

‘All I remember is mucking out!’

Last-minute presents bought at Olympia, mucking out on the big day and escaping ponies – famous equestrians share their childhood Christmas memories with Catherine Welton

IT'S a magical time when you still believe in Father Christmas, you don't have mountains of washing-up or the in-laws to deal with – and it's not your responsibility to make sure the turkey and Brussels sprouts are cooked at the same time. Childhood Christmases are, simply put, the best bits of the festive season with none of the stress.

As a child at boarding school, Christmas was particularly important to Carl Hester.

"I would start thinking about Christmas as soon as half-term was over," he says. "It was eight weeks of excitement. I didn't enjoy the journey home, though. Sark was always very wild and windy in the winter, so I was always seasick and ended up throwing up on the harbour, on the boat and when I got off."

"In Sark, Christmas was very magical. I can remember all gathering in the village to meet Father Christmas for the first time. I would have been about five. I did have a sneaky suspicion that Father Christmas was the man that

fixed all the bikes," remembers Carl. "I asked Mum, 'Is that Uncle John?'"

"Our pocket money was so measly at boarding school, literally 70p a week. As soon as I got home, Grandmother would take me out shopping for the family Christmas presents and she would help me pick something – a bottle of red wine for Dad, a bottle of perfume for Mother. I think they got the same thing every Christmas."

AS the son of an Olympic equestrian, Harry Mendé's Christmases revolved around that lifestyle.

"We were always at home because of the horses and ponies. My brother and I used to do the yard in peace and tranquility until our mother came and tormented us!" he remembers.

Growing up in a showjumping dynasty, Jack Whitaker's childhood December was always defined by one big, famous event.

"We're such a big family, we couldn't all get together on Christmas Day, but we all went to Olympia so that's where presents got handed over," he says.



Illustrations by David Stoten

"The most important present I had was my first bike; it was my most treasured possession"

CARL HESTER

