

A Victorian Christmas

Queen Victoria's reign (1837–1901) was a 63-year period of significant industrial, political, and colonial expansion for Great Britain, known as the Victorian era.

Victorian era Christmas traditions include exchanging cards and 'Christmas Crackers', decorating evergreen trees thanks to Prince Albert's German influence, enjoying lavish Christmas feasts with turkey and mince pies, and playing parlour games.



Queen Victoria with Prince Albert in 1859
© Royal Collection Trust

The exchange of gifts grew in importance, with items placed under the tree, and carols and door-to-door singing became popular for family entertainment.



The Origins of the Christmas Tree

Queen Victoria's German husband Prince Albert helped to make the Christmas tree as popular in Britain as they were in his native Germany when he brought one to Windsor Castle in the 1840s. Previously, Queen Charlotte, wife of King George III, had introduced a tree in 1800, but the tradition didn't take hold until Prince Albert's influence.



The pivotal illustration: An illustration of the couple and their children around the tree was published in the Illustrated London News in 1848.

Public adoption: This image was widely republished and inspired people to adopt the Christmas tree as a fashionable holiday decoration in their own homes.



Victorian Christmas Traditions

Victorian decorations:

Trees were decorated with candles (a fire hazard), apples, and other ornaments. Later, the first manufactured ornaments became available in the late 19th century.



Foliage for Decorations:

Holly, Ivy, and Mistletoe were common decorations, with Mistletoe used for kissing under (popular with the Victorians). These common plants all produce winter berries and were held to be “magical” long before Victorian times. The Holly berries were said to repel witchcraft, and a berry-laden sprig would be carried into the Victorian house by a male and used to decorate the Christmas pudding. Mistletoe had pagan origins and in Victorian times it was not allowed in churches.

Greetings of the Season

Communication:

The 'Penny Post' was first introduced in Britain in 1840 by Rowland Hill. The idea was simple; a penny stamp paid for the postage of a letter or card to anywhere in Britain.

This simple idea paved the way for the sending of the first Christmas cards. Sir Henry Cole tested the water in 1843 by printing a thousand cards for sale in his art shop in London at one shilling each. The popularity of sending cards was helped along when in 1870 a halfpenny postage rate was introduced.



The 1st Christmas Card



The first Christmas cards in England were designed for Sir Henry Cole, the Chairman of the Society of the Arts.

The year was 1846 and the first 100 Christmas cards, designed by John Calcott Horsley, were printed at great expense which rather hindered the idea from taking off. However, shortly afterwards colour lithography was developed making printing much cheaper. Another significant factor was the rising popularity of the Royal Mail allowing postage costs to be reduced to one half penny per ounce. By the early 1870s, anyone who was anyone could afford to send Christmas card greetings. Initially, Victorian Christmas cards were single postcards with simple designs, but soon plum puddings, robins, and snowy scenes became popular designs.



Victorian Festive Food Traditions

Christmas Feast:

A large, family-focused meal became a centrepiece of the celebration.

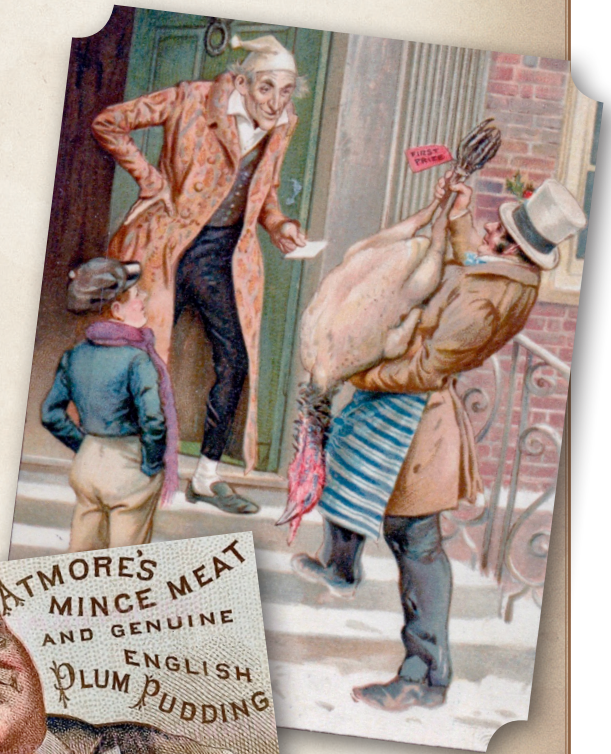



Turkey:

Roasted Turkey became the popular main course, replacing goose or beef.


Mince Pies:

Mince pies, traditionally containing meat, were adapted to a fruitier version.





Victorian Gift Giving Traditions



Under the Tree: Presents were placed under the Christmas tree and grew in size, moving from small trinkets or sweets to shop-bought items.

Handmade Gifts: Wealthy Victorian women displayed craft skills by making and giving handmade gifts such as knitted items or needlework.

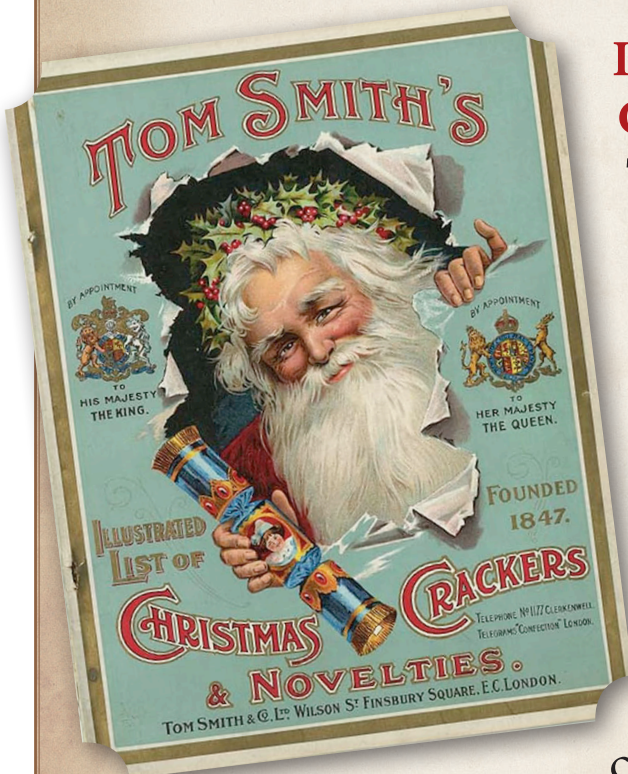
Christmas Presents: At the start of Queen Victoria's reign, children's toys tended to be handmade and therefore expensive, meaning only rich people could afford them. Factories brought about mass production, with products such as games, dolls, books and clockwork toys all at a more affordable price. Affordable that is to 'middle class' families. In a Christmas stocking of a 'poor child' (which first became popular from around 1870) typically contained only an apple, an orange and a few nuts.



Victorian Entertainment Traditions

Carols and Carolling: Carols were revived, and door-to-door carolling by families and friends to spread joy became a popular activity.

Parlour Games: Families enjoyed parlour games like charades, Truth or Dare, and the (sometimes violent) game of Blind Man's Bluff.



Introduction of the Christmas cracker: In 1846, Thomas J. Smith, a London confectioner, had a great idea for selling more sweets at Christmas. He wrapped a bonbon in a twist of coloured paper, added a love note, a paper hat and a banger mechanism which was said to have been inspired by the crackle of a log fire! This

new idea took off, and ironically the bonbons were eventually replaced with a small toy or novel.

Evolution of Christmas

Queen Victoria's Influence:

Queen Victoria's reign saw the transformation of Christmas from a rowdy, seldom-celebrated holiday into the biggest annual event on the British calendar.

Boxing Day: The tradition of giving boxes of gifts, leftover food, or money to servants on 26th December is said to have contributed to the name of Boxing Day.

Music: Carol Singers and Musicians visited houses singing and playing the new popular carols:

1843 - O Come all ye Faithful

1848 - Once in Royal David's City

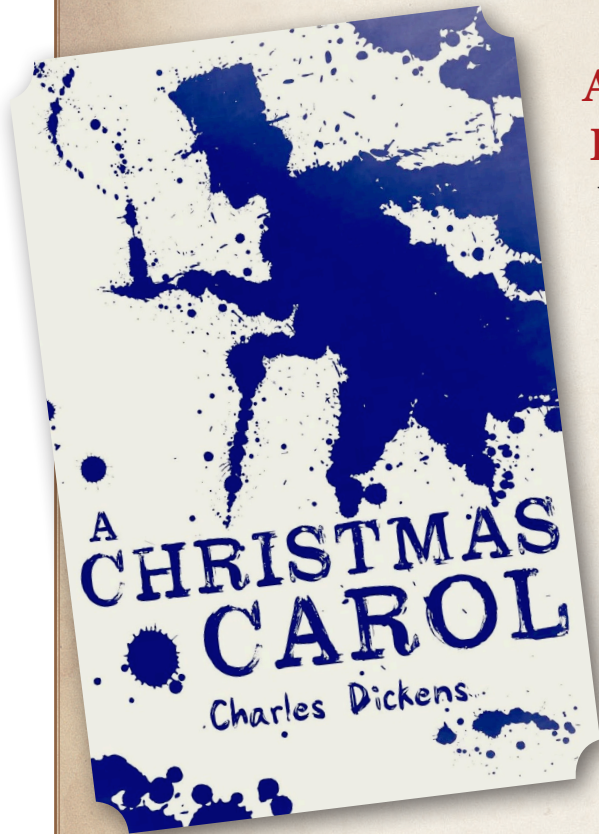
1851 - See Amid the Winters Snow

1868 - O Little Town of Bethlehem

1883 - Away in a Manger.



Dickens: A Festive Tale



A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens was published in 1843:

Written to raise awareness of some of the problems in Victorian society. He thought that many of these problems could be solved if people were kinder to each other and more support for the poorest in society.

Setting the scene...

On Christmas Eve, Ebenezer Scrooge and his clerk, Bob

Cratchit, are at work. Scrooge refuses an invite from his nephew, Fred, to have Christmas dinner with him. He also refuses to donate to charity. Scrooge doesn't even want to let Bob have Christmas Day off.

That night, Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former business partner, Jacob Marley. Marley died seven years earlier and explains that he is being punished because of how he lived his life. He warns Scrooge to change his ways to avoid the same fate and says that Scrooge will be visited by three more ghosts that night...

Ghosts of Christmas...



Ghost of Christmas Past:

Appears as a child, a figure of light, and represents memory, showing Scrooge his youthful joy and the path that led to his bitterness.

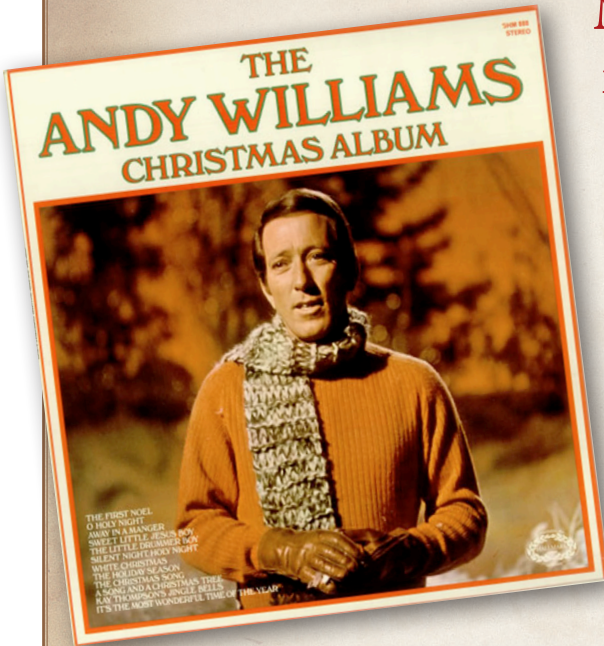
Ghost of Christmas

Present: Depicted (left) as a jolly, middle-aged man in

a housecoat, surrounded by a feast, symbolizing generosity and the true spirit of the holiday by showing Scrooge the plight of the poor and his own nephew's family.

Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come: A shadowy, cloaked figure that personifies the fear of death and future consequences, revealing a dismal future if Scrooge continues his miserly path.

Ghosts Stories...



Modern songs which refer to the traditional telling of ghost stories at Christmas time:

The Christmas song that mentions ghost stories is “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” which includes the following:

*“There’ll be parties for hosting,
Marshmallows for toasting,
And carolling out in the snow.
There’ll be scary ghost stories,
And tales of the glories of
Christmases long, long ago”*

The Line *“There’ll be scary ghost stories”* refers to the Victorian era tradition of telling ghost stories during the winter, which was a popular pastime for families gathered indoors during the holiday season. The popular festive song was written in 1963 by Edward Pola and George Wyle. It was recorded and released that year by pop singer Andy Williams for his first Christmas album, The Andy Williams Christmas Album.

Victoria's Last Christmas

Queen Victoria spent her last Christmas at Osborne House (Isle of Wight) in 1900. It was forty years exactly since Prince Albert had celebrated his final Christmas in 1860 at Windsor, the setting for so many happy family festivities in the past.



Prince Albert did not live to see Christmas 1861, dying on 14th December in the same room in which with strange historical prescience, George IV and William IV had also died, in 1830 and 1837 respectively. In December 1862, Queen Victoria wrote:

*“Christmas, formerly such
a dear happy time, came
so sadly before me”*



The Holidays: Boxing Day

The wealth generated by the new factories and industries of the Victorian era allowed middle class families in England and Wales to take time off from work and celebrate over two days, Christmas Day and Boxing Day. Boxing Day, 26th December, earned its name as the day servants and working people opened the boxes in which they had collected gifts of money from the 'rich folk'.



Boxing Day Food: Since Boxing Day was traditionally a day off for the servants, including the cook, leftovers from the Christmas feast were usually served.



Boxing Day

Confusing Origins

Some suggest that the origins of Boxing Day can be found during the Victorian era, but it appears to have begun much earlier.



“Good King Wenceslas Looked Out On The Feast Of Stephen”:

The traditional Christmas carol ‘Good King Wenceslas’ points us to a 10th century start to the Boxing Day tradition. Wenceslas, a 10th century Bohemian Duke, surveyed his land on St. Stephen’s Day (26th December) and saw a peasant gathering wood in the middle of a snowstorm.

Moved with compassion, Wenceslas collected food and wine from his

own stores and took them through the storm to the peasant’s home. His charitable deed became associated with St. Stephen’s day, making it a day for acts of charity toward the needy.

Medieval Connections to Boxing Day:

During the Middle Ages, churches maintained collection boxes for the poor. By tradition, these boxes were opened and the contents distributed to the poor on the feast of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. The association with the alms boxes may have led to the title, Boxing Day.



