



A brief look at the history of Christmas

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Today we take Christmas and all its trappings for granted and it is hard to believe that it has not always been the case.

In 1645, Christmas was banned in England by Cromwell's Long Parliament and the Puritans. In 1791, the American Constitution's separation of Church and State reduced the holiday's religious and political importance; the United States Congress sat in session on Christmas Day for the next 60 years.

By the 19th century the Victorians were ready to 'reinvent' Christmas. They wanted the old traditions of Christmas merriment and good cheer. But society had changed. The Industrial Revolution was as inimical to the spirit and practice of Christmas as were the Puritans. Re-capturing of the good old days of Christmas was going to be difficult. Were it not for people like Clement Moore, Washington Irving, Charles Dickens and Davies Gilbert, it may never have happened.

The first state to declare Christmas a legal holiday was Alabama in 1836. A significant result of this 'legislation' was the States' recognition of 25 December as Christmas Day. Previously, celebrations took place at varying times during the month, particularly 6 December, St Nicholas's day, or 6 January, Epiphany.

Christmas cards

Christmas cards have been a part of our Christmas traditions for well over a century. They bring wishes of joy and health to those we know and love. Christmas cards give us the opportunity to honour our intentions to keep in touch with an old friend or relative. They bring joy to those who receive them, not just because of a beautiful illustration or inscription, but because they all imply that you are thought of.

Although many early Christmas cards have a strong German influence, the invention of our modern day Christmas card can be deemed an essentially English invention. New Year's greetings date back as far as the 1400s, but printed Christmas greetings developed later.

Credit for designing the Christmas card goes to John Callcott Horsley, a well-known painter who designed the first Christmas card in December 1843 at the request of his friend Sir Henry Cole, founding director of the South Kensington Museum (renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1899).

At Christmas time Sir Henry, as was the custom among his peers, would handwrite greetings and best wishes to his family, friends, and acquaintances (the origin of the 'Christmas Letter'). But, being very involved in various activities, Cole had little time to write countless personal Christmas greetings. He asked Horsley to produce for him a Christmas card with a single message that could be duplicated and sent to all on his list.

The first edition of cards depicts a family party with the legend, *A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you* was lithographed, hand-coloured and printed by Jobbins of Warwick Court, London on stiff cardboard, 5 1/8 by 3 1/4 inches. Each was then hand-coloured in dark sepia by a professional colourer named Mason. It also states that it was 'Published at Summerly's Home Treasury Office, 12 Old Bond Street, London', by his friend and associate Joseph Cundall. The cards he didn't use were sold from Summerly's for one shilling each. According to Cundall, 'many copies were sold, but possibly not more than 1 000'. Only a dozen of the originals are known to exist today. One of these went on auction on 24 November 2001; it sold for a record £22 500. It was signed and sent by Sir Henry to his 'Granny and Auntie Char'.

However, other cards quickly followed. In 1844, WCT Dobson, the head of the School of Design in Birmingham, drew and sent a sketch as a token of appreciation at Christmas, in lieu of his usual Christmas letter.

English artist William Maw Egley produced a card in 1848 much the same as Horsley's, with a similar rustic frame of gnarled wood and ivy. This was the first appearance of mistletoe and holly on a Christmas card. The greeting was the same but with older spelling, *Christmass* (Christ's Mass).

By the 1850s improved printing techniques allowed cards to be inexpensively reproduced, and in multiple colours. Between 1851 and 1859 the firm of Cassell, Petter and Galpin published a small series of Christmas cards.

At first, designs were simple, but as technology advanced, new subjects evolved. By the 1860s, popular designs were Christmas feasts, church bells, snowbound mail-coaches and turkey and plum puddings. In 1862, Charles Goodall & Son, Camden Town, London, introduced the first broad selection of Christmas cards to the British public. These cards were ornate, usually in the shape of a basket of flowers. Ribbons were attached that opened the flowers when pulled, revealing messages of health, happiness, and goodwill. Others had a cord attached so the owner could hang the cards for display.

As the postal system developed and improved, people liked the idea of sending cards through the mail. With the

The Christmas pudding evolved from the medieval spicy porridge called 'frumenty'





Clockwise from top left:
Carols became popular Christmas
hymns during the fifteenth century

The first printed Christmas card
designed in 1843 by John Calcott
Horsley

A silk-fringed American Christmas
card published by Louis Prang in
Boston in 1888

In Mexico the Christmas tree is
decorated in bright joyful colours
and a nativity scene with scenes
of village life are placed beneath it

In the 1930s a series of advertisements
created this delightful image of
Father Christmas

A detail of a 15th-century Italian
altarpiece by Gentile da Fabriano,
showing the adoration of the Magi.





growing interest in Christmas cards a new industry was created. Sales figures were as quick to rise as were the number of designs of cards. Popularity of cards grew so quickly that by the 1880s sales figures were in the millions. Christmas cards were usually distributed through booksellers and stationery shops. In the 1880s they could be found for sale in tobacconists and toy shops, and many drapery shops.

American cards

The Christmas card was all but unknown in the United States (US) during this period. They were relatively well known in England by 1860, but the custom had yet to make inroads in the US. The first such Christmas greetings in the US are thought to be those issued by New York engraver Richard Pease in 1851. It was described by George Buday: 'The design includes the features of a small, rather elf-like Santa Claus with fur trimmed cap, sleigh and reindeer. In addition to the central *A merry Christmas and a happy New Year* the ornamented lettering includes *To* and *From* with spaces to be filled by the sender.' Only one example exists today, and is in the archives of the RustCraft Company.

However, it was not until Louis Prang of Boston introduced a line of cards in 1875 that they became widely used in the US.

Louis Prang, born in Poland, came to America in 1850 and went into the printing business. He perfected chromolithography, a process by which images are printed in colour with a series of lithographic zinc plates. The process allowed reproduction of up to 32 colours in a single picture. Prang's extraordinary talent led to the successful reproduction of the richness of oil paintings on greeting cards and art prints.

At the Vienna Exposition in 1873, he distributed 20 000 small business cards with designs of flowers on a tinted or black background with a ribbon scroll for the name. It was the suggestion of the wife of his London agent that the ribbon or scroll on the cards be filled in with a Christmas greeting and be sold as a Christmas card.

The first Prang Christmas cards appeared in England in 1873 but were not sold in America until 1875 (two years after the introduction of the 'penny post' card in the US). They were an instant success; he could not meet the demand. As a result, Prang would henceforth be known as 'the father of the American Christmas card'. And from then on, working from his shop in Massachusetts, he concentrated on manufacturing Christmas cards of the highest quality in America, developing a market that he will dominate until 1890. At his peak he was printing over five million cards per year.

Victorian cards

Victorian Christmas cards came in many sizes, shapes and topics. Some were square, rectangular, oval, circular, or crescent. Others were shaped like bells, shoes, or

fans. Designs included folding cards, fringed, embossed, or iridescent. The greeting on the card could be a poem, a verse, a carol, or a simple sentiment. Some had to be turned upside-down in order to reveal the message.

Flowers from the countryside were immensely popular and flying butterflies among stalks of wheat and even insects landing on ripening blackberries were included by the early artists of Christmas cards.

Other very early Christmas cards had attractive birds on them together with their nests and eggs. Red-breasted robins were common on Christmas cards, first appearing in the 1850s. The robin was considered a symbol of peace. In 1851 Cassell, Petter and Galpin (London) issued the first set of cards with angels and bell ringers.

The materials used to produce Christmas cards became just as varied as their shapes and verses. Besides the stock paper, Victorian Christmas cards used satin, silk, plush and brocade as much as it did ribbons, lace and embroidery. One card is known to consist of 750 pieces of material stitched together. Gold trim was first used in 1858. Frosted cards came about in the 1870s and the most popular silk fringe lined cards made their first appearance in the early 1880s. During this era we see many different portrayals of Father Christmas. St Nicholas first appeared in the 1850s and remains popular into the 21st century, both as the Old-World St Nicholas and the New-World Santa Claus.

In the 1860s and 1870s, Victorians favoured Christmas cards with illustrations of children as small adults, with all the coyness and guile of their elders.

Other designs included landscapes, seascapes, floral, animals, or fairies dancing on a pond. Domestic animals were also popular on cards, in particular cats in comic poses around the household and dogs in anthropomorphic postures, some wearing funny hats or posting letters.

Another favourite were cards with perfumed sachets. The sachets were very elegant, often made of satin, silk, or gold paper lace. They were padded with tissue paper or cotton and scented with a few drops of perfume. In 1876 Marcus Ward produced a card with a simple design and a sachet of powder.

In the 1880s Christmas cards evolved to meet the tastes of the late Victorians. With the coming of the gilded age, Christmas cards became more and more elaborate. Some of the most popular cards were quite bizarre novelty cards with silk or feather fringe, glitter adornments, lace, tinsel, and velvet pieces. A favourite was the mechanical card with moving parts. A person could pull a tab or a string to make figures move and reveal a hidden message. Christmas trees began appearing on Christmas cards in the late 1890s.

Despite the fact that Christmas is centered on a religious event, most of the popular cards did not have a religious theme. Religious cards began to appear in the 1890s. Some Christmas cards featured angels in the snow, cherubs, or a manger scene.

The how and why of choosing a Christmas card have varied very little since their introduction. Business owners were giving away Christmas-themed calling cards and other Christmas memorabilia before the introduction of the Christmas cards in 1843, and continue to do so today. Companies are increasingly interested in using Christmas cards as an extension of their corporate branding, with traditional

A nineteenth-century Christmas card printed by Louis Prang, The 'father' of the American card industry



Victorian Christmas cards were very decorative and often used images of children

imagery such as the Three Wise Men being replaced by logos.

Recommended e-card sites

Today you can spread joy and good cheer and bring smiles to faces by sending a Christmas card by e-mail. Go to the web sites, *Christmas e-greetings* or *123 Greetings* to send a personal e-card.

Santa Claus

Father Christmas or Santa Claus is portrayed as a bearded, portly gift-giver who wore a scarlet robe lined with fur.

The first appearance of Santa was on 3 January 1863, when Thomas Nast, a cartoonist, did a political cartoon of Santa entitled *Santa in camp* for the cover of **Harper's Weekly**. Nast's was the first regularly-illustrated Father Christmas in the now-traditional red suit and big leather belt. It was also Nast that established Santa's workshop in 1879 with a drawing of a girl putting a letter in the mailbox, addressed to St Claus, North Pole. In 1925, since grazing reindeer would not be possible in the North Pole, newspapers revealed that Santa Claus in fact lived in Finnish Lapland. Markus Rautio who compared the popular **Children's hour** on Finnish public radio, revealed the great secret for the first time in 1927: Santa Claus lives on Lapland's Korvatunturi, Ear Fell.

Santa's helpers were elves and the eight reindeers called, Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donder and Blitzen. In 1939 Rudolph, the ninth reindeer with a red and shiny nose was invented by Robert L May, a writer for the Montgomery Ward Company. In 1949 Johnny Marks wrote the song about Rudolph and Gene Autry recorded it; it went to number one on the hit parade and sold 2 000 000 copies.

The legend of Santa Claus will continue to grow over time. Many additions have been made. One of these includes a wife, invented by Katherine Lee Bates in 1899.

Santa is known throughout the world in many different names, such as: Saint Nikolaas or Sinter Klaas (Dutch), Father Christmas (English) Kris Kringle (Germans) Befana (Italians) Babushka, a grand motherly figure instead of a male (Russians). In Switzerland and Austria the Christkindl or Christ Child (a girl-angel) comes down from heaven bearing gifts. In France Santa Claus is known as Père Noël who travels with Pre Fouettard who reminds him of just how each child has behaved during the past year.

In Scandinavia Julenisse in Denmark Julemanden assisted by elves called Juul Nisse, in Norway Julesvenn, in Sweden

Christmas card facts

- * Christmas card sales surged in the 1940s due to family members being overseas during World War II.
- * During the 1980s, Santa lost weight to fit in with health-conscious consumer trends.
- * Christmas card sales soared dramatically in 2001 due to the threat of terrorism and the underlined importance of family and affection.
- * Consumers in the United States of America bought an average of seven billion Christmas cards in 2002.
- * 61 percent of all card sales are during the Christmas season.

Jultomen, a gnome who lives in the barn.

In Japan less than 1% of the population is Christian but that hasn't stopped them from adopting many Western Christmas traditions, and patterned after Santa Claus they have their own gift-bearer, Hoteiosho.

Joulupukki is the name of Father Christmas in Finland which literally means Yule Buck. In Brazil and Peru, Papa Noel and in Costa Rica, Colombia and parts of Mexico, el Nino Jesus.

Christmas carols

Christmas carols and hymns never fail to lift the spirits - and require no baking, no tree stands, and no extension cords.

Legend tells that in Bethlehem, people heard the angels sing one time in unison to announce the birth of the Christ Child. The words thought to ring out at that moment were: *Gloria in exelsis Deo, et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis*. Therefore, this is considered to be the first Christmas carol.

Christmastime music began with the litanies, or musical prayers, of the Christian Church. An early historian wrote that in approximately 100 AD, the Bishop of Rome urged his people to sing 'in celebration of the birthday of our Lord'. By 400 AD, priests would stroll around their parishes on Christmas evening singing these Latin hymns.

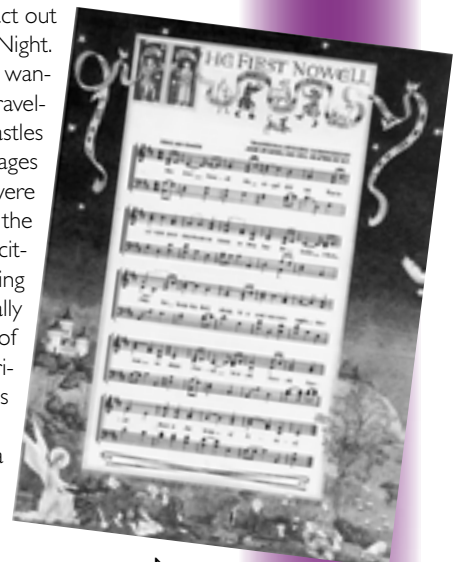
St Francis of Assisi is credited with being the 'Father of Caroling'. In 1223 the saint placed a crèche (miniature Nativity scene) in a hermitage at Greechio, Italy. After this many churches began displaying such scenes at Christmas and soon people began to act out the events of the Holy Night.

By the Middle Ages, wandering minstrels were travelling from hamlets to castles performing their carols. Later still, villages had their own bands of 'waits'. Waits were originally watchmen who patrolled the streets and byways of the old walled cities, keeping guard against fire and singing to while away the night hours. Eventually the term was used to describe groups of musicians who sang and played at various civic events during the Christmas season.

The word 'carol' derives from a Greek dance called a *choraulein*, which was accompanied by flute music. The



A wood engraving of the famous American cartoonist, Thomas Nast who crystallised the image we have of Santa Claus today. His Bavarian origins are evident in the style of his work



A beautiful illustration in medieval style by the artist Jane Lydbury enhances this popular Christmas carol





Queen Victoria's husband Prince Albert (right) did much to popularise the Christmas tree in England

dance later spread throughout Europe and became particularly popular by the French, who replaced the flute music with singing. Originally, people performed carols on many occasions during the year. By the 1600s, carols involved singing only and Christmas had become the chief holiday for these songs. Counted among the most favoured of non-religious carols are *Jingle Bells* and *White Christmas*, both of which first appeared as popular songs in the US.

Adeste Fideles, more commonly known as *Oh come, all ye faithful*, is not strictly a Christmas carol but a Latin hymn of praise. It was composed by John Reading in the 1700s. The tune first appeared in the collection known as *Cantus Diversi* in 1751. The most familiar English version of this carol was translated by Frederick Oakeley, but people sing it in many parts of the world and in many languages.

The first Noel is unknown in origin, except that it is believed to have come from the West of England. It first appeared in 1833 in **Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern**, a collection of seasonal songs gathered by WB Sandys.

God rest ye merry, gentlemen is an old English rhyme and dates at least as far back as the 1500s. It is a carol of which the British people are particularly fond.

Good Christian men, rejoice was originally a very old Latin Christmas song called *In Dulci Jubilo*. John Mason Neale translated the words around the middle of the 1800s. The melody is believed to be German in origin and dates from the 1300s or earlier.

Hark! The herald Angels sing was written by Charles Wesley (brother of John Wesley) in 1739. The carol originally began with: *Hark, how all the welkin rings*. The tune for this song was taken from the *Festeng* by Mendelssohn.

It came upon a midnight clear was written by Edmund H Sears in 1849. At the time, Sears was a pastor in Wayland, Massachusetts. The music was provided by Richard S Willis. Uzziah Burnap arranged this accompaniment to the lyrics in 1859.

The earliest extant English Christmas carol, *A child is boren amonges man* is found in a set of sermon notes written by a Franciscan friar before 1350.

The words to one the most famous Christmas carols, *Silent Night, Holy Night*, were written by reverend Joseph Mohr in 1816 (*Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!*) with the music by Franz Gruber in 1818. Verses 1-3 was translated by Bishop John Freeman Young (1820-1885), a Maine native who served Episcopal parishes in Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, New York and Florida. Verse

4 is anonymous, although sometimes erroneously attributed to Bishop Young.

Christmas trees

There is a widely-repeated story that in 1510, Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, was the first to light a Christmas tree with candles in a Riga forest, located in Latvia. While coming home one dark winter's night near Christmas, he was struck with the beauty of the starlight shining through the branches

of a small fir tree outside his home. To recreate the starlight, he is said to have attached candles to the branches of his indoor Christmas tree.

Legend has it that he used the triangular shape of the fir tree to describe the Holy Trinity of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The converted people began to revere the fir tree as God's Tree, as they had previously revered the Oak. By the 12th century it was being hung, upside-down, from ceilings at Christmas-time in Central Europe, as a symbol of Christianity.

In 1610, tinsel is invented in Germany. At that time real silver was used, and machines were invented which pulled the silver out into the wafer thin strips for tinsel. Silver was durable, but tarnished quickly, especially with candlelight. Attempts were made to use a mixture of lead and tin starting in the 1920s, but this was heavy and tended to break under its own weight. Mylar came into widespread use in the 1960s because of the danger of lead poisoning. In many homes, strings of silver or gold garland - which was first developed in the 1890s - have replaced the traditional tinsel.

In Christmas 1882, the world's first electrically-lighted Christmas tree was installed in the New York house of Thomas Edison's associate Edward H Johnson. The American patent for the electric Christmas tree lights was obtained in 1882. General Electric began promoting Christmas tree lights in the 1890s; in 1895, President Grover Cleveland became the first President to use electric lights on a white Christmas tree.

Public outdoor Christmas trees with electric candles were introduced in 1904 in San Diego, in Finland in 1906, in Pasadena, California in 1909, and in New York, Boston and Cleveland in 1912.

In 1939, Corning became the first company to mass-produce machine-made Christmas tree glass ornaments; before this, all glass ornaments were hand-blown.

A variety of ingredients contribute towards making Christmas a special celebration. This information makes for interesting reading and should not be filed too deeply, as it would provide inspiration for many Christmas celebrations to come.

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