

# A 1950s Christmas

In the 1950s the Christmas season did not begin until well into December, although some shops would begin to show festive displays at the beginning of the month.

Department stores especially would display wondrous things and adorn their windows with tempting treats. In town, the air would be filled with the aromas of 'real' Christmas pine trees and roasted Chestnuts being sold by street vendors. The Salvation Army would be playing festive music and carols singers would add to the Yuletide atmosphere.

There was no internet for shopping. The purchase of goods was mainly done in shops, occasionally via door-to-door salesmen or newspaper advertisements.



# Festive Family Time

Most families in the 1950s would not have had a fridge so buying of food had to be carefully planned for everyday and especially for the festive period.

The making of paper chains and the planning of the Nativity play in schools signalled an air of excitement for children as lessons decreased a little to be replaced by the familiar Christmas routine.

Christmas cards were the main way to pass on Christmas greetings often with letters enclosed.

Decoration of the house usually began just a few days before the big day with the decorating of the tree, hanging of paper chains / decorations and sprigs of holly strategically placed.

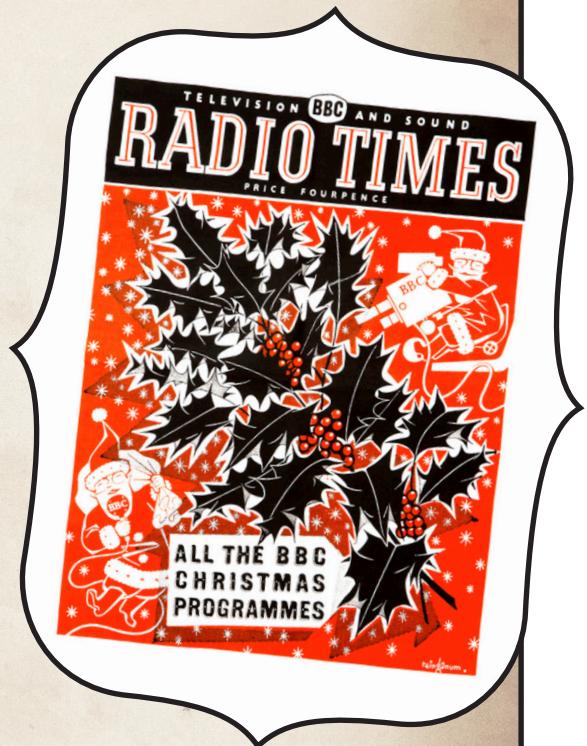


# Vintage Traditions

The annual festive issue of the Radio Times would be purchased - so families could plan their festive entertainment.

Christmas itself was quite a short-lived affair and did not begin until dad arrived home after work on Christmas Eve. There was no early finishing of work on the 24th of December.

Almost every child delighted in the Christmas Eve the ritual of leaving a mince pie and a glass of sherry for Father Christmas and maybe a carrot too - for Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, if he was lucky. The most important custom for children was the hanging of an empty stocking (or pillowcase) at the foot of their beds or on the fireplace.



# Christmas Stockings

The contents of Christmas stockings were not exciting by today's standards. However, magical to the children of the period. A selection of sweets, an orange, nuts, a shiny coin or two, sugar mice, and other small gifts.

**To a 1950s child**, the extreme cold of their bedroom did not detract from the excitement of finding that Father Christmas had visited whilst they slept.

**In the 1950s**, opening presents at Christmas involved children receiving gifts from a stocking first, and then the larger presents under the tree on Christmas morning. Many families would have a less materialistic Christmas than today, with fewer presents and often just enough for each child. The process of opening gifts was a time for family bonding, games, and sometimes the whole family gathered around the tree to witness the moment of gift-giving.



*Hanging stockings in 1956  
Image credit: FLIPSIDE*



# 1950s Gift Opening

**Christmas Eve:** Children hung stockings on their beds and waited for their parents to fill them with treats like oranges and walnuts, as well as other small gifts. Some families opened one present on Christmas Eve after dinner.

**Christmas Morning:** After waking up, children would find their stockings filled with gifts and then go downstairs to see the large Christmas tree and any gifts piled underneath.

**Gift-giving:** Children would get a smaller number of presents, but they would still be excited about things like new board games, craft kits, and new toys.

**The gift-opening process:** In many families, the tradition of opening presents was a leisurely and family-focused event, with people gathering to watch each other unwrap their gifts.

**After opening gifts:** Following the gift-opening, families would often share a large meal and enjoy a Christmas-themed movie or holiday-related festivities.



# Differences in 1950s gift-giving from today:

**Less materialistic:** The 1950s had a different approach to gift-giving, with a greater focus on experiences and less on material goods.

**Fewer presents:** Children typically received fewer presents than they do today, and there was a general sense that a limited number of gifts was the norm.

**More family-focused:** The emphasis was on enjoying the time spent together, rather than on the quantity of gifts received.

Generally, children only received one big present, a wind-up toy, a big doll, an Air-fix model, a Meccano set or a board game. Some lucky children could be seen with their new scooter or roller skates outside in the street trying out (or showing off) their new present.



# Christmas Day Routine (1)

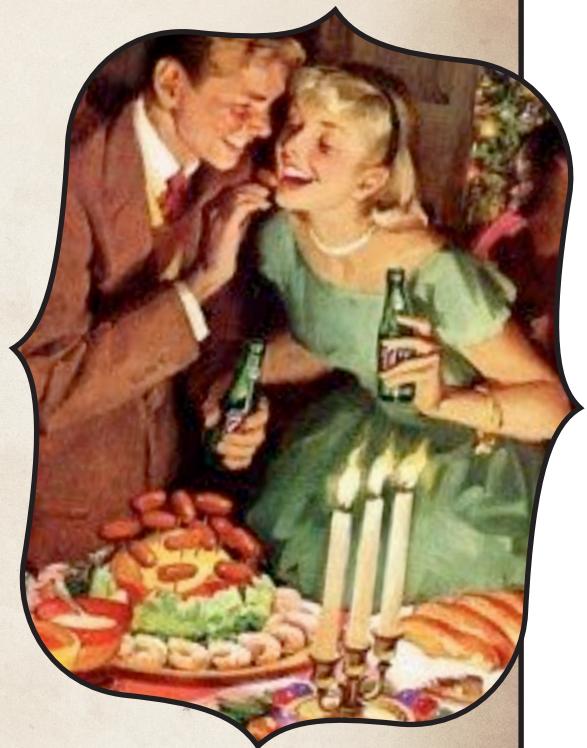
A typical 1950s Christmas Day routine consisted of breakfast, church, Christmas dinner, the Queen's speech and a buffet of sandwiches and cake.

Mothers had been busy in the lead up to the festive period - baking Christmas Cake and Christmas Pudding. Mince Pies and Sausage Rolls were often baked on Christmas Eve.

Everyone got 'dressed up' for Christmas Day even if they stayed at home. Fathers wore shirt and tie (but they always did anyway).

The best China crockery and glassware would adorn the Christmas table, and Christmas Dinner would be served at 1 o'clock sharp!

Most families had roast chicken as turkey and goose were very expensive. Christmas Pudding, typically made by Mother, would follow the main course. Always including traditionally threepenny and sixpenny pieces. A walk after dinner was essential.



## Christmas Day Routine (2)



the Long Library at Sandringham, Norfolk. Previously, the Christmas message would have been broadcast on the radio.

During the 1950s not all families owned a Television set, but if you did, a big variety programme was the television highlight in the evening. Some families though, would play board games or cards and if there was a large family gathering there may be a singsong around the piano.

Shops were all closed on Boxing Day. It was considered a family day - either staying home or visiting relatives.

There wasn't much to watch on television which was not switched on until 3 o'clock for the Queen's speech. Many families stood up for the opening National Anthem. 1957 saw HM Queen Elizabeth's first televised Christmas message, broadcast live from



# 1950s TV & Radio (1)



In 1953, BBC's first children's television series began broadcasting with 'Watch With Mother' a progression from BBC radio's 'Listen With Mother'. The programme was aimed at pre-school children, it initially only featured Andy Pandy and the

Flower Pot Men but by 1955 the daily 15-minute programmes included:

- **Monday:** 'Picture Book'
- **Tuesday:** 'Andy Pandy' (*pictured right*)
- **Wednesday:** 'Bill and Ben - The Flower...  
...Pot Men' (*pictured above*)
- **Thursday:** 'Rag, Tag and Bobtail'
- **Friday:** 'The Wooden Tops.'

**In the 1950s there was hardly any TV!**

**Neither was there:** mobile phones / smart phones, internet, home computers or computer games. Toys were of traditional nature, included: Jacks, Marbles, Skipping Ropes, Bats and Balls, Books, and Bicycles.

**How did they manage?** With just two black & white TV channels for two hours a day (no remote control) and one land-line telephone in the hallway.



## 1950s TV & Radio (2)



'Muffin the Mule' with Annette Mills was shown on TV as early as 1946 but ceased broadcasting when Annette Mills died in 1955. Muffin appeared with many animal friends including Prudence and Primrose Kitten, Larry the Lamb, Oswald the

Ostrich, Poppy the Parrot and many more. Sooty (1955) with Harry Corbett was also a great favourite.

### Other notable shows in the UK for young children include:

- Andy Pandy (1950)
- Pinky and Perky (1957)
- Captain Pugwash (1957) *Right >*
- Ivor The Engine (1959)
- Noggin The Nog (1959).

Programmes such as 'Crackerjack' (1955) with Eamonn Andrews, 'Blue Peter' (1958), 'The Adventures of Robin Hood' (1955-1960) with Richard Green, and 'William Tell' (1958), appealed to older children. All in black and white of course!



# 1950s Childhood (1)

Children spent most of their time outdoors in all weathers. New games were made up using anything that came to hand, old wood, rope, chalk, sticks, everything was adapted for play use. Traditionally, Girls loved dressing up in their mothers' old clothes and could be seen parading up and down in high heeled shoes while boys would still be playing war games.



**Every day was an adventure!** Typical playgrounds for the 1950s child: a field, a mysterious wood or even a post-war bomb site to explore. The child's role was to simply to eat, sleep, learn and play!

Most children were encouraged to be adventurous. They got dirty, fell out of trees, grazed knees and cut themselves. Mothers kept a bottle of iodine to disinfect the wounds which usually stung more than the initial injury. There was 'no such thing' as Health & Safety. All mums could sew and knit, and most mums stayed at home to look after the family.



## 1950s Childhood (2)

Every residential street had children playing. It was a safer environment than today; car ownership was very low. Prams were routinely left outside front doors to give babies fresh air.

Kids were taught discipline at home and school; corporal punishment was freely administered.



Children punished at school wouldn't dare tell their parents as they were likely to get another 'wallop' or 'clip around the ear' for misbehaving!



