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Holidays

CHRISTMAS

The word "Christmas" is derived from the words "Christ's Mass" - the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. But although Christmas is undoubtedly a Christian celebration, it is also true to say that it is an unusual combination of pagan and Christian festivities.

A Christmas tree stands in everybody's living room at Christmas, shining its good cheer around the room. Sitting on the very top of the tree is a silver star surrounded by tiny lights. All the branches are hung with silver bells, tinsel and sparkling lights. Around the base of the tree lie the gifts and toys wrapped up in bright colourful paper.

The Christmas tree has spread its influence around the world. In fact America adopted it before it found its way to England early in Queen Victoria's reign. Now every Christmas British people are sent a huge fir tree from Norway which stands in Trafalgar Square, in the centre of London, shining down on all the people who gather on Christmas Eve.

In pre-Christian times evergreens, trees that remain green throughout the year. were worshiped in Northern Europe as symbols of eternal life. Mistletoe, hung up as a Christmas decoration is a symbol of love and reconciliation.

Holly, a well-known Christmas decoration today, has Christian associations. In Norwegian, Swedish and Danish, holly is known as "Christ's thorns", the legend being that Christ wore a crown of holly thorns before his death. Some people have seen associations between the word "holly" and "holy".

Giving presents goes back to Roman Saturnalia when good luck gifts of fruit, pastry or gold were given to friends on New Year's Day. In Britain the traditional day to give presents until relatively recently was December 26th and not as it is today, Christmas Day. December 26th is now known as Boxing Day, for it was then that the priests of the Middle Ages opened alms boxes to give to the poor.

Not all Christian customs and traditions are of ancient origin. Although various people have claimed to have designed the first Christmas card. William Egley, an English artist, seems to have the best claim. In 1842 he designed his own card and sent it to one hundred of his friends. Today three billion are sent annually in the United States alone.

HAPPY NEW YEAR

At midnight on 31st December bells will ring out around the world to welcome the New Year. Although certain countries and religions calculate time by other calendars most countries in the world now number their years according to the Gregorian calendar introduced in the 16th century by Pope Gregory XIII. This calendar was intended to overcome the confusion caused by calculating time according to the moon's phases.

Bell ringing is one way of celebrating the arrival of a new year which is common to all countries welcoming it at this time; but it is the differences in their celebrations and customs which are intriguing.

In Europe traditions vary considerably, but most of them involve a meal or special food. Swiss housewives bake special bread, rich in butter, eggs and raisins. They also cook roast goose. Children go from house to house greeting the occupants and receiving invitations to come inside. People in Italy hold all-night parties, where salt pork lentils are included on the menu. Lentils are supposed to be lucky and bring money - perhaps because they look like small piles of gold coins. There is a practical reason for meals featuring in these new year festivities. Most people stay up all night, or at least until midnight to "see the New Year in", so sustenance is essential. Also there is common superstition that if the new year begins well it will continue like that.

So great efforts are made to provide an atmosphere of goodwill and plenty. Parties are arranged a drink flow freely. In Spain it is a custom to eat , ^ grapes at midnight and toast the new year in champagne. at family gatherings. Groups of friends visit restaurants in Turkey intending to spend the night in celebrations which include present giving. So a people in Greece play cards, hoping that a win will bring them luck for a whole year.

NEW YEAR'S DAY IN ENGLAND

The celebration of New Year's day varies according to the district. In the south of England, the festival of Christmas, lasting 12 days from December 25th, runs on well into the New Year. The decorations of coloured streamers and holly, put up round the walls, and of course the fir-tree, with its candles or lights, are not packed away until January 5th. On the evening of December 31st, people gather in one another's homes, in clubs, in pubs, in restaurants, and hotels, in dance halls and institutes, to "see the New Year in". There is usually a supper of some kind, and a cabaret, or light entertainment. The bells chime at midnight. The people join crossed hands, and sing "Auld lang syne", a song of remembrance.

On New Year's day all English schoolchildren make New Year resolutions. They make up lists of shortcomings which they intend to correct. The chil' dren. their mothers and fathers, and their friends laugh and have a good time when they read them The children promise to keep them.

In the north, and in Scotland, particularly, the Year known as Hogmanay, is very well kept up. The ceremonies are similar, but they have an added called "first foot". This means opening your door to anyone who knocks it after midnight, and who will then enter the house, carrying a piece of coal or wood, or bread. The visitor is entertained with cakes and ale.

At the Jolly parties on New Year's eve and also on Burn's night, when they commemorate their national poet (Jan. 25th), the Scottish people enjoy eating their famous Haggis. This is a pudding, made from the heart, liver and lungs of sheep or calf, minced suet, onions, oatmeal and seasoning, and cooked in the animal's stomach. It is brought into the banqueting-hall or dining room to the accompaniment of the bagpipes. Considerable quantities of good Scotch whiskey are consumed during these celebrations.

QUESTIONS

1. What holidays do you and your family celebrate?

2. What holiday is your favourite one?

3. Do you celebrate Christmas, New Year, Easter?

4. Do you know anything of the old traditions to celebrate these holidays?

5. When do people celebrate Christmas?

6. When do Russian people celebrate Christmas?

7. What do you know about the New Year's Day in England?

8. How is the Christmas tree decorated? Is it a holy symbol? -

9. What country sends a huge Christmas tree to England to stand in Trafalgar Square in the centre of London?

10. What is the greatest Christian festival of the year?

11. What do people joyously observe either in March or April?

12. What do you know about other holidays: the Victory Day, Women's Day, etc. What is your personal attitude to them?

13. Are there any veterans of the Great Patriotic war among your relatives?

14. Why is the Victory Day so significant in 1995?

15. What presents do you give your mother, grandmother your sister on the 8th of March?

16. Do you like to receive presents?

17. What do you like more: to give presents or to receive them?

18. Do you celebrate your birthday? Do you like to do it?

19. Do you invite your friends for your birthday party?

20. What other holidays are celebrated in Britain and the USA?