



## **Seasonal Festivities**

### **New Years' Day**

The earliest recorded festivities in honour of a new year's arrival date back some 4,000 years to ancient Babylon. For the Babylonians, the first new moon following the vernal equinox—the day in late March with an equal amount of sunlight and darkness—heralded the start of a new year. They marked the occasion with a massive religious festival called Akitu (derived from the Sumerian word for barley, which was cut in the spring) that involved a different ritual on each of its 11 days. In addition to the new year, Akitu celebrated the mythical victory of the Babylonian sky god Marduk over the evil sea goddess Tiamat and served an important political purpose: It was during this time that a new king was crowned or that the current ruler's divine mandate was symbolically renewed.

In Egypt, for instance, the year began with the annual flooding of the Nile, which coincided with the rising of the star Sirius. The first day of the Chinese New Year, meanwhile, occurred with the second new moon after the winter solstice.

### **January 1 Becomes New Year's Day**

The early Roman calendar consisted of 10 months and 304 days, with each new year beginning at the vernal equinox; per tradition, it was created by Romulus, the founder of Rome, in the eighth century B.C. A later king, Numa Pompilius, is credited with adding the months of Januarius and Februarius. Over the centuries, the calendar fell out of sync with the sun, and in 46 B.C. the emperor Julius Caesar decided to solve the problem by consulting with the most prominent astronomers and mathematicians of his time. He introduced the Julian calendar, which closely resembles the more modern Gregorian calendar that most countries around the world use today.

As part of his reform, Caesar instituted January 1 as the first day of the year, partly to honour the month's namesake: Janus, the Roman god of beginnings, whose two faces allowed him to look back into the past and forward into the future. Romans celebrated by offering sacrifices to Janus, exchanging gifts with one another, decorating their homes with laurel branches and attending raucous parties. In medieval Europe, Christian leaders temporarily replaced January 1 as the first of the year with days carrying more religious significance, such as December 25 (the anniversary of Jesus' birth) and March 25 (the Feast of the Annunciation); Pope Gregory XIII re-established January 1 as New Year's Day in 1582.

<http://www.history.com/topics/holidays/new-years>



## St Valentine

The history of Valentine's Day—and the story of its patron saint—is shrouded in mystery. We do know that February has long been celebrated as a month of romance, and that St. Valentine's Day, as we know it today, contains vestiges of both Christian and ancient Roman tradition. But who was Saint Valentine, and how did he become associated with this ancient rite?

The Catholic Church recognises at least three different saints named Valentine or Valentinus, all of whom were killed. One legend contends that Valentine was a priest who served during the third century in Rome. When Emperor Claudius II decided that single men made better soldiers than those with wives and families, he outlawed marriage for young men. Valentine, realising the injustice of the decree, defied Claudius and continued to perform marriages for young lovers in secret. When Valentine's actions were discovered, Claudius ordered that he be put to death.

Other stories suggest that Valentine may have been killed for attempting to help Christians escape harsh Roman prisons, where they were often beaten and tortured. According to one legend, an imprisoned Valentine sent the first “valentine” greeting himself after he fell in love with a young girl—possibly his jailor's daughter—who visited him during his confinement. Before his death, it is alleged that he wrote her a letter signed “From your Valentine,” an expression that is still in use today. Although the truth behind the Valentine legends is murky, the stories all emphasise his appeal as a sympathetic, heroic and—most importantly—romantic figure. By the Middle Ages, perhaps thanks to this reputation, Valentine would become one of the most popular saints in England and France.

### Origins of Valentine's Day: A Pagan Festival in February

While some believe that Valentine's Day is celebrated in the middle of February to commemorate the anniversary of Valentine's death or burial—which probably occurred around A.D. 270—others claim that the Christian church may have decided to place St. Valentine's feast day in the middle of February in an effort to “Christianise” the pagan celebration of Lupercalia. Celebrated at the ides of February, or February 15, Lupercalia was a fertility festival dedicated to Faunus, the Roman god of agriculture, as well as to the Roman founders Romulus and Remus.

To begin the festival, members of the Luperci, an order of Roman priests, would gather at a sacred cave where the infants Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, were believed to have been cared for by a she-wolf or lupa. The priests would sacrifice a goat, for fertility, and a dog, for purification. They would then strip the goat's hide into strips, dip them into the sacrificial blood and take to the streets, gently slapping both women and crop fields with the goat hide. Far from being fearful, Roman women welcomed the touch of the hides because it was believed to make them more fertile in the coming year. Later in the day, according to legend, all the young women in the city would place their names in a big urn. The city's bachelors would each choose a name and become paired for the year with his chosen woman. These matches often ended in marriage.



### Valentine's Day: A Day of Romance

Lupercalia survived the initial rise of Christianity and but was outlawed—as it was deemed “un-Christian”—at the end of the 5th century, when Pope Gelasius declared February 14 St. Valentine's Day. It was not until much later, however, that the day became definitively associated with love. During the Middle Ages, it was commonly believed in France and England that February 14 was the beginning of birds' mating season, which added to the idea that the middle of Valentine's Day should be a day for romance.

Valentine greetings were popular as far back as the Middle Ages, though written Valentine's didn't begin to appear until after 1400. The oldest known valentine still in existence today was a poem written in 1415 by Charles, Duke of Orleans, to his wife while he was imprisoned in the Tower of London following his capture at the Battle of Agincourt (The greeting is now part of the manuscript collection of the British Library in London, England.) Several years later, it is believed that King Henry V hired a writer named John Lydgate to compose a valentine note to Catherine of Valois.

<http://www.history.com/topics/valentines-day/history-of-valentines-day>



## Mothering Sunday/Mothers' Day

Celebrations of mothers and motherhood can be traced back to the ancient Greeks and Romans, who held festivals in honour of the mother goddesses Rhea and Cybele, but the clearest modern precedent for Mother's Day is the early Christian festival known as "Mothering Sunday." Once a major tradition in the United Kingdom and parts of Europe, this celebration fell on the fourth Sunday in Lent and was originally seen as a time when the faithful would return to their "mother church"—the main church near their home—for a special service. Over time the Mothering Sunday tradition shifted into a more secular holiday, and children would present their mothers with flowers and other tokens of appreciation. This custom eventually faded in popularity before merging with the American Mother's Day in the 1930s and 1940s.

### Mother's Day: Early Incarnations

The roots of the modern American Mother's Day date back to the 19th century. In the years before the Civil War (1861-65), Ann Reeves Jarvis of West Virginia helped start "Mothers' Day Work Clubs" to teach local women how to properly care for their children. These clubs later became a unifying force in a region of the country still divided over the Civil War. In 1868 Jarvis organised "Mothers' Friendship Day," at which mothers gathered with former Union and Confederate soldiers to promote reconciliation.

Another precursor to Mother's Day came from the abolitionist and suffragette Julia Ward Howe. In 1870 Howe wrote the "Mother's Day Proclamation," a call to action that asked mothers to unite in promoting world peace. In 1873 Howe campaigned for a "Mother's Peace Day" to be celebrated every June 2. Other early Mother's Day pioneers include Juliet Calhoun Blakely, a temperance activist who inspired a local Mother's Day in Albion, Michigan, in the 1870s. The duo of Mary Towles Sasseen and Frank Hering, meanwhile, both worked to organise a Mothers' Day in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Some have even called Hering "the father of Mothers' Day."

### Mother's Day: Founding by Anna Jarvis

The official Mother's Day holiday arose in the 1900s because of the efforts of Anna Jarvis, daughter of Ann Reeves Jarvis. Following her mother's 1905 death, Anna Jarvis conceived of Mother's Day as a way of honouring the sacrifices mothers made for their children. After gaining financial backing from a Philadelphia department store owner named John Wanamaker, in May 1908 she organised the first official Mother's Day celebration at a Methodist church in Grafton, West Virginia. That same day also saw thousands of people attend a Mother's Day event at one of Wanamaker's retail stores in Philadelphia.

Following the success of her first Mother's Day, Jarvis—who remained unmarried and childless her whole life—resolved to see her holiday added to the national calendar. Arguing that American holidays were biased toward male achievements, she started a massive letter writing campaign to newspapers and prominent politicians urging the adoption of a special day honouring motherhood. By 1912 many states, towns and churches had adopted Mother's Day as an annual holiday, and Jarvis had established the Mother's



Day International Association to help promote her cause. Her persistence paid off in 1914 when President Woodrow Wilson, signed a measure officially establishing the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day.

Anna Jarvis had originally conceived of Mother's Day as a day of personal celebration between mothers and families. Her version of the day involved wearing a white carnation as a badge and visiting one's mother or attending church services. But once Mother's Day became a national holiday, it was not long before florists, card companies and other merchants capitalised on its popularity.

While Jarvis had initially worked with the floral industry to help raise Mother's Day's profile, by 1920 she had become disgusted with how the holiday had been commercialised. She outwardly denounced the transformation and urged people to stop buying Mother's Day flowers, cards and candies. Jarvis eventually resorted to an open campaign against Mother's Day profiteers, speaking out against confectioners, florists and even charities. She also launched countless lawsuits against groups that had used the name "Mother's Day," eventually spending most of her personal wealth in legal fees. By the time of her death in 1948 Jarvis had disowned the holiday altogether, and even actively lobbied the government to see it removed from the American calendar.

<http://www.history.com/topics/holidays/mothers-day>



## April Fools

On this day in 1700, English pranksters begin popularising the annual tradition of April Fools' Day by playing practical jokes on each other.

Although the day, also called All Fools' Day, has been celebrated for several centuries by different cultures, its exact origins remain a mystery. Some historians speculate that April Fools' Day dates to 1582, when France switched from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar, as called for by the Council of Trent in 1563. People who were slow to get the news or failed to recognise that the start of the new year had moved to January 1 and continued to celebrate it during the last week of March through April 1 became the butt of jokes and hoaxes. These included having paper fish placed on their backs and being referred to as "poisson d'avril" (April fish), said to symbolise a young, easily caught fish and a gullible person.

Historians have also linked April Fools' Day to ancient festivals such as Hilaria, which was celebrated in Rome at the end of March and involved people dressing up in disguises. There's also speculation that April Fools' Day was tied to the vernal equinox, or first day of spring in the Northern Hemisphere, when Mother Nature fooled people with changing, unpredictable weather.

April Fools' Day spread throughout Britain during the 18th century. In Scotland, the tradition became a two-day event, starting with "hunting the gowk," in which people were sent on phony errands (gowk is a word for cuckoo bird, a symbol for fool) and followed by Tailie Day, which involved pranks played on people's derrieres, such as pinning fake tails or "kick me" signs on them.

<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/04/01>



## Good Friday/Easter Sunday/Easter Eggs

Easter, which celebrates Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead, is Christianity's most important holiday. It has been called a moveable feast because it doesn't fall on a set date every year, as most holidays do. Instead, Christian churches in the West celebrate Easter on the first Sunday following the full moon after the vernal equinox on March 21. Therefore, Easter is observed anywhere between March 22 and April 25 every year. Orthodox Christians use the Julian calendar to calculate when Easter will occur and typically celebrate the holiday a week or two after the Western churches, which follow the Gregorian calendar.

The exact origins of this religious feast day's name are unknown. Some sources claim the word Easter is derived from Eostre, a Teutonic goddess of spring and fertility. Other accounts trace Easter to the Latin term hebdomada alba, or white week, an ancient reference to Easter week and the white clothing donned by people who were baptized during that time. Through a translation error, the term later appeared as esostarum in Old High German, which eventually became Easter in English. In Spanish, Easter is known as Pascua; in French, Paques. These words are derived from the Greek and Latin Pascha or Pasch, for Passover, Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection occurred after he went to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover (or Pesach in Hebrew), the Jewish festival commemorating the ancient Israelites' exodus from slavery in Egypt. Pascha eventually came to mean Easter.

Easter is really an entire season of the Christian church year, as opposed to a single-day observance. Lent, the 40-day period leading up to Easter Sunday, is a time of reflection and penance and represents the 40 days that Jesus spent alone in the wilderness before starting his ministry, a time in which Christians believe he survived various temptations by the devil. The day before Lent, known as Mardi Gras or Fat Tuesday, is a last hurrah of food and fun before the fasting begins. The week preceding Easter is called Holy Week and includes Maundy Thursday, which commemorates Jesus' last supper with his disciples; Good Friday, which honours the day of his crucifixion; and Holy Saturday, which focuses on the transition between the crucifixion and resurrection. The 50-day period following Easter Sunday is called Eastertide and includes a celebration of Jesus' ascension into heaven.

In addition to Easter's religious significance, it also has a commercial side, as evidenced by the mounds of jelly beans and marshmallow chicks that appear in stores each spring. As with Christmas, over the centuries various folk customs and pagan traditions, including Easter eggs, bunnies, baskets and candy, have become a standard part of this holy holiday.

<http://www.history.com/topics/holidays/history-of-easter>



## Fathers' Day

On June 19, 1910, the governor of the U.S. state of Washington proclaimed the nation's first "Father's Day." However, it was not until 1972, 58 years after President Woodrow Wilson made Mother's Day official, that the day became a nationwide holiday in the United States.

### Mother's Day: Inspiration for Father's Day

The "Mother's Day" we celebrate today has its origins in the peace-and-reconciliation campaigns of the post-Civil War era. During the 1860s, at the urging of activist Ann Reeves Jarvis, one divided West Virginia town celebrated "Mother's Work Days" that brought together the mothers of Confederate and Union soldiers. In 1870, the activist Julia Ward Howe issued a "Mother's Day Proclamation" calling on a "general congress of women" to "promote the alliance of the different nationalities, the amicable settlement of international questions, [and] the great and general interests of peace."

However, Mother's Day did not become a commercial holiday until 1908, when—inspired by Jarvis's daughter Anna, who wanted to honour her own mother by making Mother's Day a national holiday—the John Wanamaker department store in Philadelphia sponsored a service dedicated to mothers in its auditorium. Thanks, in large part to this association with retailers, who saw great potential for profit in the holiday, Mother's Day caught on right away. In 1909, 45 states observed the day, and in 1914, President [Woodrow Wilson](#) approved a resolution that made the second Sunday in May a holiday in honour of "that tender, gentle army, the mothers of America."

### Origins of Father's Day

The campaign to celebrate the nation's fathers did not meet with the same enthusiasm—perhaps because, as one florist explained, "fathers haven't the same sentimental appeal that mothers have." On July 5, 1908, a West Virginia church sponsored the nation's first event explicitly in honour of fathers, a Sunday sermon in memory of the 362 men who had died in the previous December's explosions at the Fairmont Coal Company mines in Monongah, but it was a one-time commemoration and not an annual holiday. The next year, a Spokane, Washington woman named Sonara Smart Dodd, one of six children raised by a widower, tried to establish an official equivalent to Mother's Day for male parents. She went to local churches, the YMCA, shopkeepers and government officials to drum up support for her idea, and she was successful: Washington State celebrated the nation's first state-wide Father's Day on June 19, 1910. Slowly, the holiday spread. In 1916, President Wilson honoured the day by using telegraph signals to unfurl a flag in Spokane when he pressed a button in Washington, D.C. In 1924, President Calvin Coolidge urged state governments to observe Father's Day. However, many men continued to disdain the day. As one historian writes, they "scoffed at the holiday's sentimental attempts to domesticate manliness with flowers and gift-giving, or they derided the proliferation of such holidays as a commercial gimmick to sell more products—often paid for by the father himself."

<http://www.history.com/topics/holidays/fathers-day>





## Halloween

Straddling the line between fall and winter, plenty and paucity, life and death, Halloween is a time of celebration and superstition. It is thought to have originated with the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain, when people would light bonfires and wear costumes to ward off roaming ghosts. In the eighth century, Pope Gregory III designated November 1 as a time to honour all saints and martyrs; the holiday, All Saints' Day, incorporated some of the traditions of Samhain. The evening before was known as All Hallows' Eve and later Halloween. Over time, Halloween evolved into a secular, community-based event characterised by child-friendly activities such as trick-or-treating. In several countries around the world, as the days grow shorter and the nights get colder, people continue to usher in the winter season with gatherings, costumes and sweet treats.

### Ancient Origins of Halloween

Halloween's origins date back to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain (pronounced sow-in). The Celts, who lived 2,000 years ago, in the area that is now Ireland, the United Kingdom and northern France, celebrated their new year on November 1. This day marked the end of summer and the harvest and the beginning of the dark, cold winter, a time of year that was often associated with human death. Celts believed that on the night before the new year, the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead became blurred. On the night of October 31, they celebrated Samhain, when it was believed that the ghosts of the dead returned to earth. In addition to causing trouble and damaging crops, Celts thought that the presence of the otherworldly spirits made it easier for the Druids, or Celtic priests, to make predictions about the future. For a people, entirely dependent on the volatile natural world, these prophecies were an important source of comfort and direction during the long, dark winter.

To commemorate the event, Druids built huge sacred bonfires, where the people gathered to burn crops and animals as sacrifices to the Celtic deities. During the celebration, the Celts wore costumes, typically consisting of animal heads and skins, and attempted to tell each other's fortunes. When the celebration was over, they re-lit their hearth fires, which they had extinguished earlier that evening, from the sacred bonfire to help protect them during the coming winter.

By 43 A.D., the Roman Empire had conquered most Celtic territory. During the four hundred years that they ruled the Celtic lands, two festivals of Roman origin were combined with the traditional Celtic celebration of Samhain. The first was Feralia, a day in late October when the Romans traditionally commemorated the passing of the dead. The second was a day to honour Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruit and trees. The symbol of Pomona is the apple and the incorporation of this celebration into Samhain probably explains the tradition of "bobbing" for apples that is practiced today on Halloween.

On May 13, 609 A.D., Pope Boniface IV dedicated the Pantheon in Rome in honour of all Christian martyrs, and the Catholic feast of All Martyrs Day was established in the Western



church. Pope Gregory III (731–741) later expanded the festival to include all saints as well as all martyrs, and moved the observance from May 13 to November 1. By the 9th century the influence of Christianity had spread into Celtic lands, where it gradually blended with and supplanted the older Celtic rites. In 1000 A.D., the church would make November 2 All Souls' Day, a day to honour the dead. It is widely believed today that the church was attempting to replace the Celtic festival of the dead with a related, but church-sanctioned holiday. All Souls Day was celebrated similarly to Samhain, with big bonfires, parades, and dressing up in costumes as saints, angels and devils. The All Saints Day celebration was also called All-hallows or All-hallowmas (from Middle English Alholowmesse meaning All Saints' Day) and the night before it, the traditional night of Samhain in the Celtic religion, began to be called All-hallows Eve and, eventually, Halloween.

<http://www.history.com/topics/halloween/history-of-halloween>



## Christmas Eve/Day

Christmas is both a sacred religious holiday and a worldwide cultural and commercial phenomenon. For two millennia, people around the world have been observing it with traditions and practices that are both religious and secular in nature. Christians celebrate Christmas Day as the anniversary of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, a spiritual leader whose teachings form the basis of their religion. Popular customs include exchanging gifts, decorating Christmas trees, attending church, sharing meals with family and friends and, of course, waiting for Santa Claus to arrive. December 25—Christmas Day—has been a federal holiday in the United States since 1870.

### An Ancient Holiday

The middle of winter has long been a time of celebration around the world. Centuries before the arrival of the man called Jesus, early Europeans celebrated light and birth in the darkest days of winter. Many peoples rejoiced during the winter solstice, when the worst of the winter was behind them and they could look forward to longer days and extended hours of sunlight.

In Scandinavia, the Norse celebrated Yule from December 21, the winter solstice, through January. In recognition of the return of the sun, fathers and sons would bring home large logs, which they would set on fire. The people would feast until the log burned out, which could take as many as 12 days. The Norse believed that each spark from the fire represented a new pig or calf that would be born during the coming year.

The end of December was a perfect time for celebration in most areas of Europe. At that time of year, most cattle were slaughtered so they would not have to be fed during the winter. For many, it was the only time of year when they had a supply of fresh meat. In addition, most wine and beer made during the year was finally fermented and ready for drinking.

In Germany, people honoured the pagan god Oden during the mid-winter holiday. Germans were terrified of Oden, as they believed he made nocturnal flights through the sky to observe his people, and then decide who would prosper or perish. Because of his presence, many people chose to stay inside.

### Saturnalia

In Rome, where winters were not as harsh as those in the far north, Saturnalia—a holiday in honour of Saturn, the god of agriculture—was celebrated. Beginning in the week leading up to the winter solstice and continuing for a full month, Saturnalia was a hedonistic time, when food and drink were plentiful and the normal Roman social order was turned upside down. For a month, slaves would become masters. Peasants were in command of the city. Business and schools were closed so that everyone could join in the fun.

Also around the time of the winter solstice, Romans observed Juvenalia, a feast honouring the children of Rome. In addition, members of the upper classes often celebrated the birthday of Mithra, the god of the unconquerable sun, on December 25. It was believed that



Mithra, an infant god, was born of a rock. For some Romans, Mithra's birthday was the most sacred day of the year.

In the early years of Christianity, Easter was the main holiday; the birth of Jesus was not celebrated. In the fourth century, church officials decided to institute the birth of Jesus as a holiday. Unfortunately, the Bible does not mention date for his birth (a fact Puritans later pointed out in order to deny the legitimacy of the celebration). Although some evidence suggests that his birth may have occurred in the spring (why would shepherds be herding in the middle of winter?), Pope Julius I chose December 25. It is commonly believed that the church chose this date in an effort to adopt and absorb the traditions of the pagan Saturnalia festival. First called the Feast of the Nativity, the custom spread to Egypt by 432 and to England by the end of the sixth century. By the end of the eighth century, the celebration of Christmas had spread all the way to Scandinavia. Today, in the Greek and Russian orthodox churches, Christmas is celebrated 13 days after the 25th, which is also referred to as the Epiphany or Three Kings Day. This is the day it is believed that the three wise men finally found Jesus in the manger.

By holding Christmas at the same time as traditional winter solstice festivals, church leaders increased the chances that Christmas would be popularly embraced, but gave up the ability to dictate how it was celebrated. By the Middle Ages, Christianity had, for the most part, replaced pagan religion. On Christmas, believers attended church, then celebrated raucously in a drunken, carnival-like atmosphere like today's Mardi Gras. Each year, a beggar or student would be crowned the "lord of misrule" and eager celebrants played the part of his subjects. The poor would go to the houses of the rich and demand their best food and drink. If owners failed to comply, their visitors would most likely terrorize them with mischief. Christmas became the time of year when the upper classes could repay their real or imagined "debt" to society by entertaining less fortunate citizens.

#### An Outlaw Christmas

In the early 17th century, a wave of religious reform changed the way Christmas was celebrated in Europe. When Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan forces took over England in 1645, they vowed to rid England of decadence and, as part of their effort, cancelled Christmas. By popular demand, Charles II was restored to the throne and, with him, came the return of the popular holiday.

The pilgrims, English separatists that came to America in 1620, were even more orthodox in their Puritan beliefs than Cromwell. Thus, Christmas was not a holiday in early America. From 1659 to 1681, the celebration of Christmas was outlawed in Boston. Anyone exhibiting the Christmas spirit was fined five shillings. By contrast, in the Jamestown settlement, Captain John Smith reported that Christmas was enjoyed by all and passed without incident.

After the American Revolution, English customs fell out of favour, including Christmas. In fact, Christmas wasn't declared a federal holiday until June 26, 1870.



### Irving Reinvents Christmas

It wasn't until the 19th century that Americans began to embrace Christmas. Americans re-invented Christmas, and changed it from a raucous carnival holiday into a family-centered day of peace and nostalgia. But what about the 1800s peaked American interest in the holiday?

The early 19th century was a period of class conflict and turmoil. During this time, unemployment was high and gang rioting by the disenfranchised classes often occurred during the Christmas season. In 1828, the New York city council instituted the city's first police force in response to a Christmas riot. This catalysed certain members of the upper classes to begin to change the way Christmas was celebrated in America.

In 1819, best-selling author Washington Irving wrote *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, gent.*, a series of stories about the celebration of Christmas in an English manor house. The sketches feature a squire who invited the peasants into his home for the holiday. In contrast to the problems faced in American society, the two groups mingled effortlessly. In Irving's mind, Christmas should be a peaceful, warm-hearted holiday bringing groups together across lines of wealth or social status. Irving's fictitious celebrants enjoyed "ancient customs," including the crowning of a Lord of Misrule. Irving's book, however, was not based on any holiday celebration he had attended – in fact, many historians say that Irving's account "invented" tradition by implying that it described the true customs of the season.

### A Christmas Carol

Also around this time, English author Charles Dickens created the classic holiday tale, *A Christmas Carol*. The story's message—the importance of charity and good will towards all humankind—struck a powerful chord in the United States and England and showed members of Victorian society the benefits of celebrating the holiday.

The family was also becoming less disciplined and more sensitive to the emotional needs of children during the early 1800s. Christmas provided families with a day when they could lavish attention—and gifts—on their children without appearing to "spoil" them.

As Americans began to embrace Christmas as a perfect family holiday, old customs were unearthed. People looked toward recent immigrants and Catholic and Episcopalian churches to see how the day should be celebrated. In the next 100 years, Americans built a Christmas tradition all their own that included pieces of many other customs, including decorating trees, sending holiday cards, and gift-giving.

Although most families quickly bought into the idea that they were celebrating Christmas how it had been done for centuries, Americans had really re-invented a holiday to fill the cultural needs of a growing nation.

<http://www.history.com/topics/christmas/history-of-christmas>



## Christmas Tree

Long before the advent of Christianity, plants and trees that remained green all year had a special meaning for people in the winter. Just as people today decorate their homes during the festive season with pine, spruce, and fir trees, ancient peoples hung evergreen boughs over their doors and windows. In many countries, it was believed that evergreens would keep away witches, ghosts, evil spirits, and illness.

In the Northern hemisphere, the shortest day and longest night of the year falls on December 21 or December 22 and is called the winter solstice. Many ancient people believed that the sun was a god and that winter came every year because the sun god had become sick and weak. They celebrated the solstice because it meant that at last the sun god would begin to get well. Evergreen boughs reminded them of all the green plants that would grow again when the sun god was strong and summer would return.

The ancient Egyptians worshipped a god called Ra, who had the head of a hawk and wore the sun as a blazing disk in his crown. At the solstice, when Ra began to recover from the illness, the Egyptians filled their homes with green palm rushes which symbolised for them the triumph of life over death.

Early Romans marked the solstice with a feast called the Saturnalia in honour of Saturn, the god of agriculture. The Romans knew that the solstice meant that soon farms and orchards would be green and fruitful. To mark the occasion, they decorated their homes and temples with evergreen boughs. In Northern Europe, the mysterious Druids, the priests of the ancient Celts, also decorated their temples with evergreen boughs as a symbol of everlasting life. The fierce Vikings in Scandinavia thought that evergreens were the special plant of the sun god, Balder.

Germany is credited with starting the Christmas tree tradition as we now know it in the 16th century when devout Christians brought decorated trees into their homes. Some built Christmas pyramids of wood and decorated them with evergreens and candles if wood was scarce. It is a widely-held belief that Martin Luther, the 16th-century Protestant reformer, first added lighted candles to a tree. Walking toward his home one winter evening, composing a sermon, he was awed by the brilliance of stars twinkling amidst evergreens. To recapture the scene for his family, he erected a tree in the main room and wired its branches with lighted candles.

Most 19th-century Americans found Christmas trees an oddity. The first record of one being on display was in the 1830s by the German settlers of Pennsylvania, although trees had been a tradition in many German homes much earlier. The Pennsylvania German settlements had community trees as early as 1747. But, as late as the 1840s Christmas trees were seen as pagan symbols and not accepted by most Americans.

It is not surprising that, like many other festive Christmas customs, the tree was adopted so late in America. To the New England Puritans, Christmas was sacred. The pilgrims' second governor, William Bradford, wrote that he tried hard to stamp out "pagan mockery" of the



observance, penalizing any frivolity. The influential Oliver Cromwell preached against “the heathen traditions” of Christmas carols, decorated trees, and any joyful expression that desecrated “that sacred event.” In 1659, the General Court of Massachusetts enacted a law making any observance of December 25 (other than a church service) a penal offense; people were fined for hanging decorations. That stern solemnity continued until the 19th century, when the influx of German and Irish immigrants undermined the Puritan legacy.

In 1846, the popular royals, Queen Victoria and her German Prince, Albert, were sketched in the Illustrated London News standing with their children around a Christmas tree. Unlike the previous royal family, Victoria was very popular with her subjects, and what was done at court immediately became fashionable—not only in Britain, but with fashion-conscious East Coast American Society. The Christmas tree had arrived.

By the 1890s Christmas ornaments were arriving from Germany and Christmas tree popularity was on the rise around the U.S. It was noted that Europeans used small trees about four feet in height, while Americans liked their Christmas trees to reach from floor to ceiling.

The early 20th century saw Americans decorating their trees mainly with homemade ornaments, while the German-American sect continued to use apples, nuts, and marzipan cookies. Popcorn joined in after being dyed bright colours and interlaced with berries and nuts. Electricity brought about Christmas lights, making it possible for Christmas trees to glow for days on end. With this, Christmas trees began to appear in town squares across the country and having a Christmas tree in the home became an American tradition.

<http://www.history.com/topics/christmas/history-of-christmas-trees>



## Christmas cards

An Englishman named John Calcott Horsley helped to popularise the tradition of sending Christmas greeting cards when he began producing small cards featuring festive scenes and a pre-written holiday greeting in the late 1830s. Newly efficient post offices in England and the United States made the cards nearly overnight sensations. At about the same time, similar cards were being made by R.H. Pease, the first American card maker, in Albany, New York, and Louis Prang, a German who immigrated to America in 1850.

Celtic and Teutonic peoples had long considered mistletoe to have magic powers. It was said to have the ability to heal wounds and increase fertility. Celts hung mistletoe in their homes in order to bring themselves good luck and ward off evil spirits. During holidays in the Victorian era, the English would hang sprigs of mistletoe from ceilings and in doorways. If someone was found standing under the mistletoe, they would be kissed by someone else in the room, behaviour not usually demonstrated in Victorian society.

Plum pudding is an English dish dating back to the Middle Ages. Suet, flour, sugar, raisins, nuts, and spices are tied loosely in cloth and boiled until the ingredients are “plum,” meaning they have enlarged enough to fill the cloth. It is then unwrapped, sliced like cake, and topped with cream.

Caroling also began in England. Wandering musicians would travel from town to town visiting castles and homes of the rich. In return for their performance, the musicians hoped to receive a hot meal or money.

In the United States and England, children hang stockings on their bedpost or near a fireplace on Christmas Eve, hoping that it will be filled with treats while they sleep. In Scandinavia, similar-minded children leave their shoes on the hearth. This tradition can be traced to legends about Saint Nicholas. One legend tells of three poor sisters who could not marry because they had no money for a dowry. To save them from being sold by their father, St. Nick left each of the three sisters gifts of gold coins. One went down the chimney and landed in a pair of shoes that had been left on the hearth. Another went into a window and into a pair of stockings left hanging by the fire to dry.

<http://www.history.com/topics/christmas/christmas-traditions-worldwide>

## Turkey on Christmas Day

When did the turkey first become associated with Christmas? The short answer is that turkeys became associated with Christmas almost as soon as they were introduced into Britain in the sixteenth century (1500s). The longer answer needs to consider when the turkey became *synonymous* with Christmas Dinner on Christmas Day.

It is easy to dismiss roast turkey as a modern phenomenon at Christmas and write an article on why we should be eating roast goose or roast beef instead; whilst this is true for





the *family roast dinner on Christmas Day*, it is not true for its associations of turkey being eaten and served at Christmas time.

Turkey and Christmas have over 400 years of history together – with this close association culminating in the last 60 years when turkey became the national and ‘traditional’ Christmas Dinner for the general population of the UK; but this goal has been reached by walking a steady path towards it, a path this nation has been on for hundreds of years. *So it should come as no surprise that this is how we have ended up.*

When comparing through history the price of a turkey, versus the weekly wage of the working classes, and the slow uptake of breeding turkeys by the small-holder, it is simple to explain why for most people the turkey was never the ‘traditional’ roast on Christmas Day; until prices dropped in real terms during the 1950s. For most people, and for hundreds of years, it was always the cheaper Roast Chicken, Roast Goose, Roast Beef or Roast Rabbit on Christmas Day, (if they could afford anything at all).

Even in the mid part of the twentieth-century Dorothy Hartley wrote in her book ‘*Food In England*’ (1954) that “Being a north-country woman, I have no enthusiasm for turkey ... Northern farmers have ... a fine meaty goose for Christmas.” And this was true over much of Britain, but the mid-1950s was the tipping point away from other meats to turkey on Christmas day, hence Dorothy Hartley is prepared to comment in her book, (negatively) on this change towards Turkey for Christmas dinner.

Yet to place Turkey and Christmas together at the 1950s, as if this was a seismic event, is to ignore all the other evidence which indicates strongly that turkey meat has always been a traditional Christmas food – just not the main one. And historically the bond between Christmas and the turkey is intricately linked because of the natural life-cycle of the turkey.

Following the natural (and seasonal) course of events the courtship of a turkey generally begins at the end of March and early April – when the hens lay one fertile egg per day, (a normal ‘clutch’ is 12 eggs laid). After the fertile clutch is laid the turkey hens begin the process of incubation. Incubation is only started after the entire clutch of eggs is laid, therefore most eggs hatch at the same time, in 26 to 28 days – and turkey poults, born in the late spring, grow to full maturity seven months later in December.

And as for choice: it is the same reasons for people today (choosing to have a turkey for Christmas dinner) as to why the turkey replaced the swan and other big birds at banquets in the Tudor period (for the upper classes). The impressive size of a whole bird in relation to a chicken, duck or goose, or other smaller cuts of meat (from larger animals) makes it more of a special, celebratory occasion. *Yet why did it gain so quickly in popularity after the 1950s?* Alone out of all the choices, when considering cost or price per pound of meat, the amount of meat on one turkey can now cheaply feed an extended family (with friends invited) – without the modern, intensive breeding practices being introduced this was never previously the case.

We tend to overlook the obvious sometimes, or just accept it without question. A celebration is about doing something special, on a special occasion, a feast is about serving something special, something uncommon – combining these events you have what were



termed *feast days*. And feast days reach back far into history; falling on important days associated with the changing seasons. In times gone by there were several such feast days in the year, secular ones (the Harvest Festival, May Day etc.) and religious ones (Easter, All Saints Day etc.) but none more important to the common man than the celebrations in the winter period over the winter solstice, (before and after the church appropriated this pagan celebration for their own design).

Today (in the western world) most of the secular and religious feast days have fallen away, as most of us no longer follow the strict codes of religious doctrine, telling us what we can and cannot eat during the year; and with refrigeration, global supply links and 24-hour supermarket shopping the idea of a scarcity or lack of diversity of food in our diets in the winter period simply does not exist – there is no longer a need to celebrate the production of food.

Christmas however is the one time of the year that still comes anywhere near close to how we used to celebrate; even though it has been subverted by commercialisation it is still a feast day – one of the last remaining to us in an ever-growing secular western society. And that means on this day, more so than any other, food plays a major role in how we celebrate. And a very large, whole roast turkey has come to symbolise for us a special food (uncommonly served to the table for the rest of the year) served on a special day (a unique time where we all focus on feeding extended family and friends).

<http://oakden.co.uk/the-history-of-the-turkey-at-christmas/4/>