**The History Of Christmas**

**Christmas Time**

The tradition of winter festivals is a long-standing one. Many civilisations believed that the cold and dark of winter was a time when their Gods were in battle with enemies, and they would hold celebrations in order to help their deities win. Scandinavia, where the concept of a ‘Yuletide’ originally evolved, would experience a period of several days where the sun did not show at all in the depth of winter, and would hold a festival in order to herald its reappearance. The winter solstice was also the most practical time for feasts to be held: cattle which could not be fed through the winter were slaughtered in the late autumn, and as a result the winter would be the one time when European peasants were most likely to have a stock of fresh meat, which needed to be either salted, or eaten. Equally the beer which had been brewed in the autumn would be just ready to drink by the time that the winter festivals came around. It is therefore no surprise that by the time of Christianity there was already an established history of festivals which were held in late December. One of the most notable celebrations was the Roman Saturnalia – a hedonistic festival where friends would be visited and presents exchanged. However, the 25th of December was also sacred to the Persian religion of Mithraism, as the birthday of their God.The early Christian Church did not celebrate the birth of Christ, preferring to concentrate on his death and resurrection at Easter. Christmas may have been celebrated from as early as 98AD, but it was only in 350AD that Pope Julius I declared Christmas to be the 25th of December. The date of Christ’s birth is not actually mentioned in the Bible, and the presence of shepherds grazing their sheep on the hillsides has led many biblical scholars to suggest that Christ must have been born during the spring. However, the choice of the 25th of December has influenced the development of the Christmas festival irreversibly. Many of the traditions associated with winter solstice festivals seamlessly became part of the Western tradition of Christmas time. Over the centuries many have tried to revert to a more solemn celebration of Christ’s birth: Oliver Cromwell cancelled Christmas after the events of the English Civil War, disgusted by the behaviour of common people on what was supposed to be a religious festival. The puritans in Boston even declared Christmas illegal for a period in the 17th century, and there was a fine for anyone who celebrated the occasion. Although Christmas would not become a federal holiday until 1870 in the US, the traditions surrounding Christmas developed and grew during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to become the Christmas that we, and the shopping centres of the world, celebrate today.

**Christmas Trappings**

Many of the established Christmas time traditions have little or nothing to do with the biblical account of Christ’s birth. Some existed for hundreds, or thousands of years before Christianity, whilst others have evolved, seemingly out of nothing, over the past few centuries.Evergreen trees and plants were often used in the religious festivals of the past. During the winter, when everything else was dying, the continuing green of fir-trees and mistletoe was considered to symbolise the rebirth that would come in the spring. As a result evergreen foliage was used in winter festivals by the Vikings, whilst Druids in Britain and France would decorate trees with fruit and candles in honour of their harvest gods. The Roman Saturnalia also used to decorate their houses with trees bedecked with candles and other bright trinkets. According to legend, Martin Luther decorated trees with candles to reflect the beauty of the stars. In England, the tradition was resurrected by Prince Albert in 1841. The royal family led the fashion and Christmas trees became an established part of the festive season.Holly and Mistletoe have also become a central part of Christmas. Mistletoe was often used by druids. It was believed to have mystical powers, and it was often hung over doors in order to keep out evil influences. The tradition of kissing under the mistletoe may have come from Scandinavia, where mistletoe was associated with the goddess of love, Frigga. Because of its pagan associations, the Christian Church objected to mistletoe being used for Christmas celebrations. As a substitute they suggested holly, another evergreen, claiming that the sharp leaves represented Christ’s crown of thorns, and the red berries symbolised drops of his blood. Both plants have become a part of the seasonal festivities.The twelve days of Christmas do apparently have a Christian origin: they are the twelve days between Christmas day and the feast of the Epiphany (which according to different interpretations is either the day of Christ’s baptism or the visit of the wise men). It is considered bad luck if all of the Christmas decorations have not been taken down by the end of the twelfth day – the 6th of January.Christmas cards emerged in Germany in the fifteenth century. Rather than being greetings cards, they were devotional pictures to be hung in the home, wishing the family a good and blessed year. In the eighteenth century the tradition began to grow, when seasonally decorated cards were used as visiting cards left for absent friends. However, Christmas cards would reach their peak with the advent of the British mailing system in the mid-nineteenth century. Now that letters could be sent around the country at high speed and for low costs, Christmas cards became popular as a cheap way to send Christmas wishes to friends and relatives that you would not see over the festive season.They were particularly popular as a card, sent in an unsealed envelope cost only half a penny, half the price of a full letter.Father Christmas’ story is well known. The original model for Santa, was Saint Nicholas, the bishop of Myra. According to legend, he brought a dowry for three girls, who were too poor to find husbands. Whilst they were sleeping he put the gift in their stockings, which were hanging by the fire to dry. The cult of Saint Nicholas spread across much of Europe, and St Nicholas’ Day, December 6th, was a day for giving and kindness when parents would offer presents to their children. The idea of St Nicholas spread to America with the Dutch colonists, and it was the American press which transformed Father Christmas into his current image. Clement Moore’s poem ‘The Night Before Christmas’, published in 1822, introduced the world to Father Christmas’ flying reindeer, and the way that he distributed presents down chimney stacks. We discovered what Santa Claus looks like, when a magazine called Harpers Weekly published a series of pictures by the cartoonist Thomas Nash. His red suit with white trimmings came, coincidentally, from St Nicholas, whose bishop’s robes would have been red and white.

**Boxing Day**

There are currently two main theories about where the tradition and name of ‘Boxing Day’ came from. Some claim that most servants had to work on Christmas Day itself, so that they would only be able to leave the house and visit their families on the following day, the 26th of December. This was when the master or mistress of the house would give the employees their Christmas boxes. Over time the tradition has expanded, so that now boxes or gifts are given to anybody who has provided a service over the previous year: from milkmen to cleaners.The second theory is that Boxing Day is actually linked to the Feast of St Stephen on the 26th of December. One of the seven original deacons of the church, St Stephen was ordained to provide alms and care for widows and the poor. St Stephen’s Day was the time when the church alms boxes were opened up and the money inside was distributed to beggars and the needy.Boxing Day has probably existed in Britain since the Middle Ages, but it became a public bank holiday in 1871, officially falling on the first weekday after Christmas.

**New Year**

The concept of celebrating the dawn of the New Year goes back a very long way indeed. The ancient Babylonians are believed to have celebrated the New Year more than 4000 years ago. They even had the modern tradition of making resolutions to symbolise a fresh start. However, the Babylonians celebrated the New Year at the first new moon after the start of spring, matching the rebirth in nature and the start of a new year in agriculture. The Romans too began by celebrating the New Year at some time in late March. However, the Roman calendar had some difficulties in matching the movements of the sun, and although the New Year was celebrated in March, this did not necessarily mean that it was being celebrated in the springtime. Eventually in 153 BC the Senate declared that the start of the New Year was to come on January 1st. It is believed that the month of January may be named after Janus, a two-faced Roman God, who symbolised change and rebirth. His two faces looked back into the old year, and forward into the new. The Roman calendar, however, would not finally settle until the Julian system was introduced in 46BC. Although Julius kept the 1st of January as the start of the New Year, 47BC had been a 445 day year, in order to get the calendar back in line with the seasons. As a result the New Year celebrations that the Romans handed down to us were in the middle of winter. It should be noted that the early Christian Church disapproved of New Year festivities as late as the Middle Ages, considering them to be a pagan ritual.The New Year has always been much more important in Scotland than England. During the early part of this century, many Scots would work through Christmas, saving their celebrations until January and the Hogmanay festivities. The term ‘Hogmanay’ may have come from an Anglo Saxon term for ‘holy month’, or a Gaelic phrase meaning ‘new morning’. Traditionally canons fire and bells sound to mark the New Year and then people venture out of their houses for the tradition of ‘First Footing’. It has often been believed in the past that whatever happens in the first hours of a New Year will affect the household’s luck for the next twelve months. According to the ritual of ‘First Footing’, good luck will come if the first person to cross the threshold after the sounding of the New Year is a tall dark man carrying gifts of whisky, coal and food. The significance of the gifts is fairly self-explanatory, meaning that you will have them in abundance over the following year. The importance of someone tall and dark is more difficult to explain, although it has been suggested that this dates from the days of Viking invasions, when the presence of a blond man on your doorstep was hardly a sign of luck.The other great tradition of New Year’s Eve is also Scottish in origin. ‘Auld Lang Syne’ meaning ‘old long ago’ was written, at least in part, by Robert Burns, and was published after his death in 1796. Now sung around the world, the song has two verses, and the words are as below:Should old acquaintance be forgot, and never called to mind.Should old acquaintance be forgot and days of Auld Lang Syne.For auld lang syne, my dear. For auld lang syne.We’ll take a cup of kindness yet for the days of auld lang syne.Should old acquaintance be forgot and never called to mind.Should old acquaintance be forgot and days of auld lang syne.And here’s a hand, my trusty friend. And gie’s a hand o’ thine.We’ll take a cup of kindness yet for the days of auld lang syne.