
The Origins of the Customs of Hallowe'en and Christmas

HALLOWE'EN

On the eve of the Celtic new year festival of Samain held on the 31st October – ghosts, fairies and witches were thought to be at their most active.

At this festival, the pagan peasants would light huge bonfires to drive away the evil spirits, witches and disease from their animals and crops. It was believed that the fires would promote growth and fertility and ensure the renewal of life on earth with the sun's return after the long cold winter 'sleep'.

Winter was judged to commence on the 1st November, and during the long winter months, nothing could grow. The link between November and the 'long sleep' was sanctioned by the early Christians who redirected the occasion to the remembrance of all their dead Saints. The word Hallowe'en means 'a hallowed evening'. – a holy evening – and is shorted from All Hallows Even, the eve of All Saints Day.

The traditional customs in Scotland, Wales and Ireland include bonfires, fortune telling and dressing up in costumes. The peasants would dress up as witches and ghosts in the belief that the real witches and ghosts would leave them alone.

Today, similar celebrations mark saints' days or political anniversaries. Often effigies are burned, and guns and fireworks are let off. In England, Guy Fawkes' attempt to blow up the Houses of Parliament is commemorated each year in the way.

Our modern-day practice of dressing up for a Hallowe'en party derives from this ancient pagan and early Christian custom.

CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS

The Advent Calendar

Advent commences four weeks before Christmas, and Christians throughout the world prepare themselves for the birth of Christ. The Advent Calendar has a numbered door for each day of Advent. The door, when opened, revealed a typical Christmas scene or symbol. The 24th door is opened on Christmas Eve.

The Decorations

The decorating of our homes and Churches at Christmas dates back to the pagan festival of Saturn in the time of the Druids (about 2,000 years ago). Evergreen branches were considered to be mystical, because throughout winter their leaves would remain green and they even bore fruit in the form of berries. Branches of holly, ivy and mistletoe were used for decoration, and this custom is still maintained today.

The holly has prickly leaves and this has become the symbol of the 'crown of thorns' with the berries symbolising 'blood'. When used in decorations, holly also represents eternal life. It is also a token of good luck and is believed to safeguard property from lightening. Farmers used to hang holly outside their cowsheds on Christmas Eve, believing that it would ensure healthy calves and a plentiful milk yield.

The clinging ivy is a symbol of immortality, whilst the mistletoe symbolises peace, love and friendship. For some time, mistletoe was forbidden in Churches, owing to its' pagan associations, although it was a sacred plant to the Druids. Because the mistletoe berries grow in pairs, it has come to represent eternal love.

The Carols

Carol, as a word, has a very obscure origin. It could come from the Old Greek work khoros, or the Latin word chorus. Perhaps it came from the Middle English work carol, or the old French word caroller. Carollers would dance in a ring and sing of festivals, such as Easter, Whitsun, May Day, Midsummers Day, as well as Christmas.

The Cards

In 1843, Sir Henry Cole suggested to an artist friend, John Horsley, that he design him a card for Christmas. Sir Henry was far too busy to follow the custom of the time of sending short handwritten notes of a few chosen words of greeting to his close friends and family.

John Horsley's card displayed the Christmas merry-making in the centre, and on either side, the poor being fed and clothed. The greeting on the card read 'A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you'. From this time, Christmas Cards were to become an important part of our Christmas festivities.

Many of our Christmas Cards today show traditional winter scenes, but it must be remembered that for half the world, Christmas falls in their summer months.

The Robin

The Robin has become part of our Christmas image. A friend to man, he symbolises life-giving fire. It is believed that the Robin's red breast occurred on the night of Jesus' birth, when the Robin fanned the baby with his wings to spread the warmth of the fire. In doing this, of course, the Robin burned his breast!

The Tree

Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria, imported a Christmas tree to Windsor Castle from Germany for his children. Prince Albert grew up in Germany and always loved the German Christmas tradition of decorating a tree with paper flowers, sweets and nuts. This tree started the fashion we have today of decorating a tree which can be seen in most homes, Churches, offices, shops and town centres.

Each year, since 1947, a tall tree is sent from Oslo to London and is placed in Trafalgar Square. This is a gift from 'the people of Oslo'. The Queen presents two trees each Christmas to St. Paul's Cathedral, and these trees are grown and nurtured on one of her estates.

The Crackers

Thomas Smith, a sweet shop owner in London, discovered the charming French tradition of wrapping sugared almonds in coloured paper with twists at each end. He brought this idea back to England and it proved extremely popular.

However, once the popularity declined, he decided to make a cracking device using card and chemicals. Soon the almonds were replaced by small gifts, mottos, trinkets and paper hats, and the familiar crack is once again popular.

The Pudding

Traditionally, the Christmas Pudding was a Plum Pudding made on the first Sunday before Advent. This was known as 'Stir-up Sunday'. Each member of the family would give the pudding a stir to bring them luck. The pudding was stirred from East to West to honour the Three Wise Men.

The pudding is made of dried fruits, suet, flour and spices and boiled in a cloth in the shape of a round ball. When cooked, it was able to be sliced. Added to the mixture

would be a silver coin and trinkets, promising excitement as the recipient of a slice would wit to find out his or her fortune.

The fortune would generally be:

- A silver coin = wealth
- A ring = a speedy marriage
- A thimble = an old maid
- A dried bean = become a king
- A dried pea = become a queen
- A clove = become a rascal
- A twig = become a fool
- A rag = become lazy

St. Stephen's Day (Boxing Day)

There are two St. Stephens. Perhaps both play a significant role on this day. One St. Peter was fir the first Christian martyr and was stoned to death for his beliefs.

The other St Stephen was a Swedish Missionary and Patron Sant of Horses. St. Stephen's Day is associated with outdoor sports, especially hunting and racing.

The name Boxing Day probably originates form the Roman times when sealed earthenware jars with a small slit at the top, were used to collect money to pay for the Saturnalia celebrations held from the 17th to the 23rd December.

In later times, alms boxes were used to collect money for the poor and the boxes were placed outside at the back of each Church. These boxes were opened on St. Stephen's Day and the money distributed amongst the poor in the Parish.

Holy Innocent's Day

Holy Innocent's Day is the 28th December and commemorates the dreadful massacre of the innocent children by Herod in his search for the new-born 'king'.

The Twelfth Night

The Twelfth Night of Christmas, the 6th January, is the Feast of Epiphany. At this time, Christians remember the Three Wise Men who went to visit the baby Jesus in Bethlehem.

To commemorate the gifts of the Three Wise Men, the British reigning monarch presents gold, frankincense and myrrh at the alter in the Chapel Royal at St. James'

Palace. The monarch used to make the offering until George III – who was too mad to undertake any serious duties. Now it is done by proxy by the Gentlemen of the Chapel Royal. They place the gifts in silk purses on a silver dish and carry them to the alter.

The gold – 25 sovereigns – is distributed among charities for the poor and the elderly.

FATHER CHRISTMAS

At Christmas time, in homes throughout the world, traditional gift bearers visit children. This is mainly attributed to St. Nicholas, but it is more likely that the custom of giving children presents on Christmas Day, stems from the visit by the Three Wise Men bearing gold, frankincense and myrrh.

St. Nicholas

St. Nicholas lived in the 4th Century AD and was the Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor. He was the most popular saint of the Middle Ages and, as a result, he is the patron saint of children, sailors, virgins and Russia – as well as thieves, pawnbrokers and parish clerks. His saint's day is the 6th December.

St. Nicholas was a kindly, rich man and is attributed with charitable works and miracles. In Germany and in Holland, he is known as Sinterklaas. On the evening of the 5th December, children place stockings and shoes by the fireplace, ready for St. Nicholas' visit – the shoes usually contain some titbits for the white horse which he rides over the rooftops. St. Nicholas places gifts in either the shoes or the stockings in return. The Dutch people who emigrated to America took the custom with them and soon the Americans wished to share it. The Americans began to change his name from Sinterklaas to Santa Claus.

Santa Claus

Having adopted Sinterklaas and Americanised his name to Santa Claus, the Americans gave him a sleigh and a team of reindeer, instead of a white horse.

Each reindeer had a name – Dasher, Dancer, Prancer and Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner and Blitzen. Rudolph joined the team later.

Father Christmas

Clement Clarke Moore, a Professor of Religion, wrote a poem on Christmas Eve 1822 in New York. The poem was a gift to his children and was called 'The Night Before Christmas'. Unknowingly, he changed the aspect of Christmas for generations of children by giving us our jolly, warm, white haired old man, known as Father Christmas.

'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.

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"

Clement C Moore
Extract from A Night Before Christmas

Father Christmas visits children on Christmas Eve leaving presents and collecting carrots for his reindeer - and often a glass of whisky or warming toddy for himself to help him along his way.

Christkindl

Christkindl means 'the Christ child' and he is the bearer of gifts to German children. Christkindl or Kriss Kindl visits the children on Christmas Eve before the family sit down for dinner. The children are not allowed into the room that has the Christmas Tree until moments after Kriss Kindl has left.

Befana

Children in Italy receive gifts from an old woman called Befana on the 6th January – the 12th day of Christmas.

It is believed that Befana lived in Bethlehem at the time Jesus was born, and she was told of his birth by some shepherds.

Unfortunately, Befana delayed too long before visiting Jesus and when she eventually went to the stable she found that Jesus had gone. Befana, apparently is still searching for Jesus and she leaves a gift at every house in case he is there.