



## History of Christmas Traditions

### Christmas Cards

The exchanging of homemade Christmas Cards was started in England in 1840, with the start of the first postal service, the Penny Post. The Penny Post was set up by Sir Henry Cole and he commissioned a London artist, John Calcott Horsely, to produce the first commercially printed Christmas card in 1843.

The first Christmas card had a family party scene and scenes of the poor being clothed and fed on it. The card read “A merry Christmas and a happy New Year to you.” The tradition took off over the next few years as printing methods improved and by 1860 large numbers of cards were being produced and sent.

### Christmas Tree

The Christmas tree tradition has its origin in pagan times when evergreen were symbolic of new life and hope for the coming year.

A plaque in the town square in Riga, Latvia declares that the first “New Year’s Tree” was to be found there in 1510. At around the same time, it is said that the German Theologian Martin Luther was walking in an evergreen forest at night and was so struck by the beauty of the stars shining through the branches that he brought a tree home and decorated it with candles.

The first record of a decorated evergreen tree associated with Christmas time comes from Bremen in Germany in 1570, decorated with fruit and nuts, which were then given to the local children on Christmas Day.

Many people believe that it was Queen Victoria's husband Prince Albert who introduced the Christmas tree tradition, already widespread in his native German but records dating from 1800 show that the Queen's grandmother, Charlotte, also a German, brought the custom to King George III's court. It was certainly during Victoria's reign, however, that the Christmas tree became popular outside the royal family in Britain, with Prince Albert donating Christmas trees to schools and illustrations of the royal family with their tree appearing in magazines.

## Christmas Bells

Bells being rung on Christmas morning have been and are done to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

A legend that has been told is that the bells were rung for an hour before midnight on the first Christmas Eve, this was said to have been done to warm the forces of darkness of the imminent birth of Jesus. At the stroke of midnight, the peal of the bells changed pitch into a joyous peal.

## Candles

Candles were lit so it is said to symbolize the divine light that was believed to illuminate the world. Another tradition is that candles were meant to recall the lights people lit in their windows at the time of Jesus Christ's birth, so as to let Mary and Joseph know that they would be welcome in their homes.

## Christmas Caroling

Carols are said to have been introduced into church services in the twelfth century by St. Francis of Assisi. At first they were sung at times of general celebration but later they became associated specifically with the Nativity and were sung at Christmas.

Caroling can be linked to ancient Rome and the Mummers, who were troupes of singers and dancers that went from house to house during the winter festival of Saturnalia. In the Middle Ages, wassailing, which comes from the old English term “waes hael” meaning “be well” was practiced by peasants who visited their feudal lords at the beginning of each year to sing and bless their homes in exchange for wassail, a hot, spiced punch, and other favors.

## Poinsettia

The poinsettia is named after Joel R. Poinsett, who served as the USA's first ambassador to Mexico, from 1825-1829.

A Mexican legend tells how the poinsettia became a Christmas flower. A poor peasant girl was anxious to bring a gift in honor of the Virgin Mary to the Christmas Eve service. She had nothing to give so she went with nothing. On the way she met an angel, who told her to pick some weeds. She did this. As by a miracle they were transformed into the bright scarlet 'flowers'. Ever since poinsettias have been popular decorations for churches and homes during the Christmas festival.

## Christmas Stockings

The tradition of hanging up stockings can be traced back to Germany and Holland.

German folklore tells of the god Odin's annual Yuletide hunting party. Children would leave out their shoes filled with straw or sugar for Odin's flying horse. Odin would reward the children by leaving small gifts in exchange.

In Holland during the 16<sup>th</sup> century children would leave clogs filled with hay near the fireplace for Santa's reindeer. Santa would then

leave behind treats but if you have been naughty you might get a lump of coal in your clog.

Eventually children began hanging up their stocking to dry by the fireplace and Santa would leave behind treats for good little girls and boys.

## Christmas Yule Log

The origins of the Yule log can be traced back to the Norsemen of northern Europe. Jol or Jule, pronounced “Yule” was a festival celebrated on the Winter Solstice in honor Jolnir also known as Odin. A great feast would take place around bonfires and fires would be lit in hearths.

This tradition spread to other parts of Europe. Households would venture into the woods on Christmas Eve and cut a log which was taken home with much singing and merry making along the way. The log would be put on the fire which would be kept burning for twelve days. It was believed to bring health and productivity to the family and their crops for the coming year and protect them from evil spirits. When the fire was finally put out a small piece of wood would be kept and used to light the next year’s log. Often the ashes would be scattered over the fields in order to ensure fertility.

Later on, the Yule log was used to decorative centerpiece for Christmas table and as stoves replaced the giant household hearths; the pastry or chocolate logs we are familiar with today came into fashion.