

THE WORLD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
CHRISTMAS

GERRY BOWLER



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read to amuse their minds and for relaxation's sake: it is not possible to always abide in a serious mood." The Protestant and Catholic reformations of the 16th century put an end to most of this sort of merry-making.

Law, Christmas and the Governments in the United Kingdom have been legislating Christmas behaviour for centuries, and often not bothering to repeal laws that may have become outdated. The following laws were still in effect in the 1990s:

- The Holy Days and Fasting Days Act of 1551 makes church attendance obligatory on "the Nativity of our Lorde." The same law demands that everyone walk, not ride, to church and back. The police are empowered to confiscate any vehicle used for Christmas Day church-going, sell it, and distribute the proceeds to the poor.
- The Unlawful Games Act of 1541 forbids all sports on Christmas but archery, though leaping and vaulting have since been added as legitimate exercises.
- A law of 1625 specifies: "There shall be no meetings, assemblies or concourse of people out of their owne parishes for any sports or pastimes whatsoever."
- The Long Parliament of 1646 forbids Christmas dinners of more than three courses; it also bans the "abominable and idolatrous" dishes of mince pie and Christmas pudding.
- A 1667 act says, "Noe servant, artificer, workeman, labourer or other person whatsoever shall do or exercise any worldly labours, business or worke of their ordinary callings" on Christmas.
- An 1831 act forbids any hunting on Christmas.
- An 1847 law allows police to shut off roads around churches on Christmas and reroute vehicles seen to be approaching a church.
- The 1906 Act for the Better Prevention of Corruption limits the giving and receiving of presents by certain officials.

Also in Britain, one can't be served with a summons on Christmas or pressed for a legal time-limit expiring on Christmas, as it doesn't count in the calculation of days for most legal purposes.

Lebkuchen A spicy bar cookie, sometimes, but not always, made with ginger, very popular in the Nuremberg area of Germany, where it is a Christmas treat. Cut in seasonal shapes, it is often hung as a tree ornament.

Lectures, Christmas In the Christmas season of 1826, physicist Michael Faraday (1791-1867), inventor of the electric motor, arranged the first of a series of lectures on science at the Royal Institution. These talks were aimed at a juvenile audience and were meant to bring scientific discoveries to the popular mind. The lectures grew in popularity – 85,000 children are estimated to have attended Faraday's 19 series of lectures – and continue to this day. Since 1966 they have been televised by the BBC, drawing a million viewers every Christmas.

Lefse A Norwegian comfort food, these potato crêpes are often served at Christmas with meatballs or *lutefisk*. They can also be made with cinnamon and sugar and eaten for dessert.

"Legend of the Christmas Rose" A famous 1908 story by Swedish Nobel prize winner Selma Lagerlöf. The Robber Chief, his wife, and their young ones terrorize the neighbourhood. One day the mother and her children invade the grounds of an abbey. She boasts to the monks that every

Christmas Eve the forest transforms itself into a flower garden to commemorate the hour of the Lord's birth. The Abbot wishes to see the miracle and makes a bargain with the Archbishop: a rose from this Christmas garden in return for a pardon for the robber family. The miracle occurs, animals emerge peacefully, angels with harps appear, but the lay-brother accompanying the Abbot is frightened and with a curse and a shout ends the miraculous display. The Abbot dies on the spot, but a cutting he had taken from a white rose bush is transplanted to the abbey garden. The next Christmas Eve the rose blossoms and pardon is given to the bandit family. The miracle in the forest never re-occurs, except for those white blooms at Christmas.

The Lemon Drop Kid (1951) Bob Hope plays Sidney Melbourne (the Lemon Drop Kid), a gambler in a Damon Runyan world where everyone has a nickname – Brainy, No Thumbs Charlie, Gloomy Willie. He has to come up with \$10,000 to pay off a gangster by Christmas Eve and devises a scheme to defraud little old ladies before he has the predictable change of heart. The movie is memorable mostly for the holiday song "Silver Bells" by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans, which was nominated for an Oscar.

Leopard To the medieval mind the leopard was the offspring of a lion and a panther; consequently, in Christian art, such as depictions of the Adoration of the Magi, it came to represent the union of the humanity and the divinity of Jesus.

"Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!" A 1945 song by Sammy Cahn (1913-92) and Jule Styne (1905-94).

Letters to Santa Claus Of paramount importance to children around the world is how best to convey their Christmas wishes to the gift-bringer.



Letters to Santa Claus Santa Claus reflects on the naughty and the nice, by Thomas Nast.

For those who write letters (and millions do every year), the question is how to get them to the right address. Some children advocate putting them in a regular letter-box, and for them post offices around the world have made special arrangements. In the United States, the U.S. Postal Service's Operation Santa Claus takes charge, while for Canadian children Santa Claus or Père Noël can be reached at the North Pole, postal code H0H 0H0. The Danes believe that Santa lives in Greenland and forward letters to him there through the Danish Tourist Association. In Norway Santa Claus lives in a town called Drøbak and has his own postal station to handle his mail. Germans use a "Celestial Post Office" in the city of Augsburg to reach the Christ Child, while Austrian kids direct their mail to the village of Christkindl, near Steyr, Upper Austria. Stamp collectors around the world use the Austrian facilities, as they have special postmarks: 70,000,000 letters are processed each year with either the mark of a crèche or the Three Kings, depending on whether the letter is mailed closer to Christmas or Epiphany. In Switzerland a December 6 postmark from the post office in the town of St. Niklaus is a collectible item. Any British child writing to Father Christmas at Christmas receives a reply from "Reindeer Land." Many of these services, plus countless electronic equivalents on the World Wide Web, arrange a reply from Santa Claus.

Other children resort to different means of getting their letters to the gift-bringer. In the United Kingdom children pen notes to Father Christmas, but instead of dropping them in the mailbox, they burn them in the fireplace. The smoke carries their wishes up the chimney and beyond, until they reach Father Christmas. Some Scottish children use a similar method called "crying up the lum." They simply stick their heads up the chimney and shout out their Christmas desires. In Latin America children know that a letter to the Christ Child or the Magi will reach its intended audience if left beside the crèche; angels will take the messages to heaven during the night. In much of Europe, leaving a note in one's shoe beside the chimney or Christmas tree is an accepted way of reaching the gift-bringer, be it the Befana, the Magi, St. Nicholas, or the Christ Child. Swiss children know that the letter they left on the windowsill for the Christkindli has been taken because of the chocolate left in its place.

Letters to Santa Claus have attracted scholarly attention. A recent study of hundreds of letters to Santa Claus from American children revealed that boys and girls request the same amount of gifts, but that girls write longer and more polite letters. (See colour fig. 10.)

Lichstock The German Christmas pyramid of wooden rods on which small lighted candles are set. Sometimes they are topped by vanes or wooden umbrellas that rotate from the heat of the candles.

The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus (1985) Based on a story by Frank L. Baum, author of *The Wizard of Oz*, who clearly had been reading Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. This is the animated cartoon story of Claus, an abandoned child raised by a fairy and a lion. When he grows up, he dedicates his life to alleviating the suffering in the world and making children happy. Alfred Drake is the voice of the Great Ak, Earle Hyman is nasty King Awgwa, and Lynne Lipton is Queen Zurline. Directed by Jules Bass and Arthur Rankin Jr.

The Life of Brian (1979) A film made by the Monty Python troupe about the life of Brian Cohen, a Jewish lad of 2,000 years ago, born in the manger next door to the infant Jesus,

and mistaken throughout his life for the Messiah. He is, for example, given gifts by the Three Wise Men, who angrily return for them when they discover their mistake. An attack on fanaticism, both religious and political, it was made in Tunisia by director Terry Jones, who used the sets created for Franco Zeffirelli's 1976 *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Lights, Christmas Tree It is said, without much historical foundation, that Martin Luther was struck by the beauty of the winter sky as he walked home in the dark one Christmas Eve. Inspired by the sight, and trying to recreate the wonder of the heavens above Bethlehem on the night of the Nativity, he became the first person to place lit candles on the Christmas tree. Though our earliest reference to candles on trees comes from over a century later, there is no doubt that tree lights have been a big part of Christmas for hundreds of years.

Though lit candles on an evergreen tree make for a beautiful sight, they are a troublesome ornament. The first problem one faces is how to attach them safely to the tree. Earliest efforts involved melting wax onto the branches and sticking the candles to that, or piercing both branch and candle with a needle. There were attempts to wire the light to the tree, or to use thin, flexible candles that could be wrapped around the branch. A German invention of the 1700s was the "hoop of fire." A candle-holding wooden ring was slipped over the top of the tree to rest on the branches, but this required a tree with very symmetrical foliage. Candle-holders with long rods that could be screwed into the trunk appeared in the 1800s, as did socket-and-pin devices and a counter-weighted holder, but these were either unduly heavy or wobbly or both. It was not until Frederick Arzt invented a clip-on candle holder in 1878 that the problem was largely solved. (The mess created by dripping wax was overcome by the invention of the oil-cloth tree skirt.)

There were other ways of attaching lights to a tree, principally hanging oil lamps or lanterns. These contained oil with a floating wick and had the advantage of lasting longer than many candles. On the other hand they were heavy, which restricted their use to sturdy branches, and very hot. In 1878 an enterprising Englishman devised a metal Christmas tree with gas jets, but his invention attracted few buyers.

It was not just the safety issue that prompted folk to look for alternatives to the naked flame, though that was certainly an issue with the insurance industry. The fact was that candles and oil lamps were inconvenient, having always to be watched. The invention of the electric Christmas tree light in 1882 showed the way of the future.

Electric Christmas lights emerged from the Edison company labs, though the rights to produce them were soon bought up by General Electric. They were easy to set up and could be left on for hours unattended. For over 20 years after their introduction, however, they were still a plaything for the rich, beyond the reach of ordinary Americans. (They were first used in the White House under President Cleveland in 1895.) The earliest bulbs were round or pear-shaped, but in 1907 Europeans produced figural lights, hand-painted Viennese bulbs in the shape of Santa Claus, clowns, and animals. Americans loved this innovation, but the First World War cut off European supplies and forced buyers to look to Japan, which came to dominate the figural bulb industry until the Second World War.

After the war the craze for bulbs in the shape of Goofy or pine cones had passed, to be replaced by the bubble light. Invented in 1936 by Carl Otis, who found how to make lamps containing methaline chloride, these bulbs were a big post-