

The Changing Nature of Christmas Celebrations

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It's around this time of year we see publication of articles in newspapers and websites comparing Christmas of the past to those we enjoy now.

In the Telegraph over the weekend, Flora Bowen considered the cost of Christmas in the 1970s to now and discovered that whilst, on average, we are due to spend a staggering £1,811, the equivalent of 80% of the average monthly income according to analysis by MoneySuperMarket, food and alcohol was more expensive 50 years ago (2023).

There's little argument that many enjoy the trappings of a 'traditional' Christmas.

However, much of what is done in celebrating Christmas is relatively contemporary.

Regardless of whether or not you're a believer in Christianity, the idea of gathering together at this time of year has a long tradition going back to even before the time that Christ as the son of God is believed to have been alive.

As Britain becomes a more multicultural and secular society, it's debatable as to how much significance many give to a word that is simply seen as shorthand for celebration of impending end of another year and, of course, a reason to engage in consumerism we hear so much about.

The word Christmas, a shortened form of 'Christ's Mass' recorded in the eleventh century as *Crīstesmæsse*, based on a derivative of the Greek word for Messiah and the Latin for celebration of the Eucharist ('thanksgiving'), explicitly celebrates the birth of Jesus.

Whilst purists would point to there being no documentary evidence of when such a birth actually occurred, it's widely believed that as Christianity gained in popularity and wished to replace paganism, the 25th was chosen because this corresponded with the date used traditional in the Roman calendar for celebration of winter solstice and, more especially, *Saturnalia* and *Solis Invicti* ('birthday of the Invincible Sun').

Winter solstice is the day when, because the earth's axis is tilted at its furthest point from the sun which means that for the northern hemisphere, the sun is at its lowest point in the sky. This results in the shortest day of the year and, of course, longest night (English Heritage, 2023).

According to the astronomical definition of the seasons, the winter solstice marks the beginning of the season of winter.

There's evidence that 10,000 years B.C., in the Neolithic Period, communities, believing crops dying and having to endure much colder temperatures, was a reason to have feasted on the store of food they'd been able to harvest at the end of the summer.

For Romans the feast of *Saturnalia*, a holiday in honour of Saturn, the god of agriculture, was a weeklong celebration in period immediately prior to the winter solstice. Celebration of *Saturnalia*, began as a single day, but by the late Republic (133-31 B.C.), had expanded to a weeklong festival beginning on December 17th.

Crucially for the modern celebration of Christmas by many nations, *Sol Invictus* occurred in the Julian calendar used by Romans on December 25th.

Under Emperor Constantine, who'd been convinced to convert to Christianity by his mother Helena, the Church in Rome began celebrating Christmas on Dec 25th in 336. It's argued by, though without evidence, that this date was chosen to supplant pagan celebrations.

As Britain became a Christian country, celebration of Christmas day, as well as life in general, revolved around attendance at the local church. Curiously, in 1551, the Holy Days and Fasting Days Act became law requiring every citizen attend church on Christmas Day and not to use any kind of horse-drawn carriage to get there.

However, like their antecedents who'd celebrated solstice, people would have feasted on food harvested and stored to see them through the winter and spring period. Additionally, and as many still believe to be traditional, candles would be lit, and homes decorated with holly and mistletoe.

What can also be reasonably assumed is, again like those who'd celebrated winter solstice and Sol Invictus, locally brewed ales and honey-based mead spiked with brandy will have been copiously consumed.

By the Medieval period, beginning in 476 and lasting until 1400, according to National Geographic, Christmas had become a "12-day festival involving all kinds of revelry, from plays to wild feasts to pageants celebrating Jesus' birth. Music, gift giving, and decorations all became the norm" (2023).

Notably, the culmination of this period, 6th January, 'Twelfth Night', the feast of the Epiphany when the Kings of the Nativity are reputed to have reached the stable in Bethlehem where Jesus was born, was when presents were exchanged.

Stories of boisterousness were common. This was organised by a Lord of Misrule whose word was law. Given what would now be considered as an extremely mundane existence without the any luxuries we consider essential, indulging in high spirits during a period little could be achieved on the land was accepted as a good way for people to enjoy themselves during the depths of winter.

Indeed, as English Heritage describe in their history of Christmas, "blending devotion with drunken partying" was encouraged by kings (2023a):

"The most extravagant feasts were celebrated by monarchs such as Henry III, whose guests gorged themselves on 600 oxen at one 13th-century Christmas feast."

During the Tudor period, Christmases were celebrated with even greater gusto and a time for communities to celebrate collectively.

During the 'Twelve Days', people visited neighbours to indulge in feasting, drinking and singing of dance with a song. A food consumed as part of the celebration is one still commonly eaten now, the 'minced pye'.

Such pyes included thirteen ingredients representing Christ and his apostles, and consisting of dried fruits, spices as well as some chopped mutton in order to recall the shepherds of the Nativity story.

Twelfth Night was marked by eating of a fruitcake containing a coin or a dried bean. Whoever found the hidden object became 'King' or 'Queen' for the evening and would preside over the ensuing celebrations and entertainment.

According to Historic UK, "All work, except for looking after the animals, would stop, restarting again on Plough Monday, the first Monday after Twelfth Night" (Johnson, 2023).

Notably, spinning, a major occupation for women, was 'banned' by flowers being ceremonially placed upon and around the wheels to prevent their use.

However, when the Puritans held power under Oliver Cromwell, such behaviour was seen as irreverent and a ban on the celebration of Christmas implemented in 1647.

Reaction was, perhaps, predictable.

Bennett in his article 'The year Christmas was banned in Ireland and Britain' explains that "usual festivities during the 12 days of Christmas (December 25 to January 5) were deemed unacceptable" and, apart from the 25th, all normal activity must continue (2022).

Any visible signs of Christmas in by the using holly, ivy and other evergreens as decorations was banned.

However, restriction on the traditional consumption of large amounts alcohol to celebrate Christmas was especially resented and resulted in rebellions breaking out across the country.

The end of the Puritans and return of the monarchy meant traditional Christmas celebrations reemerged with even greater vigour.

One of the biggest changes experienced by Britian was the industrial revolution which radically altered society by a shift of people away from their bucolic existence to the rapidly developing towns and cities.

Christmas would still be celebrated but mass-produced goods would eventually alter the way homes were decorated and were purchased to be used as gifts.

It's widely acknowledged that the contemporary Christmas many still enjoy was shaped by the influence of Queen Victoria and, most particularly, her German husband Albert.

The Christmas tree that is commonly found in towns and cities, as well as millions of homes, originated in Germany, usually an evergreen conifer, such as a spruce, pine or fir, was popularised by an engraving published in the press showing Victoria and Albert standing with their children beside a decorated tree (English Heritage, 2023b).

What was good for Queen and her family was good for everyone else and quickly became the norm.

Notably, this wasn't the first time a reigning monarch had included a decorated tree as part of Christmas celebration.

George III, like Albert, had been raised in Germany and convinced his wife Queen Charlotte to have one at the Queen's Lodge in Windsor in 1800.

We can thank Germany for a number of other 'traditions' many still maintain including Advent wreaths on doors and nutcrackers as well as the now ubiquitous Christmas markets which take place in many towns and cities when beer and mulled wine is enjoyed.

Plentiful printing presses heralded the emergence of printed Christmas cards and Christmas crackers which accompany those enjoying the meal of Turkey, which replaced goose, and all the trimmings.

The postal system benefitting from the sending of millions of cards used to employ extra staff to cope and would have additional deliveries including Sunday. Unfortunately, rapidly rising costs for stamps

coupled with the use of email and social media has resulted in far fewer cards now being sent this way (Bowen, 2023a).

Arguably, the most popular figure associated with Christmas is Santa Claus, Father Christmas.

This large-bellied, white-bearded patriarch, allegedly living at the North Pole and employing elves to make toys to be delivered by him on a reindeer-driven sleigh to all good children the world over, is a character based on St. Nicholas, a third-century Greek bishop who became associated with December gift-giving.

Santa Claus came to the America via German and Dutch immigrants in the 18th and 19th centuries and, with not a little help from a certain cola manufacturer, who changed the colour of his cloak from green to red, became an essential part of Christmas.

In 1890, American merchant James Edgar dressed as Santa to greet children in the aisles of his Brockton, Massachusetts, department store. This is a trend that is seen in almost every country in which Christmas is celebrated.

Electric Christmas lights are based on the tradition of Germans placing candles on their trees.

American Thomas Edison, inventor of the lightbulb, is credited as the inventor of the first strand of lights. In 1882 his business partner, Edward H. Johnson, used coloured lights for the first time to decorate a Christmas tree, something we see commonly.

In a tragic footnote of the history of Christmas, in Germany in the 1930s, the Nazis attempted to alter the way in which Christmas was viewed by using their utterly detestable ideology to emphasise their national socialists' anti-Semitic values.

The Nazis rewrote the lyrics of 'Silent Night' by removing references to Christ and distributed Advent calendars for children containing propaganda and militaristic imagery and encouraged baking of swastika-shaped cookies. Additionally, because it looked too much like the Star of David, the star on Christmas trees was supposed to be replaced by a sunburst.

As the History Channel describes, traditional Christmas celebrations that had existed before the rise of Hitler and his odious regime behind closed doors became a protest against Nazism national socialism (2023).

So, it is that Christmas, and celebration occurring close to the winter solstice, has constantly adapted to suit changing circumstances.

And though critics criticise what they regard as over-rampant consumerism, average spending per head this year is expected to vary between £698 in the North-East to just over £973 in London (Statista, 2023), this is hardly new.

In the period following the second war, when austerity subsided, British high streets were thronged with shoppers stocking up for Christmas.

As has been reported, in recent years Britain's high streets have experienced the challenge of internet retailing.

Perhaps in the future, when our goods are likely to be delivered by drone, we may look back with fondness to the receiving what we've ordered on the internet from a human being driving a van.

Celebration of Christmas will undoubtedly continue to change as new traditions emerge to become the norm.

Sadly, however, as reported in the *Sunday Times*, in Bethlehem, in the West Bank, and where Jesus born, Christmas is not being celebrated this year as a way of recognising suffering being endured in by those in Gaza (Grylls, 2023).

This news, though reflecting the terrible tragedy that is befalling Palestinians at present, would appear to suggest pessimism for the future.

However, Bethlehem, a predominantly Muslim town, and in which a fifth % of residents are Christian, has long been a beacon of hope for the sort of coexistence and peace Jesus is reported to have preached.

Let's hope for a resolution to the terrible conflicts in Gaza, Ukraine as well as the other 53-armed conflicts currently occurring across the world.

Peace and goodwill to all men, women and children, regardless of whether you believe in religion or not, as well as looking forward to better times ahead has traditionally been the credence at this time of year.

And that's a good message to end this blog.

I wish everyone a very Happy Christmas and that 2024 is a successful year.

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