

It's [Sometimes] The Most Wonderful Time of the Year – A Brief Socio-Economic Examination of the History of Christmas

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Christmas is seen as effectively marking the end of the commercial year.

In the UK, as well as many other major economies, the couple of weeks immediately prior to Christmas is traditionally the period when we're exhorted to, as the parlance goes, 'shop til we drop!'

Unfortunately, as latest ONS (Office for National Statistics) figures, published on Friday indicate, because of the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, this is likely to be a tough festive season for retailers (Jolly, 2022). Once fuel sales were excluded, and apart from food sales, there was a general fall in sales of 0.3% in November when compared to October (Sillars, 2022).

Christmas has become an opportunity for shops, restaurants and all sorts of other retail outlets to extract as much of our money as possible. Though critics frequently claim that as such, merely thinking of Christmas in terms of parties, presents and, all-too-often, overindulgence in food and alcohol, indicates a sense of having lost sight of its religious significance, they'll be aware that this year's festivities may be difficult for millions of households.

Nonetheless, whatever the motivation for engaging in consumption of rich food and alcohol has a longer tradition than many appreciate.

Christmas, based on celebrating the birth of Jesus on 25th December is actually a mere convenience selected by Sextus Julius Africanus in 221AD.

However, prior to the development of Christianity, the days immediately after the winter solstice, when the sun is at its lowest elevation and daylight is at a minimum, usually occurring on the 21st or 22nd December, were marked by ancient rituals and festivals.

The lives of those living many thousands of years ago were quite literally dominated by the cycles of the sun and, of course, its influence on seasons which enabled growing of crops and rearing of animals which would provide a store of food during the winter months (Wakefield, 2014).

Winter solstice marked the beginning of longer days and, within three months, the promise of spring and warmer temperatures which would facilitate growth. As these societies believed, this time of year was the basis of "rebirth".

With relevance to what we understand Christmas to largely consist of, celebration of Saturnalia was marked with gifts. The period between 17th December, the birthday of Saturn and 25th December, the birthday of Sol Invictus, the 'Unconquered Sun', was a holiday for.

The Romans, before they were converted to Christianity under Emperor Constantine considered the Sol Invictus to be a sacred day in the religion, Mithraism, based around the god Mithras, a solar deity of Persian origin. Emperor Aurelian in 274AD designated 25th December to be an official festival and cause for celebration.

As Christianity increasingly became the belief of choice, it was recognised that banning the festival of Saturnalia in December, with its pagan rituals, would not be welcomed. Rather, and in what may be viewed as good public relations by the church in Rome, there was the beginnings of what we'd recognise as Christmas in this country in the sixth century, though initially called the Nativity.

It still took a couple of centuries for a dedicated liturgy to evolve. Citizens were expected to attend church to celebrate the birth of Jesus. By the Middle Ages, as perhaps their ancient ancestors may have done, feasting on food stored and beers fermented was commonplace. Having attended church, it was accepted practice to celebrate raucously in a “drunken, carnival-like atmosphere similar to today’s Mardi Gras” (<https://www.history.com/topics/christmas/history-of-christmas>).

Fascinatingly, as this website describes, one of the virtues of Christmas, the notion of charity, became widespread. However, though undoubtedly many gave willingly, a custom which may have resonance with modern carol signing, developed of the poor visiting houses owned by the rich and demanding their best food and drink. Failure to comply with this request would be met with “mischief” (Fleming, 2019).

Due to the belief that Christmas was the cause of drunkenness and, it may be argued, some debauchery, the overthrow of King Charles I by Oliver Cromwell and his New Model Army of Puritans in 1645 resulted in the banning of Christmas. Unsurprisingly, given the time of the year and before the dramatic change to the agrarian society which almost existed in this country until the Industrial Revolution, this decision was very unpopular.

When Charles II became King, he immediately reinstated Christmas, welcomed by all but the most curmudgeonly.

Significantly, Christmas this year will be the first for almost four centuries to be celebrated with a Charles on the throne.

Queen Victoria’s reign heralded the greatest shift in the culture of Christmas and the ‘traditions’ we now tend to take for granted.

Industrialisation caused a radical change in society through increasing urbanisation and work patterns. Whilst communities would still come together, the somewhat more raucous and rowdy elements of Christmas were replaced by greater emphasis on families being together for the festive period.

It’s acknowledged that those who’ve been in any town or city in the weekend immediately prior to Christmas might argue that the behaviour witnessed would not be out of place in Medieval England!

As English Heritage (2022) explain, the example of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, proved hugely influential in creating a different sense of Christmas, accompanied with, it should be acknowledged, the influence of businesses intent on selling their products:

“The Christmas trees Albert popularised from his native Germany in 1840 rapidly caught on, as did decking them with lights and presents, by now given on Christmas Day itself. Victorian children’s presents were usually quite modest, such as sweets, nuts or oranges, although wealthier kids might hope for a gift echoing the latest technology, such as a toy train. ‘Christmas Box’ tips to servants and tradesmen were left until 26 December, hence called ‘Boxing Day’.”

As English Heritage point out in ‘A Short History of Christmas Greenery’ (2022a), the origins of modern traditions tend to be “deep-rooted and undocumented” and, as well as being “adapted and changed over time [and...] riddled with regional differences and personal interpretations.” Mistletoe is believed to date back to the first millennium but became popular, like holly and ivy, in Medieval times. Wreaths, originating in Germany in the 16th century, appeared in this country in the 19th Century.

Notably, English Heritage explain that whist Prince Albert is believed to have introduced the Christmas tree into England in 1840, "it was actually 'good Queen Charlotte', the German wife of George III, who set up the first known tree at Queen's Lodge, Windsor, in December 1800." Christmas trees became popular with middle classes by the mid 1800s who used candles to decorate them.

Candles can, of course, be dangerous and were the cause of many fires.

The invention of the electric lightbulb by Thomas Edison, profoundly altering the way we live and work, led to the sets of Christmas lights we standardly see on trees in every home as well as to decorate external trees, streets.

Edward H. Johnson, who was Edison's friend and partner in the Edison Illumination Company, hand-wired 80 red, white and blue light bulbs to go around his tree in 1882 (Library of Congress, 2022).

Though Edison may have developed prototype Christmas tree lights, their primary focus was on production and sale of the exponential sale of lightbulbs. Instead, it was New York teenager Albert Sadacca who in 1917 saw the potential for his family company to produce multi-coloured strands of lights, initially powered by batteries (Almond, 2014).

Albert Sadacca's development of the Edison/Johnson innovation is a wonderful demonstration of how mass production, spawned by the industrial revolution, lowers unit costs and leads to mass consumption.

Those, like Sadacca's company, with foresight, made goods which have changed the way Christmas is enjoyed.

For millions, Christmas represents an opportunity to eat confectionary in much higher quantities than would otherwise be healthy. Unsurprisingly, large manufacturers such as Cadbury, Frys, Rowntree and Mackintosh, developed ways of selling more of their products for the festive season, including selection boxes and tins of sweets (BBC, 2022).

In an increasingly secular Christmas, if the importance of the birth of Jesus has lessened, the key figure has instead become Santa Claus (Father Christmas). The exemplar for this character is a third century Turkish monk, St. Nicholas, famous for assisting the poor and sick. Dutch immigrants to New York in the 1800s brought with them the story of someone referred to as "Sinter Klaas".

If we're tempted to engage in nostalgia about how Christmases of the past were be simpler and more innocent, remember the attire associated with Santa Clause was designed by a committee of the New York Historical Society, founded by John Pintard, in 1804 (Millar, 2014).

However, there was no specific colour for the colour of Father Christmas' clothes. The fact that it's now red with white trimming is due to branding by Coca Cola in the 1930's, representing the company's corporate colours.

As average wealth progressively increased in the last century, more inventive ways were found by retailers to extract as much money from consumers as possible.

Much of post second-world-war reconstruction was characterised by the sweeping away of 'out of date' shops to be replaced by huge American-style malls, 'cathedrals of consumerism', an expression posited by sociologist George Ritzert.

Shopping, especially at Christmas, became a measure of increased affluence and living standards.

What could go wrong?

If the 1960s had been a decade in which memories of the war faded and increased employment in manufacturing meant opportunities for all in a growing economy, what followed in the 1970s and 80s proved that retailing may be negatively impacted by events beyond its control.

The consequence of the oil shock of the early 1970s, rampant inflation of the mid 70s and de-industrialisation of the Thatcher years, led to a shift in the economy from making things to importing cheaper alternatives. The composition of the British economy altered to become far more reliant on shopping, facilitated by fundamental alteration to availability of credit.

Unfortunately, as we've experienced before, any downturn – usually accompanied by a reduction in credit, meaning shoppers experience reduced income/spending capability – frequently results in potential closure of retailers.

This is particularly the case for retailers reliant on customers' ability to spending without restriction at Christmas.

Arguably, high street retailer Woolworths – once omnipresent in every town and city – represents the most high-profile example of a company which, as well as saddled with crippling debt, became far too reliant on people spending freely on a range of reasonably-priced products and confectionary in the Christmas period (Kivlehan, 2018).

Though there's been a succession of names which have disappeared from the British high street in the past three decades, the global financial crisis of 2008 proved catastrophic for many retailers (including Woolworths).

The pandemic of the last couple of years has proved ruinous not just for general retailers, but also restaurants, bars and pubs which traditionally do well during the Christmas period.

Which brings us to the present.

Prior to online shopping, 'turbo-boosted' by the pandemic, buying goods required a trip to the high street. As historic pictures of Christmases show, the festive shopping season lasted right up to close of business on 24th December.

German markets, now as much a feature of Christmas as crackers, pantomimes and dreadfully kitsch pop songs, represent something of a godsend to town and city centres in attracting large crowds who spend. However, because market traders are transient, they don't face the same challenge of a fixed cost base as established retailers.

Christmas 2022, coinciding with the most intense cost-of-living crisis for a generation, will prove extremely challenging for many retailers who, after the previous two years, when restrictions on opening existed, had hoped normality had returned.

According to Liz Edwards, writing on the finder.com comparison website, the total amount spent on Christmas shopping by 'Brits' this year will be £20.1 billion, representing a 21% reduction on the £25.5 billion spent last year. As Edwards continues, this year, on average, every person will spend £430 on Christmas gifts, a 22% drop on the £548 we spent on average in 2021.

Sadly, in an economy such as the UK's. now so lopsidedly skewed towards the service sector and, by dint, consumption and retailing, people's perfectly understandable reduction in spending will, inevitably, result in a vicious circle of further closures and job losses in 2023 (Sweeny and Butler,

2022). This will add to the country's economic woes and, of course, the financial plight of those directly affected.

This is not the vista which Christmas is supposed to generate.

Those living thousands of years ago, whose lives were dominated by the cycles of the sun, were most definitely not concerned about long-term economic cycles or employment trends.

Life expectancy then was shorter and harder than what we experience in the UK now. The sole focus was entirely on survival from one season to the next.

Nevertheless, the experience of people living thousands of years ago of daylight and weather patterns, so critical to growth and production of food, is the same as we undergo if we bother to look outside our homes and workplaces which, for the majority, are artificially lit and heated to ensure comfort.

Nonetheless, this will come as scant consolation to those currently, or facing, tough times this Christmas.

Whatever anyone's beliefs or religious persuasion, I wish you the very best wishes for the season.

I sincerely hope that 2023 proves to be a year when times get better and the insanity of war and attendant problems of famine and disease are brought to an end by our political leaders.

That's my wish this Christmas.

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