

Some Christmas Traditions



At the time of writing, the Halloween paraphernalia is being sold off cheap in the supermarkets and the air is hanging heavy with the smoke of fireworks. The trees are in the full yellows and reds of Autumn and the cobwebs are picked out silver in the morning. Yes, it can only mean one thing: wall to wall Christmas adverts have started on telly!

And at the time of reading, you will have been suffering these for about six weeks, and no doubt succumbed to some: presents for the kids, food, drink...and all those decorations. But how did the whole 'Christmas thing' start and what are the ancient origins of some of today's rituals?

Of course, Christmas is celebrated by millions around the world as the time of the birth of Christ, but for millennia, long before Jesus, this period in the middle of winter had been a time of celebration. It was all about the winter solstice, December 21st, rejoicing that you have made it through the darkest days of winter and looking forward to the light.

In Scandinavia, the Norse celebrated Yule¹ (*Jol*) by bringing home large logs, which they would set on fire and feast until the log burned out, which could take as long as 12 days. Sounds familiar? And there was a worry that the great god Odin² was abroad at this time, deciding who should prosper and who should perish in the year ahead. Unsurprisingly, many chose to stay inside - a ritual some still like to observe today!

And what to do while you're indoors? Well, across much of Europe, the end of December was the time when cattle and other livestock were slaughtered so they would not have to be fed all winter. For many, this was the only time they had access to the luxury of fresh meat. And luckily, the wine and beer made throughout the year had finally fermented, so they had something to wash it down with. Perhaps times don't change as much as we think?

Now if you're stuck inside with all that rich food and alcohol, a dangerous addition to the party could be mistletoe, since pre-Christian times a popular symbol of male fertility. Although some of the reasons for this are not appropriate here, mistletoe, a parasitic plant, grows in the tree canopy with no roots or link to the earth, but still manages to remain green in winter when the rest of the tree has died. With such unearthly vitality, it is easy to understand why

¹ In old Anglo Saxon English, this very important time was known as Geol and we know that the early calenders marked *ǣrra géola* (the period before the winter solstice) and *æftera géola* (referring to the period after Yule i.e. January).

² Known to the Anglo Saxons (or early English) as Woden; as in Wednesday (Wodenesdag) or Wodens Day.

mistletoe has long been associated with magical properties. By the 18th century, kissing under it had apparently become popular among the 'servant classes' and this was perpetuated with gusto by those Christmas specialists, the Victorians. A man was allowed to kiss any woman standing underneath, and bad luck would befall any woman who refused. You've been warned.

And what about those other hedgerow and woodland favourites the holly and the ivy? Well long before they were both full grown, the holly (male) and ivy (female) were burnt together at the pagan festival of Beltane and the bringing of green vegetation into the home was closely linked to rebirth, both of spring and Christ. It is the holly that most closely bears the crown - its spiny leaves and red berries being an obvious link to Jesus' crown of thorns - but the earlier pagan tradition perhaps explains why holly has subsequently been linked to Christmas rather than Easter. In fact, holly was an important plant, cultivated in deer parks and old hunting estates, both as a winter food (it is still cut down today as fodder for ponies in the New Forest) and as protection for saplings. Holly was also thought to protect the home - put it around the door and it would trap any evil spirits trying to enter. Ivy, like holly, was another important evergreen edible plant, which was, with mistletoe, linked with both Christmas and romance. Ivy is unusual among these species in being also associated with death and melancholy as well as rebirth.

Christmas trees from Germany, turkeys from America, a red-clad Father Christmas from Coca Cola, there are lots of other more recent Christmas traditions with colourful pasts. And the perfect Christmas present? Why it must be an annual membership to the Plumpton and East Chiltington Wildlife Group, just £5.00 per household from all good department stores (well, here actually plumptonwildlife@gmail.com). And among the early new year highlights to get involved with will be the Big Garden Bird Watch and the Toad Patrol³.

Happy Christmas

David Phillips

(Thanks to Mak Norman for additional footnotes on early English traditions.)

³ Another very English new year celebration is Wassailing, traditionally staged on the first weekend in January. The word comes from 'Wes hal', which in old English means 'be whole'. The Wassailing of apple trees and bee hives was common in Sussex (where it is sometimes called 'Apple Howling'). If you go to a wassailing, take something along to make a din with, because at some point, the gathering have to drive out any bad energies from the trees; and 'rough music' (which was once used to drive out undesirable residents from Sussex villages) is the way to do it. Followed by a glass of cider of course. East Chiltington held an apple tree wassailing last year, and plan to repeat it in Jan 2019.