

A Brief History of Christmas



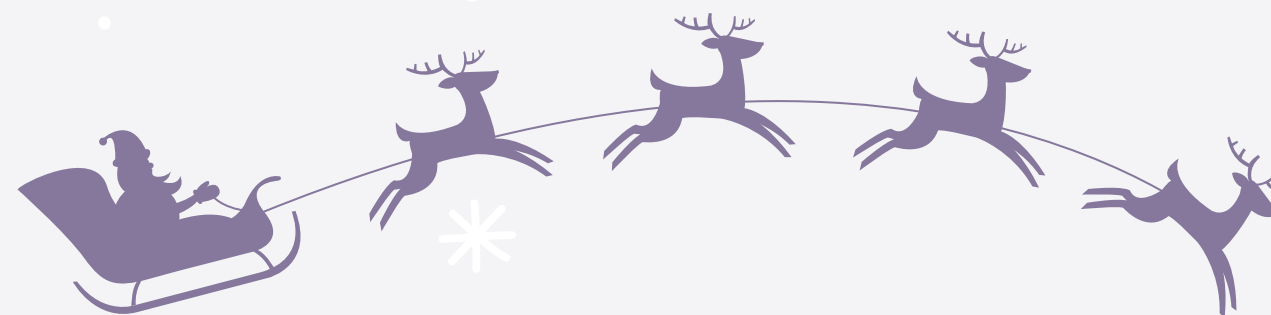
Did you know that the first recorded Christmas tree goes as far back as the 16th century when one was placed in Strasbourg Cathedral in 1539? They became most popular when Prince Albert brought in several spruce firs into his Christmas decorations around 1840 and it has been a staple of Christmas ever since! But how has Christmas changed over the years?



Saturnalia was once a very similar Roman festival that fell around the time of the Roman winter equinox - December 25th. Honouring the Roman God Saturn of farming and harvest, Romans enjoyed a carnival-like celebration which included sacrifices, gift-giving and general revelry. Shouts of 'lo Saturnalia!' were heard during the winter period two thousand years ago.



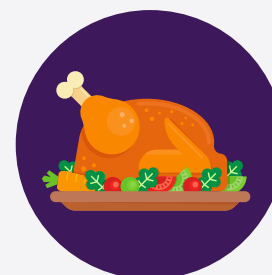
During medieval times, Christmastide celebrated what we now know as the 'twelve days of Christmas'. This was celebrated as part of the Roman Catholic religion and largely consisted of a series of religious feasts and celebrations. These began on Christmas Day and continued until the 5th of January. Many religious people would fast for weeks leading up to the celebrations too!



During wartime, Christmas celebrations often had to be scaled down during the restrictions of the period. Due to a lack of resources, many families resorted to handmade gifts, such as children's toys being made from recycled materials. Cards were much smaller and wrapping paper was even banned in 1941 due to shortages! Carol singing, pantomimes and festive plays were a much-loved aspect of Christmas during this time.



Throughout the 1970s and 80s, Christmas began to form into the one we recognise today, although decoration trends came and went. Tinsel, garlands and fake snow were very popular, with the 1980s being the golden decade of Christmas songs. Nowadays, toned-down golden glam is all in for the Christmas décor, but if you prefer things bright and bold and couldn't care less what's trendy, decorate how you wish.



The Victorian Christmas often took inspiration from royalty, such as Prince Albert and his Christmas trees and decorations. Despite royalty gorging on many of the foods we take for granted today, like turkey and mince pies, many Victorian families were not wealthy enough to afford such fine foods. Festive bird meat was the ideal and goose became very popular.

What Christmas traditions have changed in your family over the years? This Christmas can be an opportunity to reflect on your favourite Christmas you've experienced and maybe even take inspiration from some historic traditions. As they say in Ancient Rome, Lo Saturnalia!



Winter traditions around the world

We all know many traditions during the winter in Britain; mince pies, 'Rocking around the Christmas tree' on repeat, snowman competitions...If you're one for cosy nights in and heartwarming films on the TV, winter might be one of your most beloved seasons of the year.

What celebrations and traditions take place in winter around the world?

Saint Lucy's Day – Scandinavia

Scandinavia often has only a few precious hours of daylight during the winter due to its northern locations. In countries like Sweden, Norway and Denmark, the sun rises at 9am and sets at 3pm! Saint Lucy's Day is an annual winter tradition which honours Saint Lucy, a young Roman Christian martyr and saint, referred to as the 'Queen of Light'. During this event, children sing songs and wear white gowns, with the eldest daughter of the family bringing home saffron buns and coffee to enjoy. This tradition is still enjoyed today by many Scandinavians.



Kwanzaa – Africa

Kwanzaa originally began to celebrate African American culture, but now is observed and celebrated worldwide by people of African descent. Lasting from December 26th to January 1st, African art is chosen to decorate the home and represent African culture. Lighting a Kinara (a candle holder with seven candles), donning African traditional dress and eating African food is all part of this widely celebrated winter tradition. It is celebrated during the winter months to mark the first harvest.



Lunar New Year - Asia

In places like China, Vietnam and Korea, the Lunar New Year is often celebrated during the winter. To welcome in this new year, families often deep clean their houses, perform religious rituals to honour household deities and prepare sumptuous food, including dumplings and long noodles. Dancing, fireworks and gift-giving are traditional, as well as remembering deceased loved ones. Each New Year is dedicated to one of the twelve zodiac animals in Asian folklore. The year 2025 will begin on January 29th, which is the Year of the Snake.



Yalda Night - Middle East

Yalda Night, or Shab-e-Yalda, is a wintertime festival that's been in existence since the time of ancient Persia. Celebrated on 21st December, it marks the end of autumn and the longest night of the year. As the days get short, people celebrate the renewal of the sun and light's victory over darkness. On Shab-e-Yalda, people gather in groups of families and friends in the homes of their elderly relatives. There, they enjoy eating nuts and fruits, reciting Hafiz poetry and generally having a pleasant time to bid a warm welcome to the upcoming winter.



Diwali - India

Diwali is a five-day festival in India where houses and streets are adorned with everything colourful like bright lanterns! During Diwali, gifts are exchanged, traditional Indian food is eaten, and religious Hindu rituals are performed. Diwali celebrates the victory of good over evil, light over darkness, and knowledge over ignorance. It's usually celebrated during October or November and is one of the largest and most significant celebrations across India!



Winter traditions in other cultures