

Did you know?

The history of Christmas



Last minute shopping for presents, over-eating on mince pies, drinking too much sherry: Christmas wasn't always like this!

The origins of Christmas evolved from pagan solstice celebrations – great fires burning in the darkest point of the winter – and from the ancient Roman celebration of Saturnalia, a month-long hedonistic time in honour of Saturn, the god of agriculture.

Christmas itself began in the 4th century when church officials wanted to implement a festival celebrating Christ's birth – to add to the main holiday of Easter. They decided to incorporate Christmas into the already established solstice celebrations and Saturnalia.

The holiday spread from Rome to Egypt, and almost 200 years later arrived in Britain and by the Middle Ages it had more or less superseded the former pagan ceremonies. The solemn religious day was followed by a 12-day raucous, drunken affair with much merriment and misrule. Eating and drinking played a large part in the celebrations. However, during the Commonwealth in the 17th century, Christmas became a very frugal affair. The extravagance that had been hallmarks of the Tudor and the Stuart monarchies was reined in and laws were passed to ensure that Christmas was spent in quiet and respectful contemplation. Indeed for 16 years from 1644 to 1660, Christmas was officially banned and there is some record of pro-Christmas riots taking place. But with the restoration of the monarchy, those old ways of celebrating became popular again.

The Victorians also played an important role in shaping Christmas: Prince Albert, Victoria's consort, brought many German traditions to Britain, most significant of which was the Christmas tree. The first cards were sent in 1843 by Henry Cole, and Dickens wrote 'A Christmas Carol' which had a great influence on how Victorians and future generations thought about Christmas.

In the twentieth century, Santa Claus became established in America through Dutch immigrants, who brought their 'Sinter Klaas' celebrations with them, while in the UK Father Christmas became a popular figure. In the 1950s turkey became the most popular Christmas dinner in the UK, taking over from goose or beef. George V, the current queen's grandfather, launched the Christmas day message in 1932 on the radio. This message, which later was broadcast on the television has become a staple feature of the UK's Christmas viewing.

So as you settle down to enjoy your Christmas, just think about the long, diverse journey it has taken to arrive in the 21st century!

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Did you know?

If you would like to use Christmas in your lesson, we have provided you with two activities at A2 level **C-h-r-i-s-t-m-a-s** and **On Christmas Day in**

Teacher's notes

C-h-r-i-s-t-m-a-s

- Make a copy of worksheet 1 **C-h-r-i-s-t-m-a-s**, one for each student.
- On the board write *Christmas* and ask each student to name something connected to it, for example, *candles, turkey, presents*.
- Hand out copies worksheet 1, one to each student and ask them to work alone and then compare their answers with a partner. Help with any unknown language.
- Check answers together in class.
- **Key:** 1 **sleigh**, 2 **mistletoe**, 3 **turkey**, 4 **robin**, 5 **chimney**, 6 **holly**, 7 **sprouts**, 8 **islands** 9 **Advent**
- **Key:** **Chimney, Holly, Robin, Islands, Sprouts / Sleigh, Turkey, Mistletoe, Advent, Sprouts / Sleigh**
- Ask students if they can think of any other words which begin with the letters of **Christmas** and if so to write a question for the rest of the class to answer.

On Christmas Day in...

- Make a copy worksheet 2 **On Christmas Day in...**, one for each student.
- On the board write *Christmas Day 1914* and ask students what happened on that day (there was a truce (*Waffenstillstand*) between the German and British soldiers in World War 1). Remind students that in UK and USA Christmas Day is 25th December.
- Tell students they are going to do a quiz about events that happened on 25th December in the past.
- Hand out copies worksheet 2 one to each student. Explain that they should read each sentence and decide which year this event took place. Ask them to work alone and then compare their answers with a partner. Help with any unknown language.
- Check answers together in class.
- **Key:** a **1974**, b **1991**, c **1066**, d **1971**, e **1957**, f **1962**, g **1977**, h **1818**, i **1967**, j **1990**

C-H-R-I-S-T-M-A-S

Read the sentences 1 to 9 and fill in the gaps. Then find the first letter of each word on the right and write the word again.

- 1 Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer pulls a _____ full of presents.
- 2 _____ is a plant with white berries; you can kiss underneath it.
- 3 In the UK, many people eat _____ for Christmas dinner.
- 4 A _____ is a small brown bird with a red breast and it appears on many Christmas cards.
- 5 Father Christmas doesn't use the front door; he comes down the _____.
- 6 _____ has dark green prickly leaves and red berries.
- 7 _____ are a vegetable like a small cabbage and they are popular for Christmas dinner in Great Britain.
- 8 There are two _____ in the world that are named 'Christmas' – one is in the Pacific Ocean and the other in the Indian Ocean.
- 9 The period of 24 days before Christmas day is called _____.

C _____

H _____

R _____

I _____

S _____

T _____

M _____

A _____

S _____

On Christmas Day in ...

Complete each sentence using the correct year from the box.

1066 1818 1957 1962 1967 1971 1974 1977 1990 1991

- a** Cyclone *Tracy* destroyed Darwen, Australia in _____.
- b** President Mikhail Gorbachev of USSR resigned in _____.
- c** King William I was crowned in Westminster Abbey in _____.
- d** Canadian politician Justin Trudeau was born in _____.
- e** Ringo Starr (of the Beatles) received his first drum kit in _____.
- f** The film *To kill a Mocking Bird* (Gregory Peck) was released in _____.
- g** The actor Charlie Chaplin died aged 88 in _____.
- h** The Christmas carol *Silent Night, Holy Night* was first sung in _____.
- i** Paul McCartney (of the Beatles) and Jane Asher got engaged in _____.
- j** Lothar Matthäus won football's Ballon d'Or in _____.