



Christmas-Through-The-Ages

Winter Solstice

The middle of winter has long been a time of celebration around the world. Centuries before the birth of Jesus, early Europeans celebrated light and birth in the darkest days of winter. The early inhabitants of Wiltshire, who would have been familiar with sites such as Stonehenge and the Celtic Iron-age hill fort at Old Sarum, 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. The Winter Solstice falls on the shortest day of the year (21st December) and was celebrated in Britain long before the arrival of Christianity. The Druids (Celtic priests) would cut the mistletoe that grew on the oak tree and give it as a blessing. Oaks were seen as sacred and the winter fruit of the mistletoe was a symbol of life in the dark winter months. It was also the Druids who began the tradition of the Yule log. The Celts thought that the sun stood still for twelve days in the middle of winter and during this time a log was lit to conquer the darkness, banish evil spirits and bring luck for the coming year. Many of these customs are still followed today and have been incorporated into the Christian and secular celebrations of Christmas.

Romans

The Romans also held a festival to mark the Winter Solstice. Saturnalia ran for seven days from 17th December. It was a time when the ordinary rules were turned upside down. Men dressed as women and masters dressed as servants. The festival also involved processions, decorating houses with greenery, lighting candles and giving presents. Many Pagan traditions had been brought to Britain by the invading Roman soldiers. These included covering houses in greenery and bawdy partying that had its roots in the unruly festival of Saturnalia. The Church attempted to curb Pagan practices and popular customs were given Christian meaning. Carols that had started as Pagan songs for celebrations such as midsummer and harvest were taken up by the Church. By the late medieval period the singing of Christmas carols had become a tradition.

Medieval Christmas

Medieval Christmas lasted 12 days from Christmas Eve on 24th December, until the Epiphany (Twelfth Night) on 6th January. Epiphany comes from a Greek word that means 'to show', meaning

the time when Jesus was revealed to the world. Even up until the 1800s the Epiphany was at least as big a celebration as Christmas day.

Victorians

The Victorians gave us the kind of Christmas we know today, reviving the tradition of carol singing, borrowing the practice of card giving from St. Valentine's day and popularising the Christmas tree. Although the Victorians attempted to revive the Christmas of medieval Britain, many of the new traditions were Anglo-American inventions. From the 1950s, carol singing was revived by ministers, particularly in America, who incorporated them into Christmas celebrations in the Church. Christmas cards were first sent by the British but the Americans, many of whom were on the move and away from their families, picked up the practice because of a cheap postal service and because it was a good way of keeping in contact with people at home. Christmas trees were a German tradition, brought to Britain and popularised by the royal family. Prince Albert first introduced the Christmas tree into the royal household in Britain.

From far back beyond living memory, the men of Berwick St James have gone out carol singing in the earliest hours of Christmas morning. It is a thrilling thing to be awakened in the dark or the moonlight of Christmas morning, at about two o'clock, perhaps, by the powerful men's voices. Years ago, the singers used to practice on Christmas Eve in a house - now pulled down - that stood somewhere opposite the present Reading Room. At midnight they started out. In those days they did not go to Winterbourne Stoke. During the last dozen years or so the old customs have begun to break up. Nowadays the singers go to Winterbourne Stoke on Christmas Eve and have already sung there before they begin their singing in Berwick on Christmas morning.

Wilton Christmas Tree

"The Christmas Tree for the Sunday Scholars, was quite a new kind of treat for them, as hardly any of them had ever seen one before. It was given yesterday. The tree itself was the gift of Mr Challis, Head Gardener at Wilton and was a fine specimen, standing about seven or eight feet from the ground. It was kindly fetched from Wilton by one of Mr Elliot's carts. On its arrival, at about three o'clock it was fixed in the classroom and was very soon decorated with a large variety of presents of all kinds and sizes, consisting of toys, garments, sweets, dolls etc. Many willing hands made short work and in an hour or two the tree looked like a bit of fairy land. There was a hush of admiration, which gave way to louder expressions of satisfaction and merriment, as the children became possessors of the good things displayed before them

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