ATT Welcome: Christmas special

Welcomes



20 November 2024

Welcome to the festive miscellany that is the Christmas 2024 edition of the ATT Welcome Page.

While we buy our Christmas pudding from Betty’s (a Yorkshire institution) and so no longer follow the Victorian tradition of Stir-up Sunday, like most families the Batty household has its own Christmas rituals. It all kicks off with the Christmas tree weekend when we buy and decorate the tree. It is also the time when, usually in the cold and rain, I put up the outdoor lights along the gutters and in one of the trees in the garden. The following weekend is lunch with Jan’s sister and her children – and now all but one of us is retired this normally takes place mid-week. On Christmas eve, we collect the turkey from the butcher in the next village and then have lunch at one of the village pubs. All the jobs have been finished now – in my dreams! Then the big day itself, being woken up in the early hours, followed by breakfast with a bottle of champagne that we finish while preparing the food, the King’s speech at 3pm and a leisurely lunch.

Have you ever thought, though, where some of our Christmas traditions come from? Take the Christmas tree. We have been bringing greenery into our homes since at least Roman times but it was Queen Charlotte, wife of George III, who in 1800 is thought to have brought the first Christmas tree into the home (though this was a yew). We had to wait another 40 years before Prince Albert introduced the current practice of using a fir tree.

In fact, the Victorians are responsible for most of the customs that make up our idea of Christmas. Goose was traditionally the meat of choice as the centrepiece of the Christmas meal. It was not until Charles Dickens published *A Christmas Carol* that turkey gained favour. Christmas crackers were invented by Tom Smith, a London sweet seller, when in an effort to increase sales he began putting a small motto or riddle in his packaging. He later went on to invent the snap or crack which is now an essential feature, and where crackers get their name.

If someone speaks of Santa Claus or Father Christmas, it immediately conjures up an image of a large jolly man with a white beard dressed in a red suit, but did you know that he once wore a green suit? This is because the image we now have is, in fact, an amalgam of two or more characters. St Nicholas, the 3rd century bishop of Myra, was known for travelling round dressed in red robes giving gifts to the poor. The legend of St Nicholas arrived in Britain with the Normans and was quickly merged with the pagan winter festival legend of Father Christmas, who represented the coming of spring and wore a long green hooded cloak and a wreath made of holly, mistletoe or ivy.

Of course, children often leave a mince pie for Father Christmas. The mince pie has been around since at least the 13th century, but you would not recognise them as the same thing as our sweet treats. The original version included various minced meats, suet and chopped fruit. The Christmas pudding, originally meat based as well, can also be traced back to medieval times. Queen Victoria and her family had an interesting and dangerous twist on flaming the pudding in brandy. They would set fire to a bowl of raisins soaked in alcohol and then try to extract as many raisins as possible from the bowl. Please do not try this at home! Clearly, Victorian health and safety was not up to today’s standards…

Giving and receiving presents is one of the highlights of Christmas for many people. However, in the UK we are unusual in exchanging gifts on Christmas day. In most European countries, gifts are given on Christmas eve.

This year, although finances are tight, why not consider giving a small extra gift by donating to one of the many charities that help those less fortunate than we are. There are now 10,000 ATT members. If each of us were to give just £10 (less than the price of a couple of drinks in my local pub) to the charity of your choice, and do so under gift aid, this would raise £125,000 to help with their vital work. And if you're looking for suggestions of who to support, two vital charities working in our own field are TaxAid (www.taxaid.org.uk) and Tax Help for Older People (www.taxvol.org.uk)!

I hope you all have a very Happy Christmas.