronunciation and breathing aspects of keeping up can be educational as well as good fun. It's important they sing so they really get used to the rhythm and the number of syllables per line for the final stage.

Stage 7

Highlight that this song was about a man trying to woo a woman in the olden days. Ask them to imagine what a modern suitor might give to a woman he wants to date. Ensure they realise that the suitor is very, very rich.

In groups, students write their own version of the song with lines that have the correct number of syllables to fit the structure. The white boards can be used at this stage again. Then, finally, the groups sing their versions to each other and a favourite is chosen. Versions that have been produced in my lessons included verses such as

5 swimming pools 4 private jets

3 sports cars 2 white fur coats

And an island in the Caribbean!

