



Bicester Historian



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The monthly newsletter for Bicester Local History Society



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Festival of Light & Hope

Once again St Edburg's Church opened its doors for its annual Christmas Tree Festival last weekend and, even in these difficult times, it still proved to be a big success.

Rebranded this year as the 'Festival of Light and Hope', it featured trees decorated by some of the old favourites, but also included ones done by invited local charities and key services like the fire brigade and Bicester Food Bank.

Visitor number had to be limited to follow Covid safe guidelines, so prebooked tickets for set timed entry had to be used. But that didn't stop it from being as popular as ever.

- Matthew Hathaway
(Photos courtesy of Nessa Hathaway)



Dates For Your Diary

Bicester Advertiser Local History Article
31st December

January Newsletter Submissions Deadline
8th January

Bicester Advertiser Local History Article
28th January



Election News for Christmas?

This article is yet another outcome of “sorting stuff” in my front room and discovering items of interest. At least I hope you find them interesting? And it takes a little bit of pressure off Matthew finding articles to write!

I found a reference to a publication put together by a joint working party set up by The Oxfordshire County Record Office and the Oxfordshire Education Committee in 1970 entitled: “The Oxfordshire Election of 1754” as a teaching aid to encourage teachers to explore, with their pupils, the many educational possibilities that local history has to offer. This may all sound pretty dull stuff but the 71-page document had been compiled by G.H. Dannatt – ex. Deputy Head of Bicester Grammar School. You can draw a strong parallel between what happened during that election and the shenanigans that are still continuing following the recent U.S.A. Presidential Election and probably also in Downing Street and the Houses of Parliament!

The election of 1754 excited national interest as well as bitter party feeling in the county. It was the first Oxfordshire election to be contested since 1710. The Septennial Act of 1715 had lengthened the life of a Parliament from a maximum of three to seven years. The expenses of an election fell on the candidates and there had been a local gentleman’s agreement to avoid elections as much as possible!

The Tories represented the county while the Whigs sat for the boroughs of Banbury and Woodstock. This was convenient for the gentry but meant that in Oxfordshire nobody born since 1690 had ever been able to exercise the right to vote for the two knights of the shire who theoretically represented them. Those who could vote were confined to the 40/- freeholders of whom there were a large number in this county.

Note: the rules for voting had been changed by statute in 1429 which, finding that elections had recently been crowded by people of “low estate”, decreed that only freemen who owned freehold land (that is, not leased from the land’s owner) worth 40 shillings had the vote. This restricted the vote to a much smaller group of landowners, and the 40-shilling franchise was only abolished in 1832 by the Great Reform Act.

Viscount Wenman from Thame, and Sir James Dashwood of Kirtlington Park were adopted as candidates by a meeting of the gentry and freeholders. Both were Tories and stood for the Old Interest. Dashwood had been



Sir James Dashwood

the MP for Oxford. He was a large, convivial man - he could ride all the way from Kirtlington to Banbury on his own land. During the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 he refused to sign the Association – a document proclaiming loyalty to Church and State. In support of the Pretender, he had not gone any further than planting a clump of Scots firs on the highest point of his park. Some of his friends were Catholics and he had visited Rome!

The Whigs chose Sir Edward Turner of Ambrosden and Lord Parker (son of the Earl of Macclesfield) from Ewelme – they became the New Interest. Both were small men. Turner’s father had made his fortune in the South Sea Bubble and Sir Edward had built himself a “Gothick barn” of a house in Ambrosden (his son later demolished it!). He had

stood for election as a Tory to represent the University in Parliament but came bottom of the poll. His great ambition was to represent his county, for knights of the shire occupied a distinguished position in society. The Tories made the most of his changing sides to the Whigs – “Turner by name and Turner by nature”! Turner was a conscientious Justice of the Peace. In 1752 an outbreak of cattle disease led him to take the unpopular step of closing the markets at Banbury and Bicester. And a few months later he ordered a Bicester woman to be whipped.

As for Lord Parker, he was a young man who had recently returned home from the Grand Tour. He had spent some time in Geneva, a stronghold of Calvinism. The Tories accused him of wishing to undermine the Church of England, to which the Whigs replied by accusing Dashwood of having kissed the Pope’s toe!

The Tory colour was blue and the Whig green, sometimes laced with gold. Jackson’s Oxford Journal was keen to publish news and scandal on both parties. The Whigs were berated as Roundhead and Republican and as supporters of the Bill for the Naturalisation of Jews which was introduced in April 1753 and repealed a few months later. Though nobody wished to persecute Jews, many people were anxious to exploit the Jew Bill to discredit the Whig government. Dashwood actually called upon the Commons to discuss its repeal; Parker was the Chairman of the committee that repealed it. When news of this reached Bicester, the church bells rang out all day and the cry was: “No Jews! No Naturalisation! Wenman and Dashwood forever!”

After a slight calm in the proceedings, there then

followed the Battle of Chipping Norton when both parties organised meeting on the same day in the town and brought their own agitators that tried to disrupt the proceeding of their rivals with the Whigs rousing a mob that stormed the White Hart where the Tories were dining and assaulted the landlord.

Then came the actual poll. You need to be aware that although there was a General Election throughout the whole country, not all seats were being contested. The Whigs had been in power since 1715. The election would be held over a number of days, and not necessarily the same dates that other counties were holding theirs.

Oxford City lent Broad Street for the actual voting arena. Fourteen polling booths, one for each of the Hundreds into which the county was divided, were erected outside Exeter College. No register of electors existed, but in each booth the sheriff's clerks recorded the name and qualification of each voter, the way he voted. Each party had a checker and recorder in every booth and parish constables were in attendance to keep guard. Street wardens were appointed by the colleges and parties and undergraduates not possessing a vote were forbidden to come near the booths, carry weapons or leave their colleges during the poll. The Tories organised a regiment of Blueskins who guarded the booths by standing twenty men deep, the tactics of which prevented the Whigs from voting. However, the Rector and Fellows of Exeter College were solidly on the Whigs side. Whig voters were allowed access to vote by entering the college via Turl Street and through the college grounds into Broad Street, thus giving them access to the booths from behind and vote unhampered. When the result was announced by the High Sheriff, the two Tories had more votes than the two Whigs. The Whigs immediately asked for a recount, but the



Sir Edward Turner

High Sheriff officially declared that all four candidates were returned. This was illegal and meant that the House of Commons would have to settle a disputed election. For the next year there were arguments as to whether Copyholders and Leaseholders votes should be allowed as opposed to just the Freeholders and landowners. The famous lawyer Blackstone argued the case against the copyholders and so, a year and a day after the poll had closed, the Commons decided that the Whigs (Parker & Turner) had been elected.

The result did not go down too well in Bicester where the mob hung a "little green hero" (an effigy of a Whig) on the pillory on Market Hill and rang the church bells backwards.

(Note: ringing the bells backwards? Bells are normally rung with lightest bell (highest pitch) first, going down the scale to the largest bell (lowest pitch). Ringing backwards is the opposite - starting with the heaviest bell first and going up the scale - it sounds odd I can assure you!).

John Princep, the local vicar of St Edburg's Church and a firm Whig, threatened to dismiss a Tory parish clerk when he introduced Psalm 64 into a church service. In this psalm, David complains that Saul had been set against him by false slanders, and this was held in some obscure fashion to be relevant to the result of the election!

The various electoral Reform Acts of 1867 and onwards, increased the electorate to include copyholders, leaseholders, agricultural labourers, householders, and in 1918, all men of age 21 or over and all women of 30 or over. In 1928 the Act gave votes to women on equal terms with men. And in 1969 persons of 18 or over could vote.

Progress, albeit a somewhat slow progress, in the UK. As for the USA at the moment, they seem to be going backwards!

- Bob Hessian

Roll of Honour

The following are the local men who died in the Second World War, 80 years ago this month.

Sergeant Monty Richard Dards, of Southall, London.

Died: 7th December 1940 Aged: 20 Served in: Royal Air Force
(Died on service at RAF Upper Heyford, buried at Upper Heyford)



Bygone Bicester

(Taken from the Bicester Advertiser)

29th December 1860

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS

The inmates of the workhouse were regaled with roast beef, plum pudding and beer on Christmas day. The poor folks will also have an entertainment on New Year's Day. This Christmas is the 21st since Mr J.H. Mansell, the governor, first commenced the pleasant custom of giving the inmates Christmas cheer.

On Friday afternoon last the children attending the National Schools were regaled with cake and wine. The schoolroom was gaily decorated for the occasion. The children were also examined by the Rev. J.W. Watts in history, geography, the catechism, and the scriptures, and acquitted themselves very creditably. The entertainment was kindly provided by several ladies in the town, under the management of Mrs Watts.

On the following Monday the children attending the Church Sunday Schools (who were not present on Friday) also had a similar festivity.

On Wednesday afternoon Mr Edward Henry Watts very liberally entertained upwards of seventy poor people with tea and cake in the Girls' School Room. The old folks seemed much to enjoy themselves. Mrs Watts and other ladies of the town kindly waited upon them. It was altogether a very gratifying scene.

14th December 1900

CONGREGATIONAL WINTER GARDEN

Friday was the last night of the winter garden in the Congregational schoolroom, and it was again largely attended.

A great deal of fun was occasioned by a competition in which those entering had to fish six apples out of a bath of water with a toasting fork, the prizes going to those who accomplished the feat in the least time. A great number entered, and the winners were eventually declared to be Master Bob Smith and Mr Fred Kirtland, jnr.

Considerable interest was also taken in a competition for caricature drawing, the prizes for which were awarded to Mr W. Stevens and Master Frank French.

During the evening an amusing stump speech was made by Mr F. Hudson, and various items were contributed by the band. The stalls, etc, were again well patronised, and the evening was spent in a most pleasant manner.

The financial results of the winter garden are very satisfactory. The total receipts amounted to £21 5s. 5d., and after expenses have been paid the sum of £19 9s. 7d. remains as a by no means inconsiderable start to the fund for the proposed additional buildings. The promoters may congratulate themselves on this good result.

27th December 1940

QUIET CHRISTMAS IN BICESTER

Christmas, 1940, in Bicester was an extremely quiet one, necessitated by the existing wartime conditions.

Family gatherings were, in most instances, quiet affairs, with so many away in the Forces, and the several evacuees in the town, both adults and children, were given a good time in their billets and elsewhere.

The general public's response to the post early appeal was appreciated at the Bicester Post Office, where temporary workers supplemented the regular staff, and the town and district had no cause for complaint in the deliveries before and on Christmas Day.

There were services at three churches in the town on Christmas morning - St Edburg's, where the Vicar was the celebrant at three Holy Eucharist services; the Congregational Church, where a united service was held, conducted by Councillor A.F. Lambourne, the Rev. E.R. Bishop giving a short address; and St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, where the Rev. Father Webb officiated.

At the Infectious Diseases Hospital the Matron (Mrs Fox) and her staff had decorated the wards, and Christmas fare was provided for 14 patients, the children, especially, spending a most enjoyable day.

The Cottage Hospital too put on a festive appearance to suit the occasion, and although there were only three patients in for Christmas they enjoyed turkey (the gift of Mrs Mostyn, of Hethe), plum pudding, etc., with extras for tea.

The women evacuees' club on the Market Square had a party in the afternoon and much fun and gaiety was evident.

Boxing Day saw a return to work for many people, although the shops were closed. One feature which always proves so popular, viz., the meet of the Bicester Hounds on the Market Square, was an event which this year was sadly missed.

24th December 1980

SCHOOLS ENTERTAIN

Christmas is a time when schools and playgroups stage special seasonal plays and concerts, though these days there is a great deal of variation on the Nativity theme. Schools in and around Bicester - too numerous for us to get round all - have launched themselves into productions as diverse as a modern musical retelling of the Nativity story "Follow that Star" at Five Acres School in Ambrosden to something with the delightful title of "Princess Prune Face" at Glory Farm Primary School at Bicester.

The pages of history were turned back at Kirtlington Primary School where old English customs for Christmas were revived. Headmaster Mr Frederick Ashley explained that this year the school had decided on a mediaeval entertainment and staged a Mummers' play, the yule log celebrations and the boar's head ceremony.

The old tale "Rumplestiltskin" was performed at St Mary's Roman Catholic Primary School in Bicester, while a traditional Nativity play was enacted by the youngsters at North Bicester Playgroup at the community centre in

Keble Road.

Primary schools often present for parents and friends different plays and concerts for infants and juniors. At Brookside Primary School, Bicester, for example, a concert by the younger children took in quite a variety of things including puppet type plays and the famous song "Supercalifragilistic-expialidocious" from the Disney musical film "Mary Poppins". While the juniors had in their concert "A Child's Christmas in Wales" by poet Dylan Thomas and a drama "The Gift of Christmas".

Christmas, too, is a time when children in schools are encouraged to think about others and not just what they can get out of the festival. For example, the juniors at Longfields Primary School, in Bicester, entertained the residents of Bucknell Manor old people's home with a seasonal lunch and performed excerpts from their concert.

Their concert for parents took in the Bicester Junior Orchestra, formed from young musicians in the town, and the school's own Longfields Recorder Ensemble. The younger children staged a Nativity.

At St Edburg's Primary in Bicester there was a full programme of seasonal concerts, but there too the children went round carol singing to the residents at nearby St Edburg's House old people's home in Old Place Yard. And they did not go empty handed, for they presented the home with a cheque for £50 which was the proceeds of the auction of produce held after the school's harvest festival earlier in the year. Mrs Almond, the head of the home, said the money would go towards the home's fund for buying an electronic organ for sing-songs and other entertainments.



Glory Farm children in "Princess Prune Face".



St Edburg's children hand over a £50 cheque at the old people's home.



Five Acres School, Ambrosden, in "Follow that Star".



Brookside Primary children were not afraid to tackle a tongue-twister in their concert.

Ten Tips for Christmas

Published by the Co-op Home Economist in the Bicester Advertiser, December 1980.

1. When boiling sprouts for Christmas dinner, put a piece of bread or crust in the water. This will stop the nasty smell cooking sprouts usually give off.
2. If you have dried fruit left over from last year and it has hardened, place in a bowl and cover with boiling water. Leave to stand for five minutes and drain and dry on a clean tea towel. The fruit will have regained its plumpness and can be used in cakes and puddings.
3. For ice cubes with a difference, place cherries, pieces of orange, lemon or mint leaves in the ice cube tray sections, fill with water and freeze for unusual party drinks.
4. To stop mincemeat bubbling out of mince pies, brush with cold water before adding the pastry top. You will bake superb mince pies every time.
5. As a special garnish for Christmas pork, remove the core from a small eating apple and fill with sage and onion stuffing. Wrap each apple in foil and cook in the oven along with the meat.

6. Inexpensive table decorations can be made with fruit. Dip soft-skinned fruit in beaten egg white and castor sugar and arrange attractively in a bowl with holly and ivy leaves. The fruit will remain edible for up to a week.
7. Festive table napkin holders can be made by securing pieces of cake frills to a three-inch length of cardboard tube. By using different colours and arranging alternately around the table, it adds extra effect.
8. Make your own pomanders either to hang on the Christmas tree or to give as gifts. For one small orange you will need 50g (2oz) whole cloves, braid, velvet or satin ribbon. Place in a plastic bag with a good piece of ground cinnamon and shake to cover the orange in the spice. Wrap in greaseproof paper and leave for 2-3 weeks. Circle the orange with braid or ribbon and decorate with beads and sequins.
9. Keep at one side all those free gifts and unwanted presents throughout the year, so that at Christmas you can make crackers or a lucky dip for guests.
10. Make a selection of homemade sweets, biscuits and preserves for those elderly aunts and uncles who are so difficult to buy for.

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THE "WHAT-TO-GIVE" PROBLEM

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Here are a few suggestions for every member of the family taken at random from our big selection.

<p>For Ladies</p> <p>Dressing Gowns, 7/11 to 25/- Cozy Slippers, 2/11 3/11 4/11 4/11 pair Handkerchiefs in fancy boxes, 1/6 to 4/9 Soap and Scent Compacts, 9d. to 3/6 Newest in Handbags, 2/9 to 22/6 Morley's Stockings, 1/11 2/11 3/6 3/11 Settee Sets, 4/11 to 10/11</p>	<p>For Girls</p> <p>Complete Red Cross Nursing outfit, 2/6 Baby Dolls, 2/6 and 3/6 Zig Saw puzzles, 6d., 1/-, 2/6 New games, 6d., 1/-, 2/6 Dolls' Fringes, 7/11, 1/11, 1/11, 1/11 Complete Cooking sets, 2/6</p>
<p>For Men</p> <p>Tonic shirts, with two collars, 4/6, 5/11, 7/6, 8/11 Famous Tootal Ties, 1/-, 1/6, 2/6 Fancy Sox, 1/-, 1/6, 2/-, 2/6 pair 6 Handkerchiefs in neat wood cigarette box, 3/6 Raincoats, lined plush, 25/-, 30/-, 35/- Kid Gloves, full lined wrist, 5/11 pair Box Brilliantine and Shaving Soap, 3/6</p>	<p>For Boys</p> <p>Moccasin sets, from 3/- each Hornby Train sets, from 5/6 each "Cowboy" and "Conductor" sets, 2/6 Toy Soldiers 6/d. to 2/6 "Frog" Airplanes, will fly, 5/6 Novelty Mechanical Toys, 6/d., 7/d., 1/-, 1/6, 2/6</p>
<p>For Babies</p> <p>Soft Woolly Toys, 1/3 and 2/6 Wool Remper and Jersey Suits, 2/11 and 6/11 Silk Dresses, 2/11 to 4/11 2/11 and 6/11 Washable Cuddly Dolls 3/6</p>	

The Shop-closing regulations are suspended during the week before Christmas. We shall be open late every night next week, and of course all day Thursday.

Self Help Clubs

I've heard about various "slate", "thrift" and other savings clubs before and how they were part of life in Bicester for many years, but I had no idea that there were so many in existence at the same time, or that their memberships were so large.

Each week members would pay into the club. The monies collected were then deposited into the bank to accumulate a little interest. If any member became ill and couldn't work they were entitled to claim money from the club funds, and if a member died then their relatives were paid money to help with funeral expenses. Then the remaining funds would be distributed equally to every member just before Christmas.

The following article, from December 1940, lists details for 20 clubs in the area, showing that over 2,580 people contributed to the schemes that year and collectively saved over £5,272.

During the past week or so the various slate and thrift clubs of the town and district have been engaged in their annual sharing-out, and in the majority of cases the dividends have been well up to standard.

Most of the slate clubs adopted emergency rules concerning members of H.M. Forces. The gist of these was that members joining the Forces could resign from their club, and where a full year's contributions had not been completed a proportion of the share-out was remitted,

according to the number of weeks paid. With the rapid call-up many members enjoyed the privilege of this rule. Others, however, continued their payments, although, naturally, they could not receive sickness benefit.

In view of the continuation of the war it is expected that there will be a general decrease in membership all round during the coming year, as men are called up.

Little change is to be reported in the management of the clubs, a tribute to the efficiency with which the various officials have conducted the business. We are indebted to the secretaries for the following particulars.

THE BICESTER CENTRAL

The 67 members of this old established club, which is held at the White Hart Inn, each received £1 1s. at the share-out on December 10th. Receipts included £113 18s. 3d. in contributions, and the amount paid out in sickness benefit was £28 10s. 4d. Four death levies during the year totalled £13 5s. The officials continue in office, viz, Councillor G. Plater, chairman; Mr W.J. Coggins, treasurer; and Mr R. Neal, 21 Priory Road, secretary.

THE WHITE LION

The White Lion Slate Club has a membership of 74, and Mr J. Ayris, of 1 Crumps Butts, is now secretary, the club having lost through death during the year, Mr A.J. Webb, who held the office for several years. The share-out was on December 18th, the amount each member received being 18s. Three death levies were made, and sickness benefit disbursed amounted to £25 11s. 8d. Contributions totalled £97. Mr R. Harris is chairman, and Mr W. Franklin is treasurer.

THE PLOUGH

Share-out night of the Plough Slate Club was on December 18th, when 97 members each received 17s. 11d. A total of £152 6s. 10d. was received in contributions, and sickness benefit amounted to £34 15s. Five members died during the year and levies were, in consequence, imposed. Mr R. Walker is chairman; Mrs C. Clifton is treasurer; and Mr C. Clifton, 100 North Street, is secretary.

THE CROSS KEYS

Recognised as the largest slate club in the district, with a membership of 489, the Cross Keys Club shared out on December 16th, and each member received 18s. 3d. The receipts for the year totalled £809 19s. 3d., which included contributions of £808 14s. 9d. and fines 18s. 9d. Sickness benefit to the extent of £165 10s. was dispersed. The new rule made last year, whereby each member paid threepence extra per fortnight to cover death levies, proved very popular. There was, in consequence, enough money to meet the demands of the six-and-a-half deaths which occurred - an unusually high number for one year - namely £170 17s. 6d. The officials of the club are: Mr W. Checkley, chairman; Mr J. Wilkins, treasurer; and Mr F. Smith, 88 Banbury Road, secretary.

THE SWAN

This club has been in existence for twelve years, and has never paid less than £1 each to its members at the annual share-out. Actually, this year, the club share-out to each individual member was £1, but the 4s. 6d. voucher money was returned, as explained above. The

membership is 364. Contributions amounted to £620 4s. 11d. and sickness benefit paid was £111 18s. 4d. There were two death levies. The members will continue to pay the additional penny per week in the hope that next year better circumstances will prevail to allow the purchase of extra fare for Christmas. Mr W. Kerwood is chairman of the club; Mr R.H. Jacobs, treasurer; and Mr F. Smith, 88 Banbury Road, is secretary.

THE STAR, HIGHFIELD

The amount each of the 42 members of The Star Slate Club received on December 10th was 15s. The contributions amounted to £56 14s. 9d., and on the expenditure side £18 13s. 4d. was dispersed in sickness benefit. There was one death levy. Mr A.J. Simons is chairman; Mrs J. Hudson is treasurer; and Mr J. Smith, 59 Highfield, is secretary.

THE SIX BELLS

127 members of this club received £1 0s. 6d. each at the share-out on December 19th. The contributions during the year reached a total of £170, and £31 was disbursed in sickness benefit. There were no deaths in this club. The officials are: Mr C. Saunders, chairman; Mr F. Irving, treasurer; and Mr A. Smith, Causeway, secretary.

THE ROSE & CROWN

The Rose and Crown Slate Club is a comparatively new one, and this year its 64 members each received the excellent share-out of £1 3s. 8d., together with voucher goods to the value of 4s. 4d. each, for which they had paid one penny per week extra to their slate club contributions. The contributions amounted to £90 9s. 11d., and sickness benefit paid totalled £11 14s. 2d. There were no death levies. Mr F. Edmunds is chairman; Mr F. Johnson, treasurer; and Mrs F. Johnson, secretary.

THE RED LION

This is another new club, which was started two years ago, and it has a membership of 65. The amount of share-out to each on December 19th was 17s. The income included £84 10s. in contributions, and the sickness benefit disbursed was £29 5s. Three death levies were imposed during the year. The secretary is Mr W. Smith, of 7 Cemetery Road; Mr James Hawkins of the Red Lion is treasurer; and Mr C. Tibbetts is chairman.

MIDDLETON STONEY AND DISTRICT SLATE CLUB

This club has a membership of 198, and at the share-out on December 12th the amount each received was 16s. No levy is imposed when a member's death occurs, but 1s. per member is deducted from club funds. One death occurred during the year, and sickness benefit disbursed was £85 1s. 6d. The amount of contributions was £266 1s. 6d. Mr A.A. Pye is chairman of the club, and Mr F. Varney, sen., is treasurer and secretary.

LAUNTON SLATE CLUB

151 members of Launton Slate Club each received £1 1s. 6d. at the annual share-out on December 19th. On the receipts side £206 10s. 8d. was paid in contributions, and expenditure included £29 2s. sickness benefit. There was one death levy. The officials are: Mr L. Penn, chairman; Mr P. Bateman, treasurer; and Mr J. Marriott, secretary.

FRINGFORD SLATE CLUB

The members of this club, which is held at the Butchers' Arms, Fringford, each received £1 2s. 1d. at the share-out on December 16th. Mrs A. Green is secretary; Mr T. Allen, chairman; and Mr H. Allen, treasurer.

FRINGFORD SCHOOL SLATE CLUB

This club is one of the most successful in the villages around; its membership at the end of the year totalled 381. The balance sheet shows income amounting to £559 15s. 6d., and payments £131 3s., including £86 15s. 10d. in sickness benefit and £38 3s. death levies. The credit balance left a share-out of £1 2s. 6d. to each member. Mr A. White continues as secretary, and Messrs. C. Alger and C. Ward were re-elected chairman and treasurer respectively. Messrs. W. Golder and F. Mansfield are stewards.

HETHE SLATE CLUB

The annual share-out of this club took place on December 11th, and the 140 members each received £1 0s. 21/2d. Contributions during the year amounted to £191 9s., and £49 8s. 10d. was paid out in sickness benefit. There was no loss of membership through death. The following officers continue to act: Mr A. Stewart, chairman; Mr T. Pollard, treasurer; and Mr W. Slatter, secretary.

STRATTON AUDLEY SLATE CLUB

This club received £178 10s. during the year in contributions, and sickness benefit paid amounted to £27 2s. 6d., thus the 127 members were able to receive £1 2s. 10d. each on December 18th. There were no death levies. The officials are: Mr W. Barnes, chairman; Mr E. Stevens, treasurer; and Mr F.A. Stevens, secretary.

THE CHESTERTON CLUBS

69 members of the Red Cow Slate Club each received 19s. 9d. on December 18th and a voucher for 4s. 4d., for which they had paid extra each week. During the year sickness benefit was paid to the extent of £25 5s., and there were two death levies. Mr G. Lapper holds the offices of treasurer and secretary. Mr R. Varney is chairman.

The Red Cow Thrift Club held its share-out on Friday, when the sum of £240 was paid out to the 40 members. The officials are: Mr R. Varney, chairman; Mr A.E. Roach, treasurer; Mr A.J. Sadler, secretary; and Messrs. J. Kerwood, A. Holloway, G. Smith and C. Pitts, committee. The auditors appointed were Messrs. T. Aldridge and E. Hopcraft.

The darts club, also held at the Red Cow, had their share-out yesterday week, each member receiving 14s. Mr A.E. Roach is secretary and treasurer.

THE SWAN THRIFT CLUB

This club is held every Saturday at the Swan Inn, and has a membership of 85. The amount paid out on December 14th was £523. Councillor T. Hudson is president; Mr F. Smith, chairman; Mr R.H. Jacobs, treasurer; and Mr H. Dean, 10 Bath Terrace, secretary, he having succeeded Mr H.C. Wilson, who has joined up.

THE ANGEL THRIFT CLUB

The Angel Christmas Dividing Club has proved a successful concern for several years, and this year the sum of £912 was paid out to members. Mr Jack Wilkins, who has been secretary of the club since its inception 14 years ago, has resigned, and Mr J.A. Beveridge, Banbury Road, has taken office. Mr F.E. Withington is president of the club, and Mr R.H. Taylor is treasurer.

- Matthew Hathaway

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Christmas Traditions

BOXING DAY

Boxing Day takes place on December 26th, which is also St. Stephen's Day (or 'the feast of Stephen'). There are two St. Stephens. The first is believed to have been a very early follower of Jesus and is said to have been the first Christian Martyr after he was stoned to death by some Jews who didn't believe in Jesus.

The second St. Stephen was a Missionary, in Sweden, in the 800s. He loved all animals but particularly horses. He was also a martyr and was killed by pagans in Sweden. In Germany there was a tradition that horses would be ridden around the inside of the church during the St. Stephen's Day service.

Both St. Stephens have been associated with charity and giving for a very long time; and historically that's what St Stephen's Day/Boxing Day was about.

Starting in the Middle Ages, it was the day when the alms box, collection boxes for the poor often kept in churches, were traditionally opened so that the contents could be distributed to poor people. In The Netherlands, some collection boxes were made out of rough earthenware pottery and were shaped like pigs. Giving us the term 'Piggy Bank'.

It was also the day when rich land owners would give 'gifts' (often some leftover food from the main Christmas feast) to those who worked and lived on their land; and later on it became traditional that servants got the day off to celebrate Christmas with their families on Boxing Day.

Before World War II, it was common for working people such as milkmen and butchers to travel round their delivery places and collect their Christmas box, or tip.

CHRISTMAS CAKE

The rich fruit cakes that are often associated with Christmas were originally Twelfth Cakes, which were eaten at the parties on Twelfth Night, ending the 12 Days of Christmas on 5th January. These started as enriched fruit cakes, more like Italian Panettone.

It then became fashionable to have large iced decorations on and over the cake to show you were rich enough to be able to afford lots of sugar to make the



icing. So the cake had to become more rich, solid and full of fruit to support the icing.

During the industrial revolution the 12 Days of Christmas became less important, because more people lived in towns and cities and had to start working again directly after Christmas Day and Boxing Day. So the big celebrations were moved to Christmas rather than Twelfth Night and the cakes became Christmas Cakes.

Twelfth Cakes also had a bean or pea cooked in them and the finder of the bean or pea became the King or Queen of the Twelfth Night party. When Twelfth Cakes became Christmas Cakes, the custom of putting tokens into a dish moved into Christmas Pudding.

CHRISTMAS CRACKERS

Christmas crackers were first made in 1847 by a London sweet maker called Tom Smith. He had seen the French 'bon bon' sweets (sugared almonds wrapped in pretty paper) on a visit to Paris in 1840. He came back to London and tried selling sweets like that in England and also included a small motto or love message in with the sweet. But they didn't sell very well. Then, in 1861, he launched his new range of what he called 'Bangs of Expectation'.

Legend says that, one night, while he was sitting in front of his log fire, he became very interested by the sparks and cracks coming from the fire. Suddenly, he thought what a fun idea it would be if his sweets and toys could be opened with a crack when their fancy wrappers were pulled in half.

However, looking into the history of the Tom Smith company, it's thought that Tom actually bought the recipe for the small cracks and bangs in crackers from a fireworks company called Brock's Fireworks. The story of him sitting by the fire was probably added to help sell his new items.

When Tom died, his expanding cracker business was taken over by his three sons, Tom, Walter and Henry. Walter introduced the hats into crackers and he also travelled around the world looking for new ideas for gifts to put in the crackers.

The company built up a big range of 'themed' crackers. There were ones for bachelors and spinsters, where the gifts were things like false teeth and wedding rings! There were also crackers for Suffragettes, war heroes and even Charlie Chaplin! Crackers were also made for special occasions like Coronations. Very expensive crackers were made such as the 'Millionaire's Crackers' which contained a solid silver box with a piece of gold and silver jewellery inside it.

CHRISTMAS CARDS

People have been sending Christmas greetings to each other for hundreds of years. The first recorded use of 'Merry Christmas' was in a letter sent in 1534.

The first known item that looked a bit like a Christmas card was given to King James I in 1611. This was more

like a large ornamental manuscript rather than a card as we think of them today. It was 33" x 24" and was folded into panels. It had a picture of a rose in the centre and a Christmas and New Year message to the King and his son was written into and around the rose. Also on the manuscript were four poems and a song.

The custom of sending Christmas cards, as we know them today, was started in 1843 by Sir Henry Cole. He was a senior civil servant who had helped set up the Public Record Office, where he was an Assistant Keeper, and in 1838 became the secretary to a committee for promoting postal reform and went on to play a key role in the introduction of postage stamps and the Penny Post.

Sir Henry had the idea of Christmas Cards with his friend John Horsley, who was an artist. They designed the first card and sold them for 1 shilling each. The card had three panels, the outer two showing people caring for the poor and the centre one showed a family having a large Christmas dinner. About 1,000 were printed and sold, advertised with the slogan: "Just published, a Christmas Congratulations Card; or picture emblematical of old English festivity to perpetuate kind recollections between dear friends".



As printing methods improved, Christmas cards became much more popular and were produced in large numbers from about 1860. In 1870 the cost of sending a post card, and also Christmas cards, dropped to half a penny. This meant even more people were able to send cards.

Early cards usually had pictures of the Nativity scene on them. In late Victorian times, robins and snow-scenes became popular. In those times the postmen were nicknamed 'Robin Postmen' because of the red uniforms they wore.

HOLLY AND IVY

Holly, Ivy and other greenery such as Mistletoe were originally used in pre-Christian times to help celebrate the Winter Solstice Festival, ward off evil spirits, and celebrate new growth.

When Christianity came into Western Europe, some countries kept the greenery and gave it Christian meanings.

The prickly leaves of Holly represent the crown of thorns that Jesus wore when he was crucified. The berries are the drops of blood that were shed by Jesus



because of the thorns. In the Middle Ages, holly was also thought to bring good luck and to have healing powers. It was often planted near houses in the belief that it protected the inhabitants.

Ivy has to cling to something to support itself as it grows. This reminds us that we need to cling to God for support in our lives.

In pagan times, Holly was thought to be a male plant and Ivy a female plant. An old tradition says that whichever one is brought into the house first over winter, tells you whether the man or woman of the house would rule that year! But it was unlucky to bring either into a house before Christmas Eve.

MISTLETOE

Mistletoe grows on a range of trees including willow, apple and oak. The tradition of hanging it in the house goes back to the times of the ancient Druids. It is supposed to possess mystical powers which bring good luck to the household and wards off evil spirits. It was also used as a sign of love and friendship in Norse mythology.

When the first Christians came to Western Europe, some tried to ban the use of Mistletoe as a decoration in Churches, but many still continued to use it. York Minster used to hold a special Mistletoe Service in the winter, where wrongdoers in the city of York could come and be pardoned.

The custom of kissing under Mistletoe is first recorded in a musical in 1784. It was also depicted in the illustrations in the first edition of 'A Christmas Carol', published in 1843, and this might have helped to popularise the custom.

The original custom was that a berry was picked from the sprig of Mistletoe before the person could be kissed and when all the berries had gone, there could be no more kissing.

CHRISTMAS PUDDING

Christmas (or Plum) Pudding is the traditional end to the British Christmas dinner. But what we think of as Christmas Pudding, is not what it was originally like!

Christmas pudding originated as a 14th century porridge called 'frumenty'. It was usually made with cracked wheat boiled with either milk or broth and was a peasant staple. More luxurious recipes include eggs, almonds, currants, sugar, saffron and orange flower water. It was eaten as a fasting meal in preparation for the Christmas festivities.

By 1595, frumenty was slowly changing into a plum pudding, having been thickened with eggs, breadcrumbs, dried fruit and given more flavour with the addition of beer and spirits. It became the customary Christmas dessert around 1650, but in 1664 the Puritans banned it as a bad custom.

In 1714, King George I re-established it as part of the Christmas meal, having tasted and enjoyed Plum Pudding. By Victorian times, Christmas Puddings had changed into something similar to the ones that are eaten today.

Over the years, many superstitions have surrounded Christmas Puddings. One superstition says that the pudding should be made with 13 ingredients to represent Jesus and His Disciples and that every member of the family should take turns to stir the pudding with a wooden spoon from east to west, in honour of the Wise Men.

Although Christmas Puddings are eaten at Christmas, some customs associated with the pudding are about Easter. The decorative sprig of holly on the top of the pudding is a reminder of Jesus' Crown of Thorns that he wore when he was crucified. Brandy or another alcoholic drink is sometimes poured over the pudding and lit at the table to make a spectacular display. This is said to represent Jesus' love and power.

During Victorian times, puddings in big and rich houses were often cooked in fancy moulds. These were often in the shapes of towers or castles. Normal people just had puddings in the shape of balls. If the pudding was a bit heavy, they were called cannonballs!



Putting a silver coin in the pudding is another age-old custom that is said to bring luck to the person that finds it. A tradition that dates back to the Twelfth Night cakes of old.

The first coins used were a Silver Farthing or penny. After WWI it became a silver threepenny bit. In 1937 the

threepence coin changed design (and also became made from mostly brass) so the silver sixpence took over as the pudding coin. You might also get other items (sometimes called 'tokens' or 'favourites') placed in the Christmas Pudding which have special meanings:

- Bachelor's Button: If a single man found it, they would stay single for the following year.
- Old Maid's Thimble: If a single woman found it, they would stay single for the following year.
- A Ring: If a single person found this, it meant they would get married in the following year.

MINCE PIES

Mince Pies were originally filled with meat, such as lamb, as well as the dried fruits and spices mix we have today. They were also first made in oval or rectangular shapes to represent the manger that Jesus slept in as a baby, with the top representing his swaddling clothes. Sometimes they even had a 'pastry baby Jesus' on the top.



During the Stuart and Georgian times mince pies were a status symbol at Christmas. Very rich people liked to show off at their Christmas parties by having pies made in different shapes like stars, crescents, hearts, and flowers. Having pies like this meant you were rich and could afford to employ the best, and most expensive, pastry cooks.

A custom from the middle ages says that if you eat a mince pie on every day from Christmas to Twelfth Night you will have happiness for the next 12 months!

CHRISTMAS TREE

The evergreen fir tree has traditionally been used to celebrate winter festivals, both pagan and Christian, for thousands of years. Pagans used branches of it to decorate their homes during the winter solstice, as it made them think of the spring to come. The Romans used Fir Trees to decorate their temples at the festival of Saturnalia. Christians use it as a sign of everlasting life with God.

Nobody is really sure when fir trees were first used as Christmas trees. It probably began about 1000 years ago in Northern Europe. Many early Christmas Trees seem to have been hung upside down from the ceiling using chains (hung from chandeliers or lighting hooks).

Other early Christmas Trees, across many parts of

northern Europe, were cherry or hawthorn plants (or a branch of the plant) that were put into pots and brought inside so they would hopefully flower at Christmas time. If you couldn't afford a real plant, people made pyramids of woods and they were decorated to look like a tree with paper, apples and candles. Sometimes they were carried around from house to house, rather than being displayed in a home.

A picture from Germany in 1521 which shows a tree being paraded through the streets with a man riding a horse behind it. The man is dressed as a bishop, possibly representing St. Nicholas.

In 1584, the historian Balthasar Russow wrote about a tradition, in Riga, of a decorated fir tree in the market square where the young men "went with a flock of maidens and women, first sang and danced there and then set the tree aflame". There's a record of a small tree in Bremen, Germany from 1570. It is described as a tree decorated with "apples, nuts, dates, pretzels and paper flowers".

The first person to bring a Christmas Tree into a house, in the way we know it today, may have been the 16th century German preacher Martin Luther. A story is told that, one night before Christmas, he was walking through the forest and looked up to see the stars shining through the tree branches. It was so beautiful, that he went home and told his children that it reminded him of Jesus, who left the stars of heaven to come to earth at Christmas.

Another story says that St. Boniface of Crediton, in Devon, left England and travelled to Germany to preach to the pagan tribes and convert them to Christianity. He is said to have come across a group of pagans about to sacrifice a young boy while worshipping an oak tree. In anger, and to stop the sacrifice, St. Boniface is said to have cut down the oak tree and, to his amazement, a young fir tree sprang up from the roots of the oak tree. St. Boniface took this as a sign of the Christian faith and his followers decorated the tree with candles so that St. Boniface could preach to the pagans at night.

In Germany, the first Christmas Trees were decorated with edible things, such as gingerbread and gold covered apples. Then glass-makers made special small ornaments similar to some of the decorations used today. In 1605 an unknown German wrote: "At Christmas they set up fir trees in the parlours of Strasbourg and hang thereon roses cut out of many-coloured paper, apples, wafers, gold foil, sweets, etc."

At first, a figure of the Baby Jesus was put on the top of the tree. Over time it changed to an angel that told the shepherds about Jesus, or a star like the Wise Men saw.

The first Christmas Tree in the UK might well have been set up by Queen Charlotte, the German wife of King George III. In 1800 she had a tree set up at the Queen's Lodge in Windsor for a children's party for rich and noble families. Soon having a tree had become popular amongst some rich families.

They became very popular throughout the country from the mid 1840s, when reports of 'the Royal tree' were printed in newspapers. In 1848, a drawing of

"The Queen's Christmas tree at Windsor Castle" was published in the Illustrated London News. It showed Queen Victoria, her German Husband Prince Albert, and their young children around a tree which was set up on a table. The publication of the drawing helped Christmas trees become popular throughout the country.



In Victorian times, the tree would have been decorated with candles to represent stars. In many parts of Europe, candles are still used to decorate Christmas trees.

TINSEL

Tinsel was also created in Germany, where it was originally made from thin strips of beaten silver. But when plastic tinsel was invented, it became very popular as it was much cheaper than real silver and also lighter to go on the tree.

There are also folk stories about how tinsel was created - by The Christmas Spider!

These tales seem to have started in Eastern Germany, Poland or Ukraine but are also told in parts of Finland and Scandinavia.

All the versions of the story involve a poor family who can't afford to decorate a Tree for Christmas (in some versions the tree grew from a pine cone in their house, in others the family have bought a tree into the house). When the children go to sleep on Christmas Eve a spider covers the tree in cobwebs. Then on Christmas morning the cobwebs are magically turned into silver and gold strands which decorate the tree!

Some versions of the story say that it's the light of the

sun which changed the cobwebs into silver and gold but other versions say it's Father Christmas who made the magic happen.

MUMMING

Mumming is also an ancient pagan custom that was an excuse for people to have a party at Christmas. The tradition was that men and women would swap clothes, put on masks and go visiting their neighbours, singing, dancing or putting on a play with a silly plot. The leader or narrator of the mummers was dressed as Father Christmas.

The custom of Mumming might go back to Roman times, when people used to dress up for parties at New Year. It is thought that, in the UK, it was first done on St. Thomas's day or the shortest day of the year.

In mediaeval times, it had turned into an excuse for people to go begging round the houses and committing crimes. It became so bad that Henry VIII made a law saying that anyone caught mumming wearing a mask would be put in prison for three months.

YULE LOG

The custom of burning the Yule Log goes back before mediaeval times. It was originally a Nordic tradition. Yule is the name of the old Winter Solstice festivals in Scandinavia and other parts of northern Europe.

The Yule Log was originally an entire tree, that was carefully chosen and brought into the house with great



ceremony. The largest end of the log would be placed into the fire hearth while the rest of the tree stuck out into the room. The log would be lit from the remains of the previous year's log, which had been carefully stored away, and slowly fed into the fire over the Twelve Days of Christmas.

The custom of the Yule Log spread all over Europe and different kinds of wood were used in different countries. In England, Oak was traditional; in Scotland, it was Birch; while in France, it was Cherry. Also in France, the log was sprinkled with wine before it was burnt, so that it would smell nice when it was lit.

In Devon and Somerset some people had a very large bunch of Ash twigs instead of the log. This comes from a local legend that Joseph, Mary and Jesus were very cold when the shepherds found them on Christmas Night. So the shepherds got some bunches of twigs to burn to keep them warm.

As fireplaces gave way to central heating, Yule Logs became smaller and were placed as a centrepiece on the dinner table with candles on top and sweets and treats piled around. Eventually the log became the sweet treat itself when it was replaced with a cake, covered in chocolate but still topped with the candles.

TURKEY

Turkeys became fashionable to eat for Christmas in the UK in the 1840s and 1850s. In 'A Christmas Carol' by Charles Dickens, which was published in 1843, the Cratchit family first have a goose, but at the end of the book Ebenezer Scrooge gives them a turkey, because it was bigger. And in 1851 Queen Victoria first had a turkey at Christmas (along with the more traditional goose and beef). In Mrs Beeton's 1861 "Book of Household Management", turkey was praised as the Christmas meal for the growing 'middle classes' and the book even included instructions on how to carve it 'correctly'.

The growing railway network in the UK towards the end of the 1800s meant that turkeys could be moved much more quickly around the country. But it wasn't until after WWII, when farming became more efficient and the price dropped significantly, that turkey became the traditional Christmas meal.

- Matthew Hathaway

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