

A Victorian Christmas

No era in history however, has influenced the way in which we celebrate Christmas, quite as much as the Victorians.

Before Queen Victoria's reign started in 1837 nobody in Britain had heard of Santa Claus or Christmas Crackers. No Christmas cards were sent and most people did not have holidays from work. The wealth and technologies generated by the industrial revolution of the Victorian era changed the face of Christmas forever. Charles Dickens wrote a book '*A Christmas Carol*' in 1843, which actually encouraged rich Victorians to give money and gifts to the poor.

Queen Victoria and her family encouraged people to adopt a high moral tone. Charitable works by the wealthy and church going for all were an important part of Victorian life. The Christmas service was traditionally held in the Parish or village church with a Nativity scene often prominently displayed near the altar and the church decked out with greenery and candles. The whole family and all the members of their household were called by the pealing of the bells and carols were sung during the special Christmas service.



Although most people did not stop work until Christmas Eve, the traditional Victorian Christmas began with the making of the Advent wreath from ivy, laurel and holly and four candles, one to be lit on each of the four Sundays of Advent symbolizing faith, joy, love and peace. They may also have made an Advent calendar, with windows to be opened daily until Christmas Eve.

The custom of 26 December as "Boxing Day" also originated during the Victorian era. It was a day when the churches opened their alms boxes and distributed the money to the poor and so it evolved into the day for exchanging gifts and presents with family and friends. However, by the end of the 19th century Christmas Day had become established as the day for giving and receiving gifts making the day a charitable occasion as well as a family one.

The holidays - The wealth generated by the new factories and industries of the Victorian age allowed middle class families in England and Wales to take time off work and celebrate over two days, Christmas Day and Boxing Day. The newly invented railways allowed the country folk who had moved into the towns and cities in search of work to return home for a family Christmas.

Father Christmas / Santa Claus – Normally associated with the bringer of gifts, Father Christmas or Santa Claus come from two entirely separate traditions. Father Christmas was originally part of an old English midwinter festival, and he was normally dressed in green, a sign of the returning spring. St Nicholas came from America, where as Sinter Klass, he had been taken by Dutch settlers in the 17th Century. From the 1870s Sinter Klass became known in Britain as Santa Claus and with him came his unique gift and toy distribution system - reindeer and sleigh.



The Gifts - At the start of Victoria's reign, children's toys tended to be handmade and hence expensive, generally restricting availability to those rich enough to buy them. With factories however came mass production and this meant that games, dolls, books and clockwork toys all became more affordable. Toys were still quite costly so poor families would also give their children a few things such as an apple, orange and a few nuts. Christmas stockings first became popular from around 1870.

Christmas Cards - were introduced in 1843 by Sir Henry Cole following the introduction of the Penny Post in 1840. Before then it was the custom to write long, detailed letters to friends and family at Christmas. Cole commissioned an artist to design some cards which carried a short seasonal and had a thousand cards printed for sale in his art shop in London at one shilling each. The popularity of sending cards was given a boost in 1870 when a halfpenny postage rate was introduced as a result of the efficiencies brought about by the new railways.



The Tree - Queen Victoria's German husband Prince Albert helped to make the Christmas tree as popular in Britain as they were in his native Germany, when he brought one to Windsor Castle in the 1840s. Before this people decorated what was called a 'Kissing Bough' - a large branch or a ball of evergreen leaves was hung up and decorated with fruit and small presents. The 'new' trees were decorated with bows, tinsel and candles and then in 1882 the first fairy lights are said to have appeared, when Edward H. Johnson - a friend of inventor Thomas Edison - had 80 tiny red, white and blue light bulbs made especially for his home Christmas tree. A special gift might be kept under the tree, but even in the wealthier homes children didn't receive large numbers of gifts.



The Crackers - Invented by Tom Smith, a London sweet maker in 1846. The original idea was to wrap his sweets in a twist of fancy coloured paper, but this developed and sold much better when he added love notes (mottos), paper hats, small toys and made them go off BANG!

Turkey Time - When Queen Victoria first came to the throne both chicken and turkey were too expensive for most people to enjoy. For Jersey people Christmas dinner would be roast beef with roast parsnips with a plum pudding afterwards. In northern England roast beef was also the traditional meal for Christmas dinner while in London and the south, goose was favourite although many poor people made do with rabbit. On the other hand, the Christmas Day menu for Queen Victoria and family in 1840 included both beef and a royal roast swan. As people became better off turkey became associated with Christmas dinners.

Carol Singers - Carol Singers and Musicians - 'The Waits' - visited houses singing and playing the new popular carols;

- 1843 - O Come all ye Faithful,
- 1848 - Once in Royal David's City,
- 1851 - See Amid the Winters Snow,
- 1868 - O Little Town of Bethlehem,
- 1883 - Away in a Manger.

