

Christmas in Tudor Times

Advent

Advent began, and still begins, on the Sunday nearest to the feast of St Andrew the Apostle, 30th November, and the word “advent” came from the Latin “adventus”, meaning “coming”. It was, and is, a time for preparing ourselves to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ. For Tudor people, Advent was four weeks of fasting, i.e. abstaining from meat. Christmas Eve was particularly strict, with eggs and cheese also being forbidden, but the fasting ended after midnight mass on Christmas Eve – it was then time to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

6 December – The Feast of St Nicholas

The 6th December is the Feast of St Nicholas, or St Nicholas of Myra, the 4th century Bishop of Myra (modern-day Demre in Turkey), who is the patron saint of children, as well as sailors, merchants, archers, repentant thieves, brewers, pawnbrokers and students. In medieval and Tudor times, it was traditional for a choirboy to be chosen on 6th December (or sometimes Childermas, Holy Innocents’ Day) as “Boy Bishop”. This boy would act as bishop and lead processions around communities, collect money for the church and parish funds, and lead some religious services.

As Ronald Hutton points out in his book, *The Stations of the Sun*, this tradition was “a reaffirmation of Christ’s own teaching about the special relationship of children to the kingdom of heaven, and of the Church’s especial respect for innocence and purity – a celebration of norms” and that it was also widespread: “it is therefore attested at every cathedral in Britain at which a medieval archive has survived.”

King Henry VII presented money to his “St Nicholas Bishop”, a boy chosen from the choirboys of the Chapel Royal, and the giving of money to one particular chorister continued on St Nicholas’s Day even after King Henry VIII banned the Boy Bishop tradition in his reign. It appears that Henry put an end to the tradition because it could be seen as mocking Church authorities and therefore the king himself, seeing as he was now Supreme Head of the Church. Although the tradition made a brief return in Mary I’s Catholic reign, it disappeared again in Elizabeth I’s reign.

The Boy Bishop tradition continues today in Hereford and Salisbury Cathedrals. At Hereford Cathedral, a teenager is elected as “Boy Bishop” from the cathedral choristers and takes his throne at the Choral Evensong service on the Sunday nearest to 6th December. Calendar Customs website explains: “His reign lasts for three weeks and in this time he plays an important part in services, wearing full episcopal regalia, in a tradition that here goes back to the thirteenth century.”

At Salisbury Cathedral, a chorister assumes the role of Boy Bishop during Evensong on the Sunday nearest to St Nicholas’s Day in a special ceremony which involves the Bishop of Sherborne giving the boy, who is dressed in replica Bishop’s regalia, his staff and ring and installing him on the throne. The Boy Bishop then leads the prayers, blesses the congregation and receives the collection, as well as writing and delivering his own sermon. In 2015, 12-year-old Maddie Lyles was elected in the role, and the name changed from Boy Bishop to Chorister Bishop. Salisbury Cathedral, in their announcement of her election, explained what happened after she had been elected:

“In keeping with tradition, during the service Bishop Nicholas sat bareheaded in the sanctuary whilst Maddie, bedecked in her robes and mitre, wearing her ring and carrying her staff, led prayers,

received the collection, led prayers, delivered her sermon and gave the final responses. The service is a reminder to the church and clergy that they must always consider the humble and meek, in particular children. Something Maddie's sermon addressed along with the significance of St Nicholas, who is the Patron Saint of Children."

It is wonderful how the tradition is being kept alive today.

Another tradition associated with St Nicholas's Day, and also Shrovetide, from Tudor times onwards is "barring out". Schoolboys would lock their schoolmasters out of the school and take possession of the place until the schoolmaster met certain demands.

8 December – Feast of the Immaculate Conception

The 8th December is the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in the Catholic Church. It is a feast day that dates back to the 7th century when Eastern churches began celebrating the conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. That is the origin of the feast, but the feast day as we know it today in the West dates back to around the 11th century.

The "immaculate conception" does not refer to the conception of Christ by the Holy Spirit but, instead, refers to Mary's own immaculate conception in the womb of her mother, St Anne, which meant that Mary had been conceived free from the taint of original sin.

On the 8th December 1854, Pope Pius IX explained it in "Ineffabilis Deus", the Apostolic Constitution:

"We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful."

21 December – St Thomas's Day

21st December, as well as being the Winter Solstice, is the Feast of St Thomas the Apostle, also known as Didymus and "Doubting Thomas". As Sophie Jackson points out in *The Medieval Christmas*, Thomas was a carpenter and "was revered for his generosity", so on his feast day it was traditional for old women, children and the poor to "go Thomasing", i.e. walk the streets collecting alms.

24 December – Christmas Eve, The Yule Log and Christmas Decorations

On Christmas Eve, a log known as the Yule log was brought into the home. The Yule log tradition dates back to Tudor times, although it is thought that the tradition has its roots in the midwinter rituals of the early Vikings who built huge bonfires for their festival of light. The men of the house would go out to the local forest on Christmas Eve, find a huge log, decorate it with ribbons and drag it home, where they would be welcomed by the women of the household with hot spiced ale before the family attended Midnight Mass.

The Yule Log would be burned continually in the hearth for the twelve days of Christmas. It was a central part of the Christmas festivities, as the family would gather around the hearth. Apparently,

the fire used to symbolise the light of the sun, but when it was incorporated from Pagan traditions into Christmas, the light came to symbolise Jesus Christ and his victory over sin. It was considered lucky to keep a bit of the log to light the next year's Yule log.

The chocolate Yule Logs that we see in the shops at Christmas time are a reminder of this old tradition, so why not Google a recipe for a chocolate log or *Buche de Noel*.

As well as bringing in a Yule log, it was traditional for Medieval and Tudor people to decorate their homes with greenery, such as laurel, holly, ivy and rosemary, at Christmas time. However, there was no rush to take these festive decorations down on Twelfth Night, instead they were left decorating the house until Candlemas Eve, i.e. 1st February. 17th century poet Robert Herrick wrote in his poem "Ceremony Upon Candlemas Eve":

"Down with the rosemary, and so
Down with the bays and misletoe ;
Down with the holly, ivy, all,
Wherewith ye dress'd the Christmas Hall :
That so the superstitious find
No one least branch there left behind :
For look, how many leaves there be
Neglected, there (maids, trust to me)
So many goblins you shall see."

The tradition of kissing under the mistletoe

Thank you to Heather R. Darsie for writing this interesting article on the history of the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe.

Oh, the romantic kiss under the mistletoe. The viridian, sturdy, parasitic mistletoe. Varieties of the plant are found all over the world, growing on trees and shrubs. The mistletoe eventually kills the branch of the host plant upon which it is preying, feeding on the host plant throughout the winter. Mistletoe is an Anglo-Saxon word meaning "dung twig." So how did this plant become a holiday decoration prompting kisses?

Mistletoe was sacred to the Druids of Britain, who believed that mistletoe could heal ailments. Most commonly found on apple trees, it was thought especially divine when found upon oak trees. Mistletoe also makes an important appearance in the Norse myth of the Death of Baldur. Baldur, son of Odin, began having dreams of his impending doom. In an effort to save him, Baldur's mother Frigg made all things in the universe swear an oath not to harm Baldur but failed to ask the mistletoe to swear so, as Frigg found mistletoe to be an innocent plant. After the oaths were given, Loki, a mischievous god, asked Frigg if everything had indeed sworn the oath. Frigg told Loki that she did not ask the mistletoe to swear the oath. Loki later tricked a blind god into shooting Baldur with an arrow made of mistletoe, which killed Baldur instantly.

Where does the kissing start? Its roots can be traced back to ancient Greece during certain celebrations, including marriages. Romans and Scandinavians, meanwhile, would resolve issues

with their foes under mistletoe as a sign of peace. An evergreen, the plant was used for winter decorations in European cultures as well. For example, mistletoe was used by the Welsh as a decoration for their homes during the winter.

Eventually, the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe came about in England. Mistletoe was incorporated into the Kissing Bough, a popular decoration during Tudor times. The Kissing Bough was made of woven wooden hoops that were then hung with greenery, and a small effigy of the infant Jesus was placed in the middle. Kissing Boughs were placed by the doorway to the abode, and entrants were embraced by the household when they entered through the door by the Kissing Bough. Over time, the mistletoe became associated with kissing.

Thought to have originated with the lower classes, the tradition at times was that a gentleman could pluck a berry from the mistletoe and kiss a lady's cheek. Once there were no more berries, the gentleman could not request any more kisses. A lady unwittingly standing underneath mistletoe had to accept the kiss or kisses.

Another, lesser-known English tradition involving mistletoe can be found at York Minster. Dating back to the Middle Ages, the Dean of York Minster would place mistletoe upon the High Altar, being certain to wear gloves for the ceremony. After that, a blessing of freedom was given to wicked people upon the Minster's steps. This evolved into a general pardon of sorts given to criminals on Christmas Eve. Though it endured a hiatus in the 19th century, this tradition has been brought back to York Minster.

This holiday season keep in mind the following rhyme:

"Pick a berry off the mistletoe
For every kiss that's given.
When the berries have all gone
There's an end to kissing."

Christmas Day

25th December, Christmas Day, was the official end of Advent and the start of the Twelve Days of Christmas. The fasting was now over, and this was a day to celebrate. Work for those who worked on the land would stop, and spinners were banned from spinning. Work would not start again until Plough Monday, the first Monday after Twelfth Night. The Twelve Days of Christmas were a time for communities to come together and celebrate. People would visit their neighbours and friends and enjoy the Christmas traditions.

Christmas Day was a day to celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, and the religious celebrations would begin first thing with a mass before dawn and then two further masses later in the day. Congregations held lighted tapers as the genealogy of Christ was sung, before heading home to enjoy a festive feast.

Christmas was a time to 'eat, drink and be merry', a time to celebrate and enjoy a little luxury. Those families who could afford a Christmas feast would celebrate it in style with foods like roast goose, turkey or beef, and Brawn and Mustard (roast wild boar with mustard). Turkey had been eaten at Christmas by some people during Henry VIII's reign, as it was introduced into England in the 1520s, but it had not yet superseded goose which was still the traditional meat of Christmas Day for

those who could afford it. In 1588, Elizabeth I ordered the whole of England to eat goose for their Christmas Dinner to celebrate England's victory over the Armada because it was the first meal she ate after her navy had defeated Spain's ships.

Why not consider roasting a goose instead of the traditional turkey for Christmas dinner? It makes a change. Gordon Ramsay, on the BBC Good Food website, advises scoring the breast and leg skin of the goose with a sharp knife in a criss-cross pattern to help render down the fat and then rubbing lemon and lime zest, sea salt, five-spice powder and pepper into the skin and sprinkling some into the cavity. You can brown the bird slightly in a frying pan with a little oil before roasting. As for cooking times, the BBC site says: "Cook for 10 mins at 240°C/fan 220°C/gas 9, then reduce to 190°C/fan 170°C/gas 5 and cook for 20 mins per kg for medium-rare, 32 mins per kg for more well-done, plus 30 mins resting." Basting, with the fat produced, should be done every 30 minutes.

Richer households would have a more luxurious Christmas banquet which could include roasted swan or peacock which were displayed as table centrepieces with their feathers and skins put back on. A boar's head may also be used as a table decoration. These centrepieces showed just how rich the householder was. With the discovery of the New World and the Elizabethan voyages to America, the rich were also able to make use of new and exotic fruit and vegetables in their Christmas banquet. Tomatoes and potatoes were mixed with foods like citrus fruits which were specially imported from Southern European countries.

There was also the Tudor Christmas pie, a coffin shaped pie crust containing a turkey stuffed with a goose, stuffed with a chicken, stuffed with a partridge, stuffed with a pigeon. In the UK, several supermarkets offer a four-bird roast (chicken, turkey, goose and duck usually) and you can google "three-bird roast" to find recipes like the BBC Good Food one which uses chicken, pheasant and duck. It makes a nice change from stuffed turkey.

With your roast meat, serve traditional bread sauce (milk and butter simmered with cloves and onion, and then thickened with breadcrumbs), which does have its origins in the bread-thickened sauce of the medieval era, or how about frumenty instead? Frumenty is a sort of porridge made from cracked wheat soaked in ale, boiled with spices like cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger, and then mixed with currants, beaten egg and cream, and reheated.

The banqueting or sweet meat course course was an important part of Tudor feasts, for the wealthy anyway. This was an opportunity to the host to flaunt their wealth and impress their guests. Sugar was a luxury cooking ingredient in Tudor times and was rather expensive, so an array of sweet delicacies would impress the guests. Delicacies on display would have included:

- Leech - A sweet made from milk, sugar and rose-water, which was cut into cubes. It was then displayed as a chequerboard, with some of the leech left plain and other cubes gilded.
- Collops of Bacon - A collop was a rasher of bacon but these collops were crafted from ground almonds and sugar, a bit like our present day marzipan.
- Sugar-plate - Sugar-plate was made from sugar, egg white and gelatin, and then crafted to look like walnuts, eggs and other food items.
- Gilded fruit - Fruit like lemons were gilded and used to decorate the banquet table.
- The Marchpane - This arrangement made from almond paste which was iced or gilded and then decorated with sugar figures and crystallised fruit, was the centrepiece of this course.

As well as the roast meats and sweet delicacies, well-to-do Elizabethans would have enjoyed:

- Christmas pudding - A "pudding" made from meat, spices and oatmeal and then cooked in the gut of a boar.
- Brussels Sprouts - The wonderful Brussels Sprout made its debut in England in the late 1580s.
- Gingerbread - Made from bread, ginger, spices, sugar and wine. This made a stiff paste which was then moulded.
- Mulled wine – Red wine heated and infused with sugar and spices.
- Syllabub - This can be drunk or served as a dessert. Cream, white wine, sugar, sherry, nutmeg and lemon zest are whipped together. Chill to serve as a dessert.
- Lambswool - A drink made from mixing hot cider, sherry or ale, apples and spices. The mixture was heated until it “exploded” and formed a white “woolly” head. To make at home, simply bake apples in the skin, heat brown sugar and ale, mix in nutmeg and ginger, add apple pulp, whisk to give it a frothy head. Wassail!
- Buttered Beere - Ale heated with spices like ginger, cloves and nutmeg. Egg yolks and brown sugar are then whipped into it, followed by butter. It is served warm and whisked to froth it up.
- Hippocras – Mix wine (or grape juice) with bruised peppercorns and cloves, ground cinnamon and ginger, and some sugar, and let sit for 1-4 days before straining through a filter or cloth.
- Tarts and custards for dessert.
- Quince marmalade

Other Christmas traditions included:

- The “minced pye” or mince pie - If you're in the UK, then you will have no trouble finding mince pies to enjoy. In Tudor times, the “minced pye” was a bit different. It was one large pie and was rectangular, or 'crib' shaped, to represent the manger the Christ child was laid in. It traditionally contained thirteen ingredients, to symbolise Jesus and his apostles, and it also contained minced meat, rather than just dried fruit and suet. The meat was mutton, which symbolised the shepherds to whom the Angel Gabriel appeared.

Today, mince pies are usually made small, for one person to enjoy. They are made with shortcrust pastry and filled with “mincemeat” which does not contain meat, only suet. You can make your own mincemeat from raisins, currants, shredded suet, lemon zest, apple, mixed peel, brown sugar, brandy and nutmeg, or in the UK you can buy it ready-made in jars.

If you want to be more Tudor, then you can make your mincemeat filling using mutton. A recipe from the National Trust uses lean minced beef or mutton, suet, ground cloves, ground mace, black pepper, saffron, raisins, currants and prunes – see

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/recipes/real-mince-pie>.

- The Lord of Misrule - A commoner would be chosen as "The Lord of Misrule" and would be in charge of organising the entertainment and revelry for the Twelve Days of Christmas.
- Mummers' Plays with music and morris dancing.
- Decorations - Tudor people would collect winter greenery, such as holly and ivy, to decorate their homes. Holly, of course, has the red berries so with that you have the traditional Christmas colours of red and green. The Druids regarded holly as a sacred plant, and then Christians used it as a reminder of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, with the berries symbolising his blood that was shed and the pointed leaves symbolising the thorns on his crown of thorns.

The following poem from 1573 gives us a good idea of the Elizabethan Christmas:

"Good husband and huswife, now chiefly be glad,
 Things handsome to have, as they ought to be had.
 They both do provide, against Christmas do come,
 To welcome their neighbors, good cheer to have some.
 Good bread and good drink, a good fire in the hall,
 Brawn, pudding, and souse, and good mustard withal.
 Beef, mutton, and pork, and good pies of the best,
 Pig, veal, goose, and capon, and turkey well drest,
 Cheese, apples and nuts, and good carols to hear,
 As then in the country is counted good cheer.
 What cost to good husband, is any of this?
 Good household provision only it is:
 Of other the like, I do leave out a many,
 That costeth the husband never a penny."

(Thomas Tusser, 500 Points of Husbandry, 1573.)

Christmas Carols and Wassailing

Christmas carols were sung on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning around the parish and carollers would be rewarded with money, food or drink. The Coventry Carol dates back to 1534, the Boar's Head Carol dates back to the 14th century, "Lullay, myn lykyng" to the 15th century, and the Gloucester Wassail dates back to the Middle Ages.

Here is the first verse of the Gloucestershire Wassail, or "Wassail! Wassail! All over the Town":

"Wassail! wassail! all over the town,
 Our toast it is white and our ale it is brown;
 Our bowl it is made of the white maple tree;

With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink to thee.”

Wassailing was the enjoying of a communal cup of spiced ale. Wassailing has also been linked to blessing the orchards and land, and going round the parish in groups with an empty bowl for householders to fill with spiced ale. We have a description of wassailing at the Tudor court from Henry VII's reign where the steward and treasurer were present with their staves of office. The steward brought the wassail, i.e. the communal cup, into court and cried out “wassail” three times and the courtiers replied with a song. This was a formal occasion but it could be more informal. There would be a crust of bread at the bottom of the bowl and this was given to the most important person present. By the way, “wassail” comes from Old English “was hál” which came from an Anglo-Saxon greeting meaning “be whole” or “be healthy”, like toasting “your good health”.

In cider-making areas, like the West Country and Herefordshire, people would wassail in orchards. They would place cider-soaked cake in the fork of an apple tree and splash cider on it. They would then sing special wassail songs to the trees. The aim was to ward off evil spirits and encourage good spirits to ensure a good harvest.

In 1521, Wynkyn de Worde published a collection of Christmas carols *Christmasse Carolles*. Unfortunately, his book is no longer extant, but two carols appear on the single leaf that survives in the Bodleian Library: “A caroll of huntyng”, which, according to TheDevilstoneChronicles.com, “describes a huntsman's meeting with a hart (deer) which in Medieval Christianity represented mankind's search for God”, and “A caroll bringyng in the bores heed”, or the Boar's Head Carol.

So which traditional carols date back to medieval times? Here are a few:

- In dulci jubilo is German in origin and is thought to date back to the 14th century
- The words of O Come All Ye Faithful (*Adestes Fideles*) may date back to as early as the 13th century.
- Good King Wenceslas is thought to be based on a 13th century Finnish carol.
- The Boar's Head dates back to the 15th century
- The Coventry Carol
- Adam lay ybounden dates back to the 15th century.
- Make we joy now in this fest dates back to c.1450.
- Thomas Tallis's “Puer natus mass”
- The Gloucestershire Wassail dates back to the Middle Ages
- God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen is thought to date back to at least the 16th century.

The Lord of Misrule

The Lord of Misrule tradition saw a commoner being chosen as the Lord of Misrule and presiding over the Christmas entertainment and revelry. It had its roots in the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia, which was celebrated in December and was in honour of Saturn, god of agriculture, and his wife Ops, goddess of earth and fertility. The festival comprised feasting, gift-giving, gaming with dice, and general revelry, and during the festival, which ran from 17th to 23rd December, the usual social hierarchy was relaxed and even turned on its head, with slaves joining their masters and

the banqueting table and masters waiting on their slaves and following their slaves' orders. It also included a mock king presiding over the revels, a king who was customarily put to death at the end of the festival, symbolising a “good god who gave his life for the world”.

In Edward VI's reign, the Lord of Misrule, played by George Ferrers, entered London in a huge procession which mimicked that of a monarch – his large retinue included councillors, fools, jugglers, tumblers, a divine, a philosopher, an astronomer, a poet, a physician, an apothecary, a Master of Requests, a civilian, friars, two gentleman ushers and others. He also processed into the royal court at Greenwich palace under a canopy, like a royal canopy of estate. The revels he presided over included a tourney, a drunken mask, a mock joust with hobby horses, a mock Midsummer Night festival, a variety of other masks, plays, banquets, mock combats, and hunting and hawking. A fortune was spent on the revelry, calling it lavish is an understatement.

Here is a primary source account of one of Ferrers' entries into London as Lord of Misrule. It's from January 1553 and is written by merchant-taylor Henry Machyn in his diary. It is damaged, so not complete, but it gives us some insight.

“The same day afore noon landed at the Tower wharf the King's lord of misrule, and there met with him the Sheriff's lord of misrule with his men, and every one having a riband of blue and white about there necks, and then his trumpet, [druws,] morris dancers, and tabrett, and he took a sword and bare it afore the king's lord of misrule, for the lord was gorgeously arrayed in purple velvet furred with ermine, and his robe braided with spangles of silver full; and about him singers, and afore him on great horses and in coats and cloaks of . . . embroider with gold and with baldricks about their necks, white and blue sarsenets, and chains of gold, and the rest of his servants in blue garded with white, and next afore his council in blue taffeta and their capes of white . . . his trumpeters, taburs, drums, and flutes and fools and his morris dancers, guns, morris-pykes, bagpipes; and his messengers . . and his jailers with pillory, stocks, and his axe, gyves and bolts, some fast by the legs and some by the necks, and so rode through Marke lane, and so through Gracechurch Street and Cornhill; and . . .

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trumpet blowing, making a proclamation . . . and so the king's lord was carried from the . . . scaffold; and after the sheriff's lord; and the king's lord gave the sheriff's lord a gown with gold and silver, and anon after he kneeled down and he took a sword and gave him three strokes and made him knight, and after they drank one to the other upon the scaffold, and his cofferer casting gold and silver in every place as they rode, and after his cofferer his carriage with his cloth-saykes on horseback; and so went about Cheap, with his jailers and his prisoners; and afterwards the 2 lords took their horses and rode unto my lord mayor to dinner; and after he came back through Cheap to the cross, and so down Wood Street unto the sheriff's house for more than half an hour, and so forth the Old Jury and London wall unto my lord treasurer's) place, and there they had a [great] banquet the space of half an hour; and so down to Bishopsgate and to Leadenhall and through Fenchurch Street, and so to the Tower Wharf; and the sheriff('s) lord going with him with torch-light, and there the king's lord took his pinnace with a great shot of guns, and so the sheriff's lord took his leave of him and came home merrily with his morris dancers dancing and so forth.”

26 December – The Feast of St Stephen, now known as Boxing Day

The day after Christmas, which is today known as Boxing Day, was the Feast of St Stephen, the first Christian martyr or protomartyr. Stephen was stoned to death after being accused of blasphemy, and his death was witnessed by Paul the Apostle, then known as Saul of Tarsus.

Acts 7:54 - 8:2:

“When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.” (King James Version)

Thomas Tusser, the 16th-century poet and farmer, wrote of how St Stephen's Day was the traditional day for bleeding horses and cattle:

“Ere Christmas be passed let horse be let blood,
for many a purpose it doth them much good.

The day of St. Stephen old fathers did use:

if that do mislike thee some other day choose.”

And it was also a day associated with hunting. On one St Stephen's Day, at the Inner Temple, a cat and fox were let loose and hunted with a pack of hounds who finally tore the two creatures to bits. Here is the account from John Nichols's *The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth* (Volume V, p. 161):

“This Ceremony also performed, a Huntsman cometh into the Hall, with a Fox and a Purse-net; 26 with a Cat, both bound at the end of a staff; and with them nine or ten Couple of Hounds, with the blowing of Hunting-Hornes. And the Fox and Cat are by the Hounds set upon, and killed beneath the Fire.”

Trivia: “Boxing Day” has its origins in the 17th century when apprentices and servants collected their annual tips (gratuities) in boxes or earthenware pots.

28 December – Childermas

Childermas (Children's Mass) or Holy Innocents' Day was part of the Twelve Days of Christmas celebrated in the Tudor period and was celebrated on 28th December.

This feast day commemorates the massacre of the baby boys which King Herod ordered in Bethlehem, in an attempt to kill the infant Jesus Christ. The innocent babies were seen by the Catholic Church as the very first martyrs.

The 16th century Christmas carol, The Coventry Carol, which was sung on 28th December, referred to the massacre:

“Herod the King, in his raging,
Charged he hath this day;
His men of might, in his own sight,
All children young, to slay.”

The story is told in Matthew Chapter 2 and here it is from William Tyndale’s New Testament:

“When Jesus was born at Bethlehem in Jury, in the time of Herod the king. Behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem saying: Where is he that is born King of the Jews? We have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king, had heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him, and he gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people, and asked of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him: at Bethlehem in Jury. For thus it is written by the prophet:

And thou Bethlehem in the land of Jury, art not the least as concerning the princes of Juda. For out of thee shall come the captain that shall govern my people Israhel.

Then Herod privily called the wise men, and diligently enquired of them, the time of the star that appeared. And sent them to Bethlehem saying: Go and search diligently for the child. And when ye have found him bring me word, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed, and lo the star which they saw in the east went before them, until it came and stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were marvellously glad. And went into the house, and found the child with Mary his mother, and kneeled down and worshipped him, and opened their treasures, and offered unto him gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And after they were warned of God in a dream that they should not go again to Herod, they returned into their own country another way.

When they were departed, behold the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in dream saying: arise and take the child and his mother, and fly into Egypt, and abide there till I bring thee word. For Herod will seek the child to destroy him.

Then he arose, and took the child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt, and was there unto the death of Herod, to fulfil that which was spoken of the Lord, by the prophet, which saith: out of Egypt have I called my son.

Then Herod perceiving that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, as many as were two year old and under, according to the time which he had diligently searched out of the wise men. Then was fulfilled, that which was spoken by the prophet Jeremy, saying:

On the hills was a voice heard, mourning, weeping, and great lamentation. Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they were not.”

As Matthew says, Herod failed to kill Jesus, but many infants were killed and they are known as the Holy Innocents. Childermas, or Holy Innocents' Day was part of the twelve days of Christmas. In "A Tudor Christmas", Alison Weir and Siobhan Clarke write that in Tudor times, adults fasted on this day and sometimes children were whipped as they lay in their bed first thing in the morning, as a reminder of the suffering of those massacred infants. After that, though, they were given free rein to enjoy themselves for the rest of the day. On Wikipedia it states that "There was a medieval custom of refraining where possible from work on the day of the week on which the feast of "Innocents Day" had fallen for the whole of the following year until the next Innocents Day."

In Spain, where I live, Childermas is a bit like April Fools' Day, and pranks, or bromas, are played on people. One Spanish website gave ideas for bromas which included substituting salt for sugar, changing the time on the clock while the victim is sleeping, sticking a coin to the road or pavement so people can't pick it up, putting toothpaste on a person's face while they sleep, scaring them by hiding behind a door and jumping out at them, any of the tricks that you'd use on April Fools really. We had no idea about this tradition in Spain until our local barman played a trick on us with our drinks one 28th December.

New Year

Although the Medieval and Tudor New Year officially started on Lady Day, 25th March, the Roman tradition of New Year and the Roman custom of gift giving at this time was celebrated on 1st January. The Hymns and Carols of Christmas website has published an excerpt from "Brand's Popular Antiquities Of Great Britain" in which it explains that an essay on New Year's gifts from a December 1692 "Monthly Miscellany" stated that the custom of New Year's gift-giving came from the Druids. It stated that "the ancient Druids, with great ceremonies, used to scrape off from the outside of oaks the misleden, which they consecrated to their great Tutates, and then distributed it to the people thro' the Gauls, on account of the great virtues which they attributed, to it; whence New Year's Gifts are still called in some parts of France Guy-l' en-neuf." I looked up this French phrase and mistletoe in French is "le gui" and "Au gui l'an neuf" is another way of saying Happy New Year. The miscellany also explained that "We rejoice with our friends after having escaped the dangers that attend every year, and congratulate each other for the future by presents and wishes for the happy continuance of that course."

In his book "Stations of the Sun", Ronald Hutton writes of how Henry III, in the 13th century, was criticised for extorting New Year's gifts from his subjects, and that in the 15th century Henry VI's gifts to family members included tablets of gold studded with jewels, a ruby set in a gold ring, and a crucifix decorated with pearls and sapphires. C. M. Woolgar in "The Great Household in Late Medieval England" gives examples of other New Year's gifts in the medieval period:

- 1286 – The gold pitcher with enamel work and precious stones given to Eleanor of Castile by her husband King Edward I in 1286 "was, at nearly £50, by some way the most expensive object in the account for jewels that year."
- 1289 – Queen Eleanor of Castile purchased 72 paternosters, i.e. rosaries, from a goldsmith, which must have been new year's gifts.
- 1407 – Richard Mitford, Bishop of Salisbury, gave a gift of 4d to each of the pages in his household, "with eight knives for his boys and others of his chapel, and 24 purses." He also purchased 72 rings and two brooches for New Year's gifts.

- 1414 – The Earl of March, who spent New Year with Henry V that year, bought six rings, which must have been New Year's gifts as Woolgar notes that they were listed with cash gifts he gave. Woolgar also notes the gifts he received – two falcons.

“Brand's Popular Antiquities Of Great Britain” states that “Perhaps the most splendid New Year's Gifts ever made in early time were those which Wolsey presented to Henry VIII. One of these was a gold cup, richly chased and engraved, of the value of £117 17s. 6d.”

Woolgar writes of how the household ordinances of Henry VII give account of the rewards given to those who brought the king's gift to the queen and the queen's gift to the king. Barbara Harris, in “English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550”, notes that Henry VIII sent New Year's gifts to many of his queen's servants and that these gifts, combined with wardships and land that he occasionally granted them too, indicated that kings “attached considerable value to the service their queens received from their ladies and gentlewomen and to the women's contribution to the success of the court as the political and visual center of the monarchy.”

Ronald Hutton writes of how the ordinances of Henry VII state that the king would receive his gifts in the morning after putting on his shoes and that trumpets would sound to signal the arrival of the gifts. In the “Royalle Book”, a manuscript of ceremonies and services at court which once belonged to Peter Le Neve, Henry VII's Norroy king at arms, there are instructions for the ceremony associated with the king's New Year's gifts which is thought to have been written by one of Henry VII's esquires or gentleman ushers:

“On New-year's Day the king ought to wear his surcoat, and his kirtle, and his pane of ermine; and, if his pane be five ermine deep, a duke shall be but four; an earl three. And the king must have on his head his hat of estate, and his sword before him; the chamberlain, the steward, the treasurer, the comptroller, and the ushers, before the sword; and before them all other lords, save only them that wear robes; and they must follow the king; and the greatest estate to lead the queen. [...] On New Year's Day in the morning, the king, when he cometh to his foot-schete, an usher of the chamber to be ready at the chamber door, and say 'Sire, here is a year's gift coming from the queen.' And then he shall say, 'Let it come in, sire.' And then the usher shall let in the messenger with the gift, and then, after that, the greatest estate's servant that is come, each one after the other according to their estate; and after that done, all other lords and ladies after their estate. And all this while the king must sit at his foot-schete. This done, the chamberlain shall send for the treasurer of the chamber, and charge the treasurer to give the messenger that bringeth the queen's gift, if he be a knight, ten marks, and if he be an esquire eight marks, or at the least one hundred shillings: and the king's mother one hundred shillings; and those that come from the king's brothers and sisters, each of them, six marks: and to every duke and duchess, each of them, five marks; and every earl and countess forty shillings. These be the rewards of them that bring gifts. Whether the king will do more or less, this hath been done. And this done the king goeth to make him ready, and go to his service in what array he liketh.

The queen, in likewise, to sit at her foot-schete, and her chamberlain, and ushers to do as the king's did. Her rewards to them that bring her gifts shall not be so good as the king's.”

(From The Year Book of Daily Recreation and Information: Concerning Remarkable Men and Manners, Times and Seasons... by William Hone)

So, as you can see from that description, the king sat on his bed of state in his chamber and received the queen's gift first and then gifts from nobles in order of the rank of the gift giver. Each messenger being rewarded according to the status of the gift-giver. As the herald notes, the ceremony for the queen was the same. And after the gift-giving, the king would get ready for mass.

Woolgar writes of how “music was an essential accompaniment to the start of New Year's Day, with musicians playing at the door of the chamber of the fifth Earl of Northumberland and his wife, and then at those of his sons.” Hutton also writes of this and goes on to say that “similar scenes were probably enacted at the residences of other Tudor magnates, while gentry exchanged presents with their servants and often despatched them to local aristocrats.” He also describes how religious houses gave gifts to their staff and to each other, and schoolboys at Eton played games in order to win gifts and presented their masters and their fellow schoolmates with verses as gifts. What we don't know, as Hutton points out, is whether New Year's gifts were exchanged between commoners or how far down the social scale the tradition went.

It is unclear how long the tradition of New Year's gift-giving lasted but in the early 19th century book “The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth”, John Nichols wrote that “the last remains of this custom at court were, that, till within these few years, the Chaplains in waiting on New Year's day had each a crown-piece laid under their plates at dinner.

As well as gift-giving, there was merry-making. Hutton describes how James IV of Scotland would be greeted with a New Year ballad sung by the clerks of his chapel and Henry VII held a banquet at noon, processing to it with a sword of state carried before him. It was a time for more feasting and celebration.

Epiphany

For many people around the world today, the Christmas period is over with New Year, but Christmas in the Tudor period ran for twelve days: Christmas Day to Epiphany on 6th January, the feast day which was a commemoration and celebration of the visit of the Magi to the Christ child.

Twelfth Night and Epiphany were marked with feasting and entertainment. But when exactly is "Twelfth Night"? Is it 5th or 6th January? There isn't really any agreement over this and an article in The Guardian newspaper examined this question:

“So when is Twelfth Night? The Epiphany – the Christian feast to mark the visit of the three kings (or Magi) to the baby Jesus – is 6 January. If you count from Christmas Day, the 12th night is 5 January – the eve of the Epiphany. But some say you should count the 12 days after Christmas, which takes you to the 6th. People treat either the 5th or 6th as the day to celebrate, and there are equal claims that each is Twelfth Night...”

And the Oxford Dictionary gives two definitions for “Twelfth Night”:

“1. 6 January, the feast of the Epiphany.

1.1 Strictly, the evening of 5 January, the eve of the Epiphany and formerly the twelfth and last day of Christmas festivities.”

In *The English Year*, Steve Roud writes of how “in earlier times, 'Twelfth Night' meant 5 January, i.e. the Eve of Twelfth Day, in the same way as Christmas Eve precedes Christmas Day. But nowadays, most people regard 'Twelfth Night' as meaning the evening of Twelfth Day (6 January).”

In Spain, the night of 5th January, is very special. The tradition of Father Christmas, or Papa Noel, has crept in over recent years, but it is 5th/6th January when children here get most of their presents. During the night of the 5th the Reyes, the Kings, visit homes and leave present for good children. Those who've been naughty might be left coal instead. In our village, the Kings arrive on the back of a truck and villagers process behind them through the cobbled streets collecting the sweets that they throw out to the crowd. Everyone then goes to our local theatre where the children are called up to the stage one-by-one to be given a present from the King. It is a lovely tradition.

On 6th January, Spanish children enjoy their gifts and there is feasting. Families also enjoy the Roscón de Reyes (Kings' Cake). In the one we buy from the supermarket or baker, there are two objects hidden in the cream filling: a bean and a king. The instructions included with the cake explain that the person who finds the bean has to pay for the cake and the person who finds the king is crowned King of Epiphany and must wear the paper crown that is included with the cake. The person crowned king will enjoy good luck for the rest of the year. This Epiphany cake is a tradition that Tudor people would recognise because they also shared a Twelfth Night Cake. Inside this cake was hidden a dried pea, or bean, and the person who found the bean/pea in their slice of cake became the Lord of Misrule, or King, at the feast. Games were played, carols were sung and people also went wassailing to spread goodwill throughout their community.

Robert Herrick, the 17th century poet, wrote of the celebrations in his poem "Twelve Night":

"Now, now the mirth comes,
With the cake full of plums,
Where Bean's the king of the sport here;
Besides we must know,
The pea also
Must revel, as queen, in the court here.

Begin then to choose,
This night as ye use,
Who shall for the present delight here,
Be a king by the lot,
And who shall not
Be Twelfth-day queen for the night here.

Which known, let us make
Joy-sops with the cake;
and let not a man then be seen here,
Who, unurg'd, will not drink,

To the base from the brink,
A health to the king and queen here.

Next crown the bowl full
With the gentle lamb's-wool
Add sugar, nutmeg, and ginger,
With store of ale too;
And thus ye must do
To make the wassail a swinger.

Give then to the king
And queen wassailing;
And, though with ale ye be wet here,
Yet part ye from hence
As free from offense,
As when ye innocent met here.”

A.H. Bullen, in “A Christmas garland; carols and poems from the fifteenth century to the present time” (1885), writes “A bean and pea were enclosed in the Twelfth-cake. When the cake was divided, he who got the slice containing the bean was king of the feast, and the girl to whose lot the pea fell was queen”, so there were obviously variations of the tradition.

As I said, in Tudor times Epiphany was a time for celebration, a last blast before getting back to normal, and it was celebrated in style at the royal court with masques, pageants and plays. In 1494, in the reign of Henry VII, there was a great banquet followed by “a playe, with a pageant of St George with a castle” and then a disguising and dance. At Epiphany in 1512, in Henry VIII's reign, something very exciting happened at court, an entertainment that chronicler Edward Hall described as “a thyng not seen afore in Englande”. It was a “masque”:

“On the daie of the Epiphanie at night, the kyng with a. xi. other were disguised, after the maner of Italie, called a maske, a thyng not seen afore in Englande, thei were appareled in garmentes long and brode, wrought all with gold, with visers and cappes of gold & after the banket doen, these Maskers came in, with sixe gentlemen disguised in silke bearyng staffe torches, and desired the ladies to daunce, some were content, and some that knewe the fashion of it refused, because it was not a thyng commonly seen. And after thei daunced and commoned together, as the fashion of the Maske is, thei tooke their leaue and departed, and so did the Quene, and all the ladies.”

In *The Stations of the Sun*, Ronald Hutton writes of how “it was the tradition by 1500 for the monarchs to make offerings symbolizing their spiritual kinship with the Wise Men”, and he writes of how Henry VII made offerings of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and that James IV gave three gold crowns. This tradition is carried on today. The official website of the British Monarchy states

that “A service of Holy Communion is celebrated on 6 January (Epiphany) each year in the Chapel Royal, St James's Palace, when an offering of gold, frankincense and myrrh is made on behalf of The Queen” and it also says that “According to Psalm 72, the Wise Men were three kings, so it was fitting that an earthly king should make an offering at Epiphany. It became a crown-wearing day in the 15th century, and the Sovereign always attended the ceremony in person.”

It is often said that you should take your Christmas decorations down by Twelfth Night and that if you don't then you have to leave them up all year. However, fear not, medieval tradition is on your side and you can keep them up until Candlemas Eve (1st February).

Plough Monday

Plough Monday was the first Monday after 6th January and was the day on which things would return to normal after the Twelve Days of Christmas and people would return to work. It was also the first day of the new agricultural year and 16th century poet and farmer Thomas Tusser wrote:

“Plough Monday, next after that Twelfth tide is past

Bids out with the plough, the worst husband is last.”

Ronald Hutton, in his book *Stations of the Sun*, writes of how there are records from the 15th century of ploughs being dragged around the streets "while money was collected behind it for parish funds" and that this money might be spent on the “upkeep” of plough lights, which were candles that were kept burning in church at this time to bring the Lord's blessing on those working in the fields. Steve Roud, in *The English Year* writes of how there was often a 'common' or 'town' plough that was loaned out to locals who could not afford to buy their own and that this would be kept at the parish church. Roud notes: "its presence presumably gave the opportunity for services based on blessing the plough and praying for success in the coming year".

The Reformation put an end to the practice of plough lights, because the lighting of these candles to bring a blessing was seen as superstitious, but the practice of processing around towns and villages with the plough continued. In his 19th century book *The Every Day Book*, William Hone wrote of the Plough Monday traditions that had survived to his time:

“In some parts of the country, and especially in the north, they draw the plough in procession to the doors of the villagers and townspeople. Long ropes are attached to it, and thirty or forty men, stripped to their clean white shirts, but protected from the weather by waistcoats beneath, drag it along. Their arms and shoulders are decorated with gay-coloured ribbons, tied in large knots and bows, and their hats are smartened in the same way. They are usually accompanied by an old woman, or a boy dressed up to represent one; she is gaily bedizened, and called the Bessy. Sometimes the sport is assisted by a humorous countryman to represent a fool. He is covered with ribbons, and attired in skins, with a depending tail, and carries a box to collect money from the spectators. They are attended by music, and Morris-dancers when they can be got; but there is always a sportive dance with a few lasses in all their finery, and a superabundance of ribbons. When this merriment is well managed, it is very pleasing. The money collected is spent at night in conviviality [...]

[...]Then Plough Monday reminded them of their business, and on the morning of that day, the men and maids strove who should show their readiness to commence the labours of the years, by rising the earliest. If the plough-man could get his whip, his plough-staff, hatched, or any field implement,

by the fireside, before the maid could get her kettle on, she lost her Shrove-tide cock to the men. Thus did our forefathers strive to allure youth to their duty, and provided them innocent mirth as well as labour. On Plough Monday night the farmer gave them a good supper and strong ale. In some places, where the ploughman went to work on Plough Monday, if, on his return at night, he came with his whip to the kitchen-hatch, and cried "Cock on the dunghill," he gained a cock for Shrove Tuesday."