# 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.