

# The Ten Ages of Christmas

## The Medieval Christmas

Adapted from: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/ten\\_ages\\_gallery\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/ten_ages_gallery_01.shtml)

### Fire, light and evergreens

Pre-Christian, northern societies used to liven the dark days of the winter solstice with a celebration of fire, light and jollity, to create relief in the season of nature's dormancy and to hurry along the renewal of springtime. Christmas, as the celebration of the birth of Christ, was also a winter festival which gradually incorporated many pagan traditions, one of which was the burning of fires to ward away dark and evil spirits.



The tradition of decorating the home with native evergreens is a truly ancient one. Since pagan times, evergreens have been valued for their ability to retain signs of life in the middle of winter, particularly since some produce berries and flowers at this time.

Early Christians displayed evergreen plants in the home to symbolise everlasting life. Holly, Ivy and evergreen herbs such as Bay and Rosemary were the most commonly used, all with symbolic meanings that were familiar to our ancestors. Rosemary, for remembrance, and Bay, for valour, are still well known. Holly and Ivy were a particularly popular combination. The Holly was traditionally thought to be masculine and the Ivy feminine, giving stability to the home.

A 'kissing-bough' was often hung from the ceiling. This would consist of a round ball of twigs and greenery, decorated with seasonal fruit, such as apples. It was the precursor to the bunch of mistletoe, under which no lady could refuse a kiss. Mistletoe was also sacred to the Druids and was once called 'All Heal'. It was thought to bring good luck and fertility, and to offer protection from witchcraft.

In the medieval period, the 'Yule log' was ceremoniously carried into the house on Christmas Eve, and put in the fireplace of the main communal room. Often decorated with greenery and ribbon, it was lit with the saved end of the previous year's log and then burnt continuously for the Twelve Days of Christmas, providing much needed light and warmth.

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. How did the northern pre-Christians celebrate the winter solstice?
2. Why did they decorate their homes with evergreens?
3. Which pagan tradition is incorporated into Christmas and is supposed to get rid of dark and evil spirits.
4. How old is the tradition of decorating the home with green things?
5. What do each of these plants represent?  
Rosemary  
Holly  
Ivy  
Bay
6. What is a Yule log and what was it used for?

# The Ten Ages of Christmas

## The Elizabethan Christmas

Adapted from: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/ten\\_ages\\_gallery\\_02.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/ten_ages_gallery_02.shtml)

### The banqueting course

*'Sugar, spice and everything nice ...'*

The invitation to 'eat, drink and be merry' epitomised Christmas in Elizabethan England. A highlight of the season was the Christmas feast, which, in those households that could afford it, culminated in a 'banqueting course' of sweet and colourful delicacies.



A banquet, or sweetmeat course allowed the host to display his wealth and status. It also provided its creator, often the lady of the house, an opportunity to show her culinary and artistic skills. Sugar, very expensive at the time and considered to have medicinal properties, was the key ingredient of most of the elaborate dishes.

The dishes were prepared and displayed to dazzle the guests with their beauty, delicacy and wit. The latter was provided by the creation of whimsical foods designed to deceive the eye. 'Collops of Bacon', made from ground almonds and sugar, were a great favourite, as were walnuts, eggs and other items made from sugar-plate, a substance of egg, sugar and gelatine which could be moulded successfully into almost any form the cook might conceive. Another popular sweetmeat was 'Leech', a milk-based sweet made with sugar and rosewater, which was cut into cubes and served plain or gilded, arranged as a chequerboard.

Spectacle was of great importance, with pride of place going to a 'Marchpane' - a round piece of almond paste which was iced and elaborately decorated, sometimes with figures made of sugar. Crystallised fruits added colour. Gold leaf was used to gild lemons and other fruits and also gingerbread, which added to the rich and splendid appearance of the banquet.

All of this would be accompanied by hot drinks, including 'Lambs-Wool'. This was made from hot cider, sherry or ale, spices and apples, which when hot exploded, to create a white 'woolly' top. Spiced wines and syllabubs were also popular. Guests were flattered and impressed by such extravagant expenditure.

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## The Elizabethan Christmas

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What was the highlight of the Christmas season for the Elizabethans?
2. What did the banquet course allow the host to display?
3. What does 'whimsical' mean? If you are not sure, use a dictionary to look it up.
4. Give two examples of whimsical foods served at the banqueting course?
5. What is 'Leech' and how is it served?
6. What was given pride of place and how was it made?
7. What was 'Lambs-Wool' and how did it get its 'woolly' top?

# The Ten Ages of Christmas

## The Restoration Christmas

Pictures and text adapted from: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/ten\\_ages\\_gallery\\_03.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/ten_ages_gallery_03.shtml)

### The restrained restoration of Christmas

*“More mischief is that time committed than in all the year besides ... What dicing and carding, what eating and drinking, what banqueting and feasting is then used ... to the great dishonour of God and the impoverishing of the realm?”*

So wrote the strict protestant, Philip Stubbes, in the late 16th century, expressing the Puritan view that Christmas was a dangerous excuse for excessive drinking, eating, gambling and generally bad behaviour.

This view was made law in 1644, when an Act of Parliament banned Christmas celebrations. Viewed by the Puritans as superfluous, not to mention threatening, to core Christian beliefs, all activities to do with Christmas, both domestic and religious, including attending church, were forbidden. The ban, however, was unpopular and many people continued to celebrate privately, albeit in a far more restrained manner than in Elizabethan times.



A more openly festive, if slightly subdued, spirit returned following the restoration of the Monarchy in 1660. Old customs were revived, and Christmas as both a religious and social festival was celebrated throughout society. The writings of Samuel Pepys provide a fascinating insight into Christmas in London during the decade following the Restoration.

A civil servant best known today for his diaries, Pepys' observations about Christmas give us a feeling for what the season was like for Londoners at the time. In common with his contemporaries, Pepys worked on Christmas Eve, and often for part of Christmas Day itself. He attended church without fail on Christmas Day and, in 1660 and 1664, he went to both morning and evening services.

The Christmas meal was also an important part of the day. Pepys noted with pleasure, or otherwise, what he ate each Christmas. In 1662, he made do with 'a mess of brave plum porridge and a roasted pullet...' a rather frugal meal owing to his wife's illness. This was supplemented by a bought, rather than home-made, mince pie.

In other years he enjoyed richer food, including a 'shoulder of mutton', and in 1666 'some good ribs of beef roasted and mince pies ... and plenty of good wine'. For entertainment, Pepys attended theatrical productions when possible and read and played music at home. Visiting with friends and family was frequently mentioned.

# The Ten Ages of Christmas

## The Restoration Christmas



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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What did Philip Stubbes think dishonoured God at Christmas?

2. What religion was Philip Stubbes? (Please circle your answer)

Protestant

Catholic

Puritan

Unitarian

Atheist

3. What was banned in 1644 by an Act of Parliament?

4. What does superfluous means?

5. Find 3 synonyms for superfluous.

6. After the restoration in 1660 Christmas was allowed to be celebrated again. What things does Samuel Pepys say he did at Christmas? (Please tick)

Decorated a Christmas Tree

Go to watch a play

Eat Plum Pudding

Give presents

Eat turkey

Sing carols

Buy mince pies

Visit family

Go to church

Eat chicken

# The Ten Ages of Christmas

## The Early Victorian Christmas

Pictures and text adapted from: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/ten\\_ages\\_gallery\\_05.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/ten_ages_gallery_05.shtml)

### The Christmas tree

The image of a glittering fir tree, with its lush dark-green branches illuminated by twinkling lights, at the centre of a happy domestic scene is today one of the most powerful and recognisable images of a 'traditional' Christmas. For many, the Christmas tree is also firmly associated with the Victorians, and indeed with those great advocates of Christmas, Queen Victoria and her husband Prince Albert.

The custom, which originated in Germany, was introduced into England during the Georgian period. Queen Charlotte, German wife of George III, is known to have had a decorated tree for her family as early as the 1790s and there is also a record of a tree at a children's party given by a member of Queen Caroline's court in 1821. Queen Victoria herself remembered such trees in the 1830s, happily describing potted trees placed on round tables 'hung with lights and sugar ornaments'.



So, although Prince Albert is generally given credit for introducing the Christmas tree to England, he in fact simply popularised and made fashionable an already existing custom. Victoria and Albert shared a heart-felt enthusiasm for Christmas and each year of their marriage, decorated trees provided a focal point for their domestic celebrations.

In 1848, a print showing the Royal couple with their children was published in the *Illustrated London News*. From this time onwards, the popularity of decorated fir trees spread beyond Royal circles and throughout society. Charles Dickens referred to the Christmas tree as that 'new German toy'.

Trees were generally displayed on tables in pots, with gifts placed unwrapped underneath. The tree was decorated with wax candles, baskets of sweets, flags and little ornaments and gifts. The imported German 'Springelbaum' was the tree of choice until the 1880s, at which time the home-grown 'Norway Spruce' became available. This made a larger tree more affordable, and people began placing trees on the floor.

# The Ten Ages of Christmas

## The Early Victorian Christmas

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What does the word 'advocates' mean? (Hint - use a dictionary)

2. Which monarch brought the custom of a Christmas tree to England from Germany? (Please circle your answer)

Victoria

Elizabeth

Caroline

George III

Albert

Charlotte

3. What type of tree is a Christmas Tree?

4. Name the tree that comes from Germany and was imported until the 1880s?

5. What replaced the German tree?

6. Lots of decorations are mentioned throughout the text name as many as you can.

7. Name the newspaper that showed a picture of Victoria and Albert with their Christmas tree.



# The Ten Ages of Christmas

## The Mid-Victorian Christmas

Pictures and text adapted from: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/ten\\_ages\\_gallery\\_06.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/ten_ages_gallery_06.shtml)

### Christmas cards and crackers

“If there is one thing inseparable from Christmas in general and the little ones’ seasonable gatherings in particular, it is - a cracker. With what a delightful look of expectation they have waited for it to go "bang" and how they have screamed as they scrambled after the surprise which came in response to the explosion ...” So observed a Victorian writer about one of the two real Christmas innovations of the period: the Christmas cracker.



The story of the Christmas cracker is really a testament to one man’s ingenuity and determination. Tom Smith was a confectioner’s apprentice in London in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. On a trip to Paris in 1840, he admired the French sugared almond bon-bons wrapped in coloured tissue paper, and decided to introduce them in London. These bon-bons were popular, but not quite as Smith had hoped.

For seven years he worked to develop the bon-bon into something more exciting, but it was not until he sat one evening in front of his fireplace that his great idea came to him. Watching the logs crackle, he imagined a bon-bon with a pop. He made a coloured paper wrapper and put in it another strip of paper impregnated with chemicals which, when rubbed, created enough friction to produce a noise. He knew that bangs excited children (and were said to frighten evil spirits) - and the mottoes and poems he inserted inside the crackers amused adults.

The combination of innovation and tradition which is a hallmark of the Victorian period also marked another creation of the 1840s - the Christmas card, an altogether more pragmatic ‘invention’ than the cracker.

Sir Henry Cole, burdened by the amount of seasonal correspondence he felt obliged to write, first conceived of a dedicated Christmas card in 1843. His idea was to print a seasonal greeting card which would save hours of handwriting, and he engaged his friend, the artist John Horsley, to design nearly 1000 hand-coloured lithographs.

The standardisation and lowering of postage rates in 1840, which made letters easier and cheaper to send, contributed to the rapid spread of this new custom. Designs featured Christmas scenes, including Father Christmas, robins, evergreens and snow scenes but also a range of non-Christmas designs, much like Valentine cards.

# The Ten Ages of Christmas

## The Mid-Victorian Christmas

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Who invented the Christmas Cracker?
2. Where did he get the idea from?
3. What was he hoping to sell inside his Christmas Crackers?
4. What made the bang in the cracker and how did it work?
5. Who is credited with the idea of Christmas Cards?
6. What was the problem he was hoping to solve?
7. Describe the different designs of the early cards?
8. What does the word 'lithograph' mean? Use a dictionary to help you

# The Ten Ages of Christmas

## The Late Victorian Christmas

Pictures and text adapted from: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/ten\\_ages\\_gallery\\_07.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/ten_ages_gallery_07.shtml)

### Father Christmas

“He was dressed all in fur from his head to his foot, and his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot ... His eyes how they twinkled! His dimples how merry! His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry ... He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf.”

The lines above are from a poem called ‘*A Visit from St Nicholas*’ written by Clement C Moore in 1822, although it did not become well known until it was depicted in a series of engravings by Thomas Nast in the 1860s. By the Edwardian period, it was almost universally accepted as the definitive description of this important representative of Christmas.



But do these words describe Saint Nicholas or Father Christmas or Santa Claus? There were several forerunners to this chubby, elderly gentleman with a snowy beard. The Norse God Odin was one of the early figures, who rode through the winter world, bringing either gifts or punishments, as appropriate.

Odin wore a blue-hooded cloak, and had a long white beard. Because he was able to read hidden thoughts and watch from afar the behaviour of those he visited, he was both loved and feared. A much later figure was the 4th-century Bishop of Myra, also known as Saint Nicholas, famous for his kindness to children and generosity to the poor. After the Bishop died, the legend of Saint Nicholas grew and he is still remembered in some countries on 6<sup>th</sup> December.

In medieval England and for centuries afterwards, the figure of Father Christmas represented the spirit of benevolence and good cheer. In the 19th century, his role changed to something more like that of the European Saint Nicholas. At about the same time, Dutch emigrants took the story of a legendary gift-bringer called 'Sinterklaas' to America, where he eventually became known as Santa Claus.

The names may be different, but there were enough similarities between all these symbolic personages to allow, by the early 20th century, Father Christmas, Santa, St Nick and others to merge. The resulting 'right jolly old elf' is now the universally recognised symbol of Christmas.

# The Ten Ages of Christmas

## The Late Victorian Christmas

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Who wrote the poem 'A visit from St Nicholas'?
2. When was it written?
3. Give two other names for Father Christmas.
4. What does forerunner mean?
5. Who was the forerunner to Father Christmas?
6. What is the same about him and Father Christmas?
7. What was the alias of the 4th Century Saint Nicholas?
8. Describe Father Christmas - use as many adjectives as you can.

# The Ten Ages of Christmas

## The Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Christmas

Pictures and text adapted from: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/ten\\_ages\\_gallery\\_08.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/ten_ages_gallery_08.shtml)

### Gifts and shopping

Gifts have been exchanged at Christmas and New Year for many centuries. By the early 20th century, the availability of a huge range of gifts for both children and adults had increased dramatically. The streets of London thronged with shoppers in the days up to Christmas, and the shops were open and ablaze with a riot of light and colour even on Christmas Eve.



Manufacturers and shopkeepers both large and small were keen to capitalise on the commercial potential of Christmas. 'Gamages', a vast department store in Holborn, offered nearly 500 pages of gifts in their Christmas Bazaar catalogue of 1913.

Children's gifts proved a particularly lucrative market, and the sheer variety of games, toys and other gifts thrilled Christmas shoppers. Some gifts were considered suitable for both sexes. These included rocking horses, wooden farmyard animals, board games, picture and adventure books, magic tricks, Noah's Arks and mechanical or stuffed animals.

In 1911, 'Gamages' filled its window with stuffed animals made by 'Steiff', including teddy bears, which were hugely popular and became a symbol of the period. Other toys and games were targeted specifically at one sex or the other. For girls, skipping ropes and, of course, dolls were available in huge variety. Boys could expect toy soldiers and train sets.

Some of these gifts were left under the Christmas tree, but small treats could be left in a stocking to be filled by Father Christmas. This custom was derived from a Dutch tradition, whereby children fill their shoes with straw as a gift for Saint Nicholas's horse, in the hope that sweets will be left as a reward for their thoughtfulness. If they were deemed to have been naughty, they received nothing.

Stockings were generally hung by the fireplace but were also left at the end of beds, as one boy living in Shoreditch, in East London, described in 1881:

"Woke up early in the morning ... found a crammed stocking hanging helplessly over the side of my bed, for the next 10 minutes busily engaged in ransacking its contents which were 2 bags of sweets, a pocket knife, oranges, almonds and raisins, packets of sweets and 2 jockeys' caps ..."

# The Ten Ages of Christmas

## The Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Christmas

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What does the word 'capitalise' mean? (Hint - use a dictionary)
2. How many pages did Gamages offer in their Christmas Bazaar catalogue and where was the store?
3. Name as many things as you can, that Gamages sold.
4. Who made the toy that became the symbol of the era and what was it?
5. Name the 2 places you could expect to find your presents?
6. Describe the Dutch tradition that led on to filling stockings with presents?
7. What things did the boy in Shoreditch find in his stocking in 1881?

# The Ten Ages of Christmas

## The World War 2 Christmas

Pictures and text adapted from: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/ten\\_ages\\_gallery\\_09.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/ten_ages_gallery_09.shtml)

### Making do

“In the present circumstances many people are asking, ought we celebrate Christmas at all? There can be no doubt that this is the very year when we should think, not less, but more about Christmas - not only as an escape from the horrors of war, but as a remembrance of nobler ideals.”



So wrote the editor of the *'Picture Post'* in December 1939. People were encouraged to spend available money, either on National Savings Certificates and War Bonds to support the war effort, or on everyday goods to support commercial traders. Where possible, this seems to have been taken to heart, and although Christmas during wartime was a greatly reduced affair, the spirit of the season remained strong.

Children regularly wrote to Father Christmas, and some families extended hospitality to those less fortunate than themselves. Their hope and kindness in a trying time proved that this exhortation from the *Picture Post* fell on receptive ears: “And if we are merry at Christmas, we shall be showing the Nazis that we are winning the war of nerves, and maintaining the gallant spirit which has overcome the adversities which are no novelty to this windswept isle.”

Good cheer abounded, but the Blitz did disrupt both Christmas celebrations and seasonal travel. Travel to family gatherings and even short shopping trips could be difficult. Rationing and the general lack of both luxury goods and daily foodstuffs meant that food preparation required patience and imagination. Sugar, butter, and eggs could only be acquired in small quantities, so substitutions, such as using grated carrots instead of sugar to sweeten cakes, were made.

Home-made decorations, such as paper-chains, and any available artificial decorations were used to enliven the home and offer cheer - despite the constant threat of bombing. A small artificial tree was a great asset, as it could be easily transported to the bomb shelter as required. One East End family had one made of goose feathers, which could be decorated with tinsel and paper decorations.

# The Ten Ages of Christmas

## The World War 2 Christmas

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1. What did the editor of the 'Picture Post' think about celebrating Christmas?
2. What were people encouraged to buy and why?
3. How did rationing affect people and why?
4. What message did people feel would go to the Nazis, if they still celebrated Christmas?
5. Why was an artificial tree better than a real tree during this time?
6. What is the meaning of the word 'substitution'? Use a dictionary to help you.
7. What was the Blitz another name for? Use a dictionary to help you.
8. What was one East End family's Christmas tree made from?



# The Ten Ages of Christmas

## The Post-War Christmas

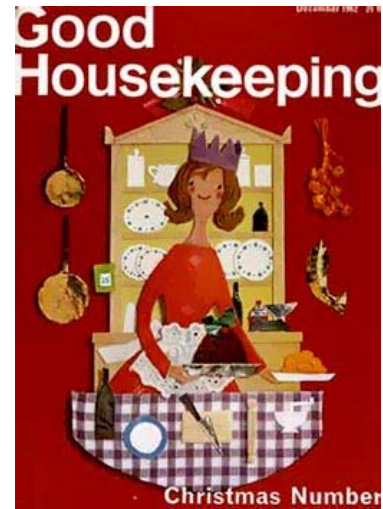
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### Magazines and the hostess

"Parties ... owe much of their success to the thought expended on food and drink. Even the impromptu need not take the hostess by surprise if the store cupboard is kept well-stocked with pastry shells in airtight tins and good supplies of canned and bottled delicacies."

So ran an article in *'Ideal Home'* in 1956, reflecting the general societal view that an ideal homemaker was also a gifted hostess, always prepared for visitors and a party and always wearing a gracious smile.



The image of the housewife as 'happy homemaker' was powerful in the 1950s, and at no time was she under more pressure than at Christmas. The pressure to produce not only a perfect Christmas dinner but also several days' worth of festive meals and snacks was enormous. Advice came from all quarters: 'helpful' parents and in-laws, household manuals and popular magazines.

Magazines such as *'Ideal Home'* and *'Good Housekeeping'* suggested ways to save money, short-cuts designed to enable the hostess to cut down on preparation time, and ideas for making entertaining both more exciting and easier. Despite this, playing the perfect hostess on top of other domestic duties was, it seems, a strain and the hostess often spent most of the party in the kitchen and most of the holidays exhausted!

Cocktail parties were especially popular in the 1950s, and Christmas was a favourite time of year for such events. Drinks such as those seen in Hollywood movies were accompanied by inventive nibbles and hors d'oeuvres. The woman was expected to plan and organise these 'sophisticated' parties, prepare all the food and yet appear unruffled as the guests arrived. The man of the house had but one serious responsibility: to stock and run the bar.

Larger parties with full meals were also expected and in 1959 hostesses were encouraged by *'Good Housekeeping'* to: "... study recipe books. Not half an hour before a meal, but study them in odd moments just for pleasure and ideas. Look out for two or three culinary masterpieces to add an inspired, professional touch to your meal planning."

# The Ten Ages of Christmas

## The Post-War Christmas



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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. In which magazine could the 1956 article be found?
2. What were considered good qualities for the gifted hostess?
3. What was the image of the housewife in the 1950s?
4. Where could the housewife get advice?
5. What type of party was popular in the 1950s?
6. What is the meaning of the word 'inventive'?
7. What were the duties of the 'man of the house'?
8. What did 'Good Housekeeping' encourage hostesses to do in 1959?