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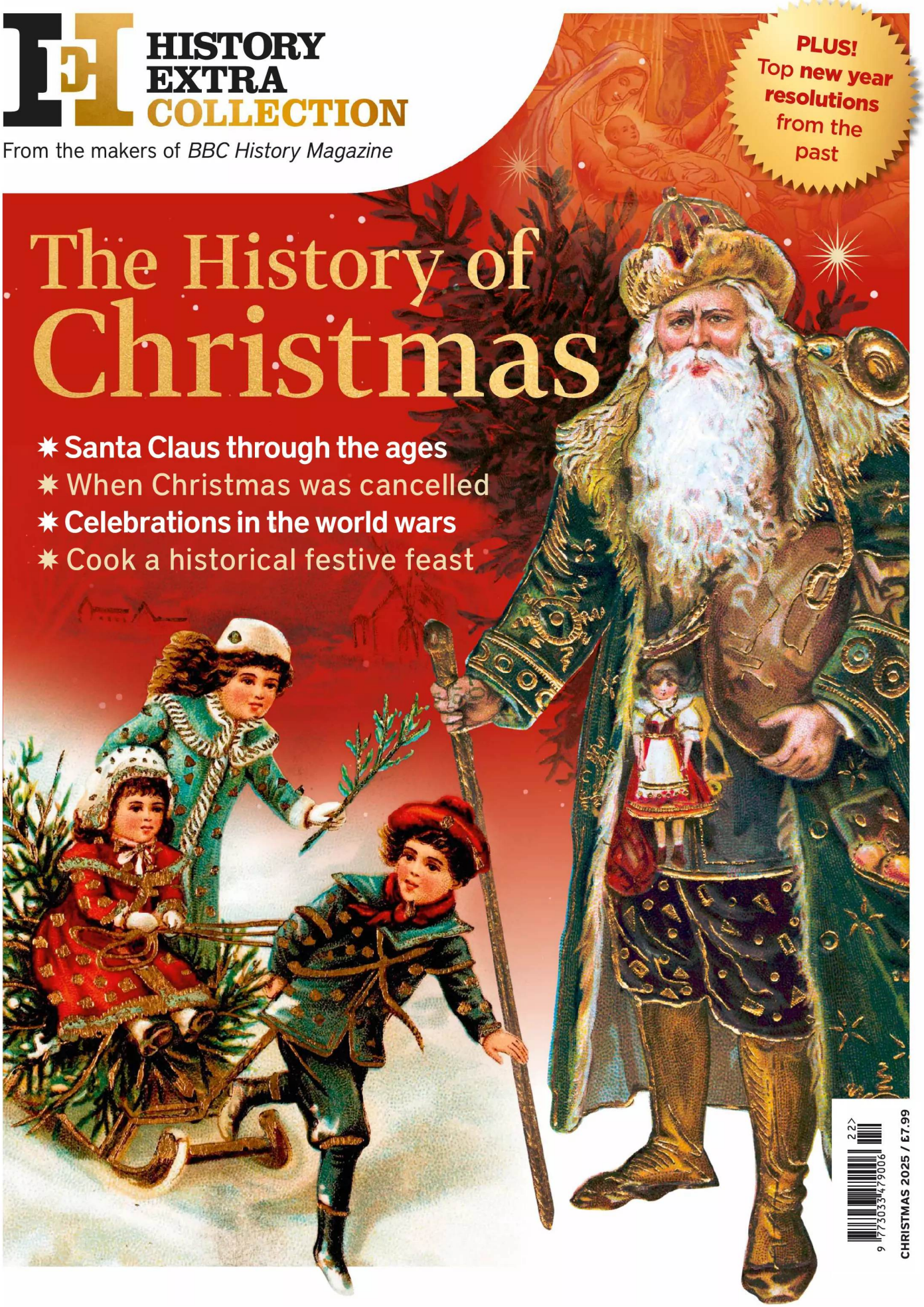

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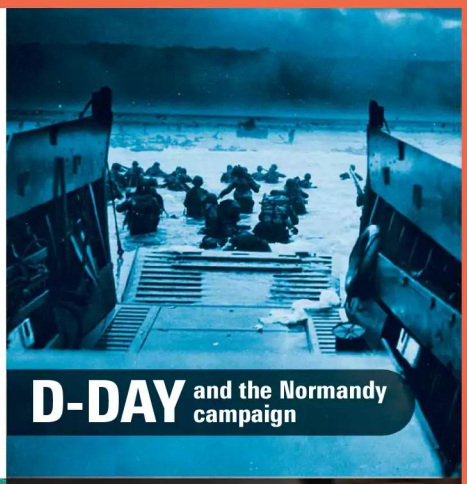

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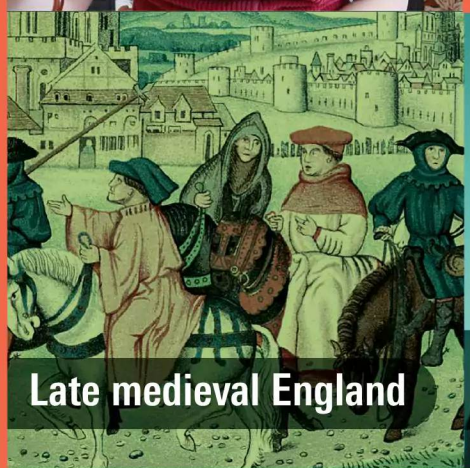

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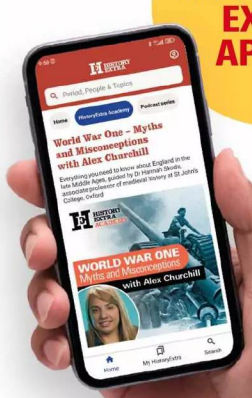

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HISTORY EXTRA COLLECTION

The History of Christmas

FROM THE MAKERS OF *BBC HISTORY MAGAZINE*

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CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

THE NEW YEAR

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“If one thing defines the history of Christmas, it’s a constant state of evolution”

BY **THOMAS RUYS SMITH**

History, big and small, often feels close at hand at Christmas-time. As Charles Dickens understood, we are all haunted by the ghosts of Christmas past. Contained within our contemporary seasonal pleasures are the echoes of celebrations long, long ago that take us back through thousands of years of history. Our festivities are shaped by traditions whose origins are often lost to us, passed down for reasons we’ve forgotten – but treasured, nonetheless, as the way things have always been. Whether singing Christmas carols or reading *A Christmas Carol*, we tap into deep reservoirs of the past. Uniquely in our modern lives, Christmas thins the veil and brings that history to life again in ways that make this season feel so different from any other time of year.

Of course, if one thing defines the history of Christmas across the last two millennia it is its constant state of evolution. A period of winter celebration rooted in the Christian story of the nativity, Christmas has fulfilled a wide variety of competing religious, political, cultural, economic and social needs over the centuries, all while retaining a place close to the heart of people’s emotional lives. History has never stopped for Christmas, and Christmas doesn’t stop for history: each period has left its own imprint on our modern celebrations, through good times and bad.

The feast of Christmas was formally established on 25 December by the Emperor Constantine in AD 336, though there are signs that Jesus’ birth was celebrated on that date as far back as the second century. It took a while to reach these shores. When St Augustine arrived in Britain in the sixth century, he apparently baptised 10,000 people on Christmas Day AD 597 – a major turning point in the Christianisation of Anglo-Saxon Britain. By the mid-eighth century, Archbishop Ecgbert of York could proclaim that “the English people have been accustomed to practise fasts, vigils, prayers and the giving of alms both to monasteries and to the common people, for the full twelve days before Christmas”. Charity to the needy had already become a signal part of this time of year.

But was that pious picture the whole story? Ecgbert’s clerical contemporary Bede, writing at the same moment, suggested that some stranger seasonal traditions were also still part of the fabric of the season. Bede recorded disapprovingly that on the very same day as Christmas, Anglo-Saxon pagans would mark a festival known as Modraniht – “mother’s night”– and tantalisingly hinted at “rituals they performed through that night”.

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THE GOLDEN AGE
LEFT An early 14th-century fresco depicting the birth of Jesus, which is believed to have been celebrated on 25 December from the second century MIDDLE When *A Christmas Carol* was published in 1843, the modern Christmas was already taking shape RIGHT A Victorian family at Christmas time in a c1850 painting

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

Whether such activities influenced the development of Christmas celebrations remains one of many seasonal mysteries, but it is a reminder that midwinter has long been a time for communal commemorations of many kinds.

A few hundred years later and Christmas had been firmly established as the most important celebration of the year, overtaking Easter. It certainly seems no coincidence that William the Conqueror had himself crowned on Christmas Day, 1066, in Westminster Abbey. The medieval Christmas was marked by merry-making and feasting on a grand scale. Christmas itself began 12 vigorous days of celebrations, culminating in Epiphany on 6 January.

The middle ages also saw a new emphasis on the iconography of the nativity itself, emphasizing Christ's lowly entry into the world. The generations of children who have grown up singing about little donkeys and finding no room at the inn can thank St Francis of Assisi for their star turns: in 1223, he arranged what is thought to be the first staging of the nativity scene, boasting a manger, a donkey and an ox, starting a trend that is still very much alive today.

The Tudors were, unsurprisingly, no slouches when it came to marking the season: Henry VIII was the first English monarch to eat turkey on Christmas Day, a new arrival from the New World, and in 1521 the London based printer Wynkyn de Worde published the first collection of Christmasse Carolles. But soon, the Reformation would bring about some major challenges to long-established Christmas traditions. The Puritan hatred of the season was rooted in a lengthy list of complaints: first, there was no scriptural basis for the celebration of Christ's birth on 25 December; then, all this merry-making at midwinter seemed rather tainted by pagan association; and, above all, the general debauchery and wantonness of Christmas celebrations apparently had little to do with the serious spiritual matter of Christ's arrival on earth. As a result of the English Civil War, Christmas celebrations were essentially outlawed from 1645 until the Restoration in 1660.

Seasonal celebrations didn't regain their medieval heights again until the 19th century. Rather than the anarchic rowdiness of previous years, however, the Victorians shaped a new domestic Christmas that lives on today, centred around the family, children, gift-giving, and, of course, food and drink. It took an American to give them the nudge: when the author Washington Irving arrived in England in 1815, he developed a particular fascination for the lingering Christmas traditions that he felt were on the verge of extinction. "Amidst the general call to happiness, the bustle of the spirits, and stir of the affections, which prevail at this period, what bosom can remain insensible?" he beseeched his readers longingly; the revival of Christmas was soon underway. By the time Dickens published *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, the pieces of the modern Christmas started to fall into place in short order: cards, trees, crackers, stockings, all became ubiquitous over the following decades.

As Charles Dickens understood, we are all haunted by the ghosts of Christmas past

Tradition and innovation; charity and indulgence; spirituality and materialism; power and humility; the end of something and a new beginning: such is the ongoing story of Christmas. Yet for all that Christmas and its constant mutability has shaped our history and continues to shape our lives in the 21st century, it is surprising how much more there is to learn about the seasonal celebration that punctuates the year. In December 1837, the essayist Leigh Hunt had a bone to pick with those who felt that Christmas had already been exhausted as a subject: "Do they suppose that everything has been said that can be said, about any one Christmas thing?" Hunt then produced a list of more than 50 seasonal topics, starting with roast beef and ending in plum pudding. Yet it's true: there's always more to say about Christmas and its remarkable history. So as you enjoy this Christmas present, keep an eye out for the ghosts of Christmas past who will inevitably be in attendance at your feast.

Professor Thomas Ruys Smith is the author of several books including *Searching for Santa Claus: An Anthology of the Poems, Stories and Illustrations That Shaped an American Icon* (Boiler House Press, 2025).

From the story of the nativity through to the First World War, discover how Christmas has been celebrated over the centuries

HISTORY AT CHRISTMAS

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ANNIVERSARIES

DOMINIC SANDBROOK highlights events that took place at **Christmas** in history

25 DECEMBER 1223

The Christmas nativity is born

St Francis of Assisi recreates the birth of Christ, in Italy

An awestruck crowd looks on as St Francis of Assisi prepares the first Christmas nativity in this 13th-century Italian fresco

Today the town of Greccio, in the Apennines in central Italy, is a sleepy sort of place. But at Christmas 1223, it welcomed one of the best-known men in the medieval world: Francis of Assisi, Catholic friar and founder of the Franciscan order. And it was Francis who decided that Greccio should put on the world's first nativity scene.

Then in his early forties, Francis was keen to remind the people of Greccio that there was more to Christmas than fancy food and fine gifts. Then, as now, people often lamented that the true meaning of the festival had been lost.

So, determined to "commemorate the nativity of the Infant Jesus with great devotion [and] all possible solemnity", and adamant that there must be no hint of "lightness or novelty", Francis asked Pope Honorius III for permission to put on a little show for the people of Greccio.

Francis had been to the Holy Land a few years earlier, and may well have been inspired by the sites associated with the Gospels. According to St Bonaventure, he "prepared a manger, and brought hay, and an ox and an ass to the place appointed". Then, as midnight approached on Christmas Eve, "the brethren were summoned, the people ran together, the forest resounded with their voices, and that venerable night was made glorious by many and brilliant lights and sonorous psalms of praise".

The nativity scene was a huge hit. One man, a former soldier who had become one of Francis's closest companions, even claimed to have seen a vision of "an Infant marvellously beautiful, sleeping in the manger". From then on, there was no looking back.

The crowning of William the Conqueror, shown here in a 19th-century engraving, was interrupted by a fire in the abbey

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

25 DECEMBER 1066

The Conqueror is crowned

William of Normandy's Westminster Abbey coronation goes up in smoke – in more ways than one

On the morning of Christmas Day 1066, William of Normandy rode through the streets of Westminster towards his coronation. His destination was the magnificent new abbey begun by his distant cousin, Edward the Confessor. It was just over two months since the battle of Hastings. Across the country, resistance still smouldered and security around the abbey was tight.

William's coronation had been planned as the ultimate propaganda coup. In a supremely symbolic moment, the invader was crowned king by Ealdred, Archbishop of York, previously one of the chief supporters of Harold II, the last Anglo-Saxon king. Before lowering the crown onto William's head, Ealdred asked the crowd – in English – if they wanted him as their king. And as had no doubt been arranged, up went the loud cheers of acclamation.

But then came disaster. In a telling sign of the anxiety of the day, William's Norman troops misunderstood the cries of the English crowd. According to the chronicler Orderic Vitalis, "the armed guard outside, hearing the tumult of the joyful crowd in the church and the harsh accents of a foreign tongue, imagined that some treachery was afoot, and rashly set fire to some of the buildings". The fire spread, the crowd panicked, and, Vitalis wrote, "throngs of men and women of every rank and condition rushed out of the church in frantic haste. Only the bishops and a few clergy and monks remained, terrified, in the sanctuary, and with difficulty completed the consecration of the king who was trembling from head to foot."

For William it was the worst possible start; for his new subjects, meanwhile, it was a sign of things to come. The English, recorded Vitalis, "never again trusted the Normans who seemed to have betrayed them, but nursed their anger and bided their time to take revenge".

From left to right: James Lovell, William Anders and Frank Borman prepare to become the first men to orbit the moon, 1968

AKG IMAGES

24 DECEMBER 1818

An Austrian priest unveils his new carol: 'Silent Night'

Musical phenomenon gets its first airing, in a divided town

In December 1818, the little Austrian town of Oberndorf, just north of Salzburg, was still nursing its scars. Two years earlier, after the treaties marking the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the town had been split in half, with its northern section across the river Salzach being given to Bavaria. The new frontier had driven a stake through the town's economy; unemployment and resentment were running high.

Amid these convulsions, few had paid much attention to the arrival of a young priest called Josef Mohr, the illegitimate son of an Austrian mercenary. With him Mohr had brought the draft of a six-stanza poem, scribbled while he was at a church in the Alps. And when Mohr heard that the church organ was broken – which meant they might have no music at Christmas Eve's midnight mass – he suggested to the organist, Franz Gruber, that his poem might make a decent carol. Gruber got to work on a melody.

As the worshippers trudged through the snow towards St Nicholas's Church that Christmas Eve, none knew that they were to witness the birth of a musical phenomenon. Today 'Silent Night' is probably the world's most familiar carol, having been translated into an estimated 300 languages and dialects. Its fame in the English-speaking world owes much to an American priest, John Freeman Young, who translated it for his New York parishioners in 1859 and later became bishop of Florida.

Yet the carol we sing today is not quite the same as Mohr and Gruber's original. During its early days, it was faster and jauntier, a song to gee up the parishioners of a bruised, moribund little town – and a long way from the gentle ballad we know and love in the 21st century.

This picture accompanied a 1913 score for, arguably, the world's best-known carol

GETTY IMAGES

24 DECEMBER 1968

Apollo 8 crew give the first Christmas broadcast from space

Hundreds of millions listen in to the astronauts' historic address

On Christmas Eve 1968, Frank Borman, James Lovell and William Anders had been in space for three days. As the crew of Nasa's Apollo 8 mission, the three American astronauts were the first human beings to leave the Earth's orbit, to travel around the moon, and to see their home planet hanging in the darkness. And they were also the stars of another historic moment – the first Christmas broadcast from space.

After their ship had circled the moon nine times, the astronauts went live before a worldwide audience estimated to have been in the hundreds of millions. "We are now approaching lunar sunrise," said William Anders, "and for all the people back on Earth, the crew of Apollo 8 has a message that we would like to send to you." Then he quoted the opening of the Book of Genesis: "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the Earth" – and one by one, the astronauts took it in turns to read the Bible's first 10 verses.

By any standards it was an extraordinary moment. "Oh, this is a little too much, this is a little too dramatic," thought the veteran American news anchor Walter Cronkite as the astronauts began reading. But as they finished, even Cronkite, like tens of millions of others, was visibly moved. "By the time Borman had finished reading that excerpt from the Bible, I admit that I had tears in my eyes," Cronkite said later. "It was really impressive and just the right thing to do at the moment. Just the right thing."

The history of the nativity: How much do we know about the birth of Jesus?

The story of Jesus's birth may be among the most celebrated in all of literature, but to what extent is it possible to root it in history?

BY **SPENCER MIZEN**

MIXED MESSAGES
The Adoration of the Magi by Rogier van der Weyden, 1455. Much of our knowledge of Jesus's birth is based on the gospels, but they provide little corroborating evidence

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Slade and Cliff Richard on the airwaves, shopping centres full to bursting, glittering trees and sprigs of mistletoe, teachers frantically putting the finishing touches to school nativity plays up and down the land – the Christmas season is definitely one that is steeped in tradition.

In excess of two billion people consider the festive season to be the most important holiday of the year. In fact, Christmas has become such a heavyweight in the global calendar that it's now celebrated by more people than any other religious event on the planet.

But what about the 2,000-year old tale that lies at the heart of these celebrations? Is it cold-hard historical fact, a theological flight of fancy, or something in between? Virtually everyone knows the nativity story – Joseph and Mary's search for room in the inn, the shepherds tending their flocks, the three wise men arriving in the stable bearing glittering gifts. But these episodes were recorded by shadowy scribes, with little corroborating evidence, a very long time ago. The story of Jesus's birth may be among the most celebrated in all of literature, but is it possible to root it in history?

This is a question that scholars have pondered for centuries, and most have tried to find the answer in the pages of the most important books in the entire Christian canon: the gospels.

Gospel truths

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John may be the authors on whose writings much of our knowledge of Jesus's life and teachings are based, but for historians investigating the nativity story, they throw up two major problems. The first is that two of the books – Mark and John – fail to mention Jesus's birth at all; the second is that the two that do – Matthew and Luke – disagree on many of the details.

Matthew and Luke both tell us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and that his mother, Mary, was a virgin when she gave birth. But these are the only episodes of the nativity story in which the two accounts converge.

We've got Matthew to thank for the appearance of an angel to Joseph in a dream, the three wise men following the star from the east, and Herod the Great's infamous massacre of the innocents. Luke mentions none of these. Instead, it's from Luke that we learn that "an angel of the Lord" appeared before some shepherds "keeping watch over their flock by night", that Mary and Joseph were forced to travel to Bethlehem to be counted in a Roman census, and that Jesus was laid in a manger.

For some academics, the discrepancies between Luke and Matthew's accounts cast further doubt on the nativity's historical credibility, but not everyone agrees. "If the evangelists were going to make up a story about the origins of Jesus, and keep their story straight, you would expect their stories not to differ in detail," argues Ben Witherington, an Amos professor of New Testament for Doctoral Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary. "The fact that they do, suggests we are dealing with two independent witnesses talking about the same events, with the same core substance affirmed by both."

There's another fact to take into account here, and that's that Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels around 70 years after Jesus's birth. Given that eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus's life were, by then, rapidly dying out – and that many early Christian communities were isolated from one another, scattered by political upheaval – you could argue that it would be quite an achievement if Matthew and Luke's accounts did agree.

Mark and John fail to mention Jesus's birth at all, but the two **that do – Matthew and Luke – disagree on many of the details**

The lack of consensus between Matthew and Luke certainly didn't trouble Dionysius 'the Humble'. In what would become the sixth century AD, this prominent Roman monk invented the Anno Domini era, declaring with cast-iron certainty that Jesus was born in AD 1. It was a bold assertion and it stuck, creating the dating system that we use to this very day. But were Dionysius's calculations any more than pure guesswork? Can he really have divined the precise year of Jesus's birth?

From a distance of two millennia, it's a fiendishly difficult riddle to solve. But three incidents in the gospel writers' accounts of the nativity – the census, the massacre of the innocents, and the star of Bethlehem – at least offer some potential clues.

The Roman census – requiring all Jews to return to their ancestral home to be counted – is one of the most famous incidents in Luke's version of the nativity story. Some historians have cast doubt on the tale, opining that it simply wasn't Roman practice to uproot families in such a way. However, we know from other historical sources that the Roman governor of Syria, Quirinius, called a census of Judea – and that he did so in AD 6. Could, then, Jesus have been born in this very year?

It's possible. But there's a problem, presented by one of the most notorious episodes in Matthew's version of the nativity: the massacre of the innocents. This sees Herod the Great (the Roman-appointed King of Judea), perturbed by the news that the "King of the Jews" had just been born in Bethlehem, ordering that all males in that town below the age of two be put to death.

Grim fact? Elaborate fiction? Again, opinion is divided. Some claim that if Herod had indeed ordered the killings, then the first-century historian Josephus – a vehement critic of the Judean king – would have been quick to condemn him. Witherington, however, sees little reason to doubt Matthew. "So ruthless and paranoid was Herod that he killed his very own children, fearing they planned to usurp his throne. Surely, then, he was more than capable of murdering unknown babies. But given that Bethlehem probably had fewer than 1,000 residents, the massacre of the innocents would have been a minor detail in history, only involving a few small children – perhaps no more than six or so."

ELABORATE FICTION?
Sano di Pietro's *Massacre of the Innocents*, c1470. Bethlehem wouldn't have had many residents at the time, argues Witherington, so only a few children would have been killed

INDEPENDENT WITNESS
The Census at Bethlehem, 1566, depicts Joseph and Mary (in a blue cloak on a donkey) arriving in Bethlehem to register, as detailed by Luke

DATING SERVICE
A representation of Roman monk Dionysius 'the Humble', who declared that Jesus was born in AD 1. While we can't be certain when Jesus was born, the gospels offer us some clues

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

STAR GAZERS
The Adoration of the Magi by Giovanni di Paolo, c1450. The magi certainly existed and prophesied when it was 'time' for Jesus's birth

CREDIBILITY BOOST
Charlemagne is crowned 'Emperor of the Romans' on Christmas Day AD 800, which did wonders for the cultural significance of the date

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

Minor detail or not, the slaughter of the innocents can't have happened in AD 6 – the year of Quirinius's census – for the simple reason that Herod the Great died in 4 BC, a full ten years earlier. So instead of clearing up the confusion over Jesus's year of birth, these two incidents merely muddy the waters.

Star of wonder

But what about the star of Bethlehem? Can that shine any light on the conundrum? The image of the three kings – or magi – following the star to the stable is arguably the most celebrated of the entire nativity story.

For centuries, academics have attempted to peg this star to an astronomical event, one that can in turn be linked to a precise date. Johannes Kepler, a key figure in the 17th-century scientific revolution, suggested that the magi may have been intrigued by a series of three conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn, which occurred in 7 BC.

Others have suggested that the star may have been a comet or nova, like one reported by Chinese and Korean stargazers in about 5 BC. The reality is, of course, we'll never know for sure – especially if the star was, in fact, some kind of local phenomenon as opposed to a significant celestial event. As John Mosley, who was an astronomer at Griffith Observatory in California, put it: "Maybe it was something that required interpretation, rather than something brilliant."

If three magi did indeed follow a star to Bethlehem two millennia ago, who were they and where were they heading? A group of men called the magi certainly existed in Jesus' time. They belonged to a priestly sect from Persia (now Iran), described by the Greek historian Herodotus nearly 450 years earlier. The magi had knowledge of astronomy and the interpretation of prophecy, which is supposedly how they knew it was 'time' for Jesus's birth. They have gone by several names: in one account from Persia they are identified as Hormizdah, Yazdegerd and Perozdh, with the Western church settling on Balthasar, Melchior and Caspar or Gaspar.

"The magi were astrologers and counsellors to kings who made predictions," says Witherington. "They would have taken the star as a sign in the heavens from God that something major was happening."

As to where the magi were headed, for centuries, Christians have believed that Jesus was born at the site currently occupied by Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, one of the holiest locales in the whole of Christendom. As for the abode in which he was born, that could perhaps have been a cave used to shelter livestock. Alternatively, it may well have been a split-level house favoured by peasants, with the residents living upstairs and their animals kept below. Archaeological excavations suggest that such buildings were small and dark with mud-plastered walls. These might not have been chiselled out of the bedrock, but they were no less humble for all that.

It is, of course, on 25 December that the celebrations marking Jesus's birth reach a crescendo. Yet few people now argue that this is the precise date on which the events described by Luke and Matthew took place. "The story about shepherds in the fields with flocks may suggest that the birth of Jesus actually took place in spring," says Witherington.

So how did 25 December come to be universally accepted as the official date of the Christmas festival? The answer appears to be because this was already a time of year when people across Europe were used to letting their hair down. By the fourth century AD, midwinter festivals – marking the moment when the Sun started coming back and the days got longer – were a well-established fixture in the pagan calendar.

'The story about shepherds in the fields with flocks may suggest that **the birth of Jesus actually took place in spring,' says Witherington**

In the British Isles, druids cut mistletoe and gave it as a blessing to mark the winter solstice. In Scandinavia, people marked the 'Yule' festival by dragging evergreens indoors and setting logs alight. And, above all, in Rome, revellers had long celebrated the festival of Saturnalia with an orgy of drinking and eating in honour of Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture.

Cultural behemoth

Christmas may not have been particularly original, but it was fantastically successful. First called the Feast of the Nativity, the festival had spread to Egypt by AD 432 and to England by the end of the sixth century. By the end of the eighth century, it was being celebrated as far away as Scandinavia. Its prominence in the calendar only increased after Charlemagne was crowned 'Emperor of the Romans' on Christmas Day in AD 800. By the time William the Conqueror was crowned King of England at Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day in 1066, it was well on its way to becoming the cultural behemoth it is today.

Back in the Conqueror's day, few would have doubted the historical credibility of the nativity story. Today, in our age of greater scepticism, attitudes have, of course, changed. But does it really matter if the census, the magi and star of Bethlehem are fact or fiction? Should Christians be more concerned with the message that the events surrounding Jesus's birth convey? Again, that depends who you ask.

"It's important to understand that history and theology are interwoven in biblical history, and nothing about the life of Jesus can be theologically true that is historically false," opines Ben Witherington.

Dr Helen Bond, professor of Christian origins at the University of Edinburgh, has a different take. "I don't think it's necessary to believe that all those details are historical," she told a BBC documentary in 2013. "I think that the theology of these stories is what's important, and that, in the end, is what these authors were trying to get across."

The Vindication of

CHRISTMAS,

OR,

His Twelve Yeares Obſervations upon the Times, concerning the lamentable Game called Sweep-ſtake; acted by General *Plunder*, and Major General *Tax*; With his Exhortation to the people; a deſcription of that oppreſſing Ringworm called *Excize*; and the manner how our high and mighty Chriſtmas-Ale that formerly would knock down *Hercules*, & trip up the heels of a Giant, ſtrook into a deep Conſumption with a blow from *Weſtminſter*.

Imprinted at London for G. Horton, 1653.

DREAMSTIME/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

THE CHRISTMAS CHAMPION
John Taylor's pamphlet *The Vindication of Christmas* (1652). In it, Taylor rails at parliament's abolition of the high point of the English ritual year

No Christmas under Cromwell?

During the Civil War, there was popular resistance to the Puritan assault on Christmas. So what would the festive period have looked like in the mid-17th century? And how did people react to its abolition?

BY **MARK STOYLE**

As the year 1645 limped towards its weary close, a war-torn England shivered beneath a thick blanket of snow.

A few months earlier, parliament's New Model Army, led by Sir Thomas Fairfax and Oliver Cromwell, had routed the forces of Charles I at the battle of Naseby. Although that defeat had struck the king's cause a mortal blow, the royalists still refused to surrender, and the bloody Civil War which had divided the country ever since 1642 continued to rage.

Under constant pressure from the armies of both sides to supply them with money, clothing and food, few Englishmen and women can have been anticipating a particularly merry Christmas. Yet, for those who lived in the extensive territories which were controlled by the king's enemies, there was to be no Christmas this year at all – because the traditional festivities had been abolished by order of the two Houses of Parliament sitting at Westminster.

From Charles's beleaguered wartime capital in Oxford, the royalist satirist John Taylor – by now in his mid-60s, but nevertheless one of the king's most indefatigable literary champions – issued a cry of anguish at this assault on England's time-honoured customs. All of the "harmless sports" with which people had long celebrated Christ's nativity "are now extinct and put out of use… as if they had never been," Taylor lamented in his pamphlet *The Complaint of Christmas*, and "thus are the merry lords of misrule suppressed by the mad lords of bad rule at Westminster". So why had the parliamentarians decided to wage war on Christmas – and how did those, like Taylor, who were determined to defend the traditional celebrations, fight back?

The attack on the feast of Christmas had deep roots. Long before the Civil War began, many zealous Protestants, or 'Puritans', had been troubled both by the boisterous nature of the festivities which took place at Christmas and by the perceived association of those festivities with the old Catholic faith. During the early 1600s, most English Puritans had been prepared to tolerate Christmas. Following the rebellion of the Presbyterian Scots against Charles I in 1637, however, all this was to change.

The Scottish Kirk, which was itself fiercely Protestant, had abolished Christmas as long ago as the 1560s and, although James I had managed tentatively to restore the feast in his northern kingdom in 1617, it was banned there once again after his son's defeat by the Scots in 1640. From this time onwards, attitudes towards Christmas among English Puritans began to harden. And as political tensions between Charles I and his opponents in parliament rose during 1641 so a handful of Puritan extremists took it upon themselves to abandon the celebration of Christmas.

Following the outbreak of full-scale Civil War between king and parliament in 1642, John Taylor became one of the first to allude in print to the radicals' decision to dump Christmas. In a satirical pamphlet published in January 1643 – a pamphlet which was clearly intended to appeal to a wide popular audience – Taylor provided his readers with the text of *A Tub Lecture*, which, he claimed, had been preached by a godly joiner to a group of Puritans at Watford "on the 25 of December last, being Christmas day". In this fictitious address, the 'lecturer' is shown assuring his audience that they should not "conceive of me to be so superstitious, as to make any conscience of… this day, because the Church hath ordained [it]" to be a holy feast. "No, God forbid I should be so profane," the 'lecturer' goes on, "rather it is a detestation of their blindness that have brought me hither this day, to enlighten you… [and] I give you to understand that the very name of Christmas is idolatrous and profane, and so, verily, are the whole 12 days [of Christmas] wherein the wicked make daily… sacrifices to riot and sensuality."

Thus are the merry lords of misrule suppressed by the mad lords of bad rule at Westminster

Here, Taylor was hinting to his readers that the godly parliamentarians posed a potential threat to Christmas itself. Eight months later, that threat was to become all too real.

Seizing the initiative

One of the clauses of the 'Solemn League and Covenant' which parliament signed with the Scots in September 1643 stated that, in exchange for Scottish military assistance against the king, MPs would ensure that further "reformation" of the Church of England took place. As Ronald Hutton has observed, this clause encouraged religious radicals on the ground to seize the initiative and to attack those aspects of the traditional ecclesiastical calendar which they disliked. Three months later, a number of Puritan tradesmen in London opened up their shops for business on 25 December in order to show that they regarded this day as no different from any other, while several London ministers kept their church doors firmly shut. Meanwhile, many MPs turned up to sit in the parliament house, thus making their own disdain for the customary Christmas holiday very clear.

During the following year, moreover – when Christmas Day happened to coincide with one of the monthly fast days upon which parliament's supporters were enjoined to pray for the success of their cause – MPs ordered, not only that the fast day should be "observed" instead of the traditional feast, but also that the fast should be kept "with the more solemn humiliation, because it may call to remembrance our sins, and the sins of our forefathers, who have turned this feast, pretending [to] the memory of Christ, into an extreme forgetfulness of him, by giving liberty to carnal and sensual delights".

In January 1645 the final nail was hammered into Christmas's coffin, when parliament issued its new *Directory for the Public Worship of God*, a radical alternative to the established *Book of Common Prayer*, which made no reference to Christmas at all. Thus the way was paved for the 'anti-Christmas' of 1645 – a day upon which, in Taylor's words, a man might pass right through the parliamentary quarters, and "perceive no sign or token of any holy day".

ALAMY/DREAMSTIME/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

HAPPIER TIMES
A woodcut of an illustration from *A Book of Roxburghe Ballads* shows revellers celebrating Christmas in the 17th century

CHRISTMAS WARE
Tankards – like this one, made in Southwark in c1630 – would have come into their own at Christmastime in the early 17th century

What was Christmas like before the Civil War?

During the early 1600s, Christmas was celebrated in many different ways – just as it is today. These were some of the most widely observed customs...

Decorating houses, churches and other public buildings with boughs of holly, ivy, rosemary and bay

Taking **Christmas Day off work**. Many people went further than this and took the next 11 days off as well, thus observing the traditional '12 days of Christmas'

Attending a **church service**

Singing carols, dancing to music and playing a wide variety of games

Feasting on all sorts of rich food, including roast beef, brawn, Christmas pies and 'plum pottage' (this was a kind of porridge or spiced broth, which was the forerunner of today's Christmas puddings)

Imbibing plenty of **alcoholic drinks**, including 'lambs-wool', a mixture of ale, roasted apple, sugar and spice

In certain aristocratic households, electing a '**Lord of Misrule**'. This was a person of relatively humble status, who was first declared Lord of Misrule and then – to mark the fact that the world had been temporarily 'turned upside down' for the holiday period – licensed to lead the merry-making throughout the 12 days of Christmas

Presenting friends and relatives with **gifts** on New Year's Day

What sort of people supported the abolition of Christmas?

Dorothy Kelly
The widow of a Bristol grocer. According to a later admirer, Mrs Kelly defied the orders of the church authorities before the Civil War and "would not observe their invented times and feasts, called Holy Days". Instead, she ostentatiously kept her shop open throughout "the time they called Christmas Day".

Ralph Josselin
The Presbyterian minister of Earles Colne in Essex. Like many other parliamentarians, Josselin began to doubt the legitimacy of the traditional feast following the outbreak of the Civil War. In December 1643, he recorded in his diary that he had "made a serious exhortation" to his congregation "to lay aside the jollity and vanity of the time [that] custom hath wedded us unto" at Christmas.

Nehemiah Wallington
A London wood-turner of strongly Puritan inclinations. Wallington regarded parliament's decision to order that the monthly fast should be kept in preference to Christmas Day in 1644 as "a great mercy of God," because, he wrote, "I am persuaded that there was more wickedness committed... with gluttony and drunkenness and other villainies [on that day] than [in] all the year besides".

Thomas Larkham
A nonconformist clergyman and ex-parliamentarian army chaplain. While serving as minister of the strongly royalist town of Tavistock in Devon after the Civil War, Larkham branded one of his many local opponents "a superstitious Christmas man".

Parliamentarian army chaplain Thomas Larkham

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTE

The parliamentarians had abolished the high point of the English ritual year, and the cancellation of Christmas aroused huge popular resentment – not just in the royalist camp, but in the districts controlled by parliament, too. As early as December 1643, the apprentice boys of London rose up in violent protest against the shop-keepers who had opened on Christmas Day, and, in the words of a delighted royalist, "forced these money-changers to shut up their shops again".

There were further dark mutterings next year. On 24 December 1644, the editor of a pro-parliamentarian news-pamphlet expressed his support for the MPs' decision to favour the monthly fast over the traditional feast, but admitted that "the parliament is cried out on" by the common people as a result, with incredulous shouts of "What, not keep Christmas? Here's a Reformation indeed!"

Many ordinary Londoners continued to show a dogged determination to keep Christmas special during the following year, and John Taylor's decision to rush into print at this time with his *Complaint of Christmas* – a work which bore the same title as a pamphlet urging the enthusiastic observance of the mid-winter feast, which he had published as long ago as 1631 – was clearly motivated by a desire to stir up popular resentment against the parliamentarian leadership, as well as to turn a quick profit for its poverty-stricken author.

How far Taylor succeeded in these aims it is impossible to say, but his satire quickly provoked a parliamentarian counter-satire entitled *The Arraignment, Conviction and Imprisoning of Christmas*. Published in January 1646, this publication took great pleasure in conflating Taylor himself with the symbolic character of 'old Christmas Day' whose persona the royalist writer had assumed in his own previous pamphlets. In one passage, Taylor/'old Christmas Day' – here described as "an old, old, very old grey-bearded gentleman" – is portrayed sitting dejectedly in the midst of the king's shrinking territories, while desperately urging "all you that ever think to see Christmas again, stick to me now close!"

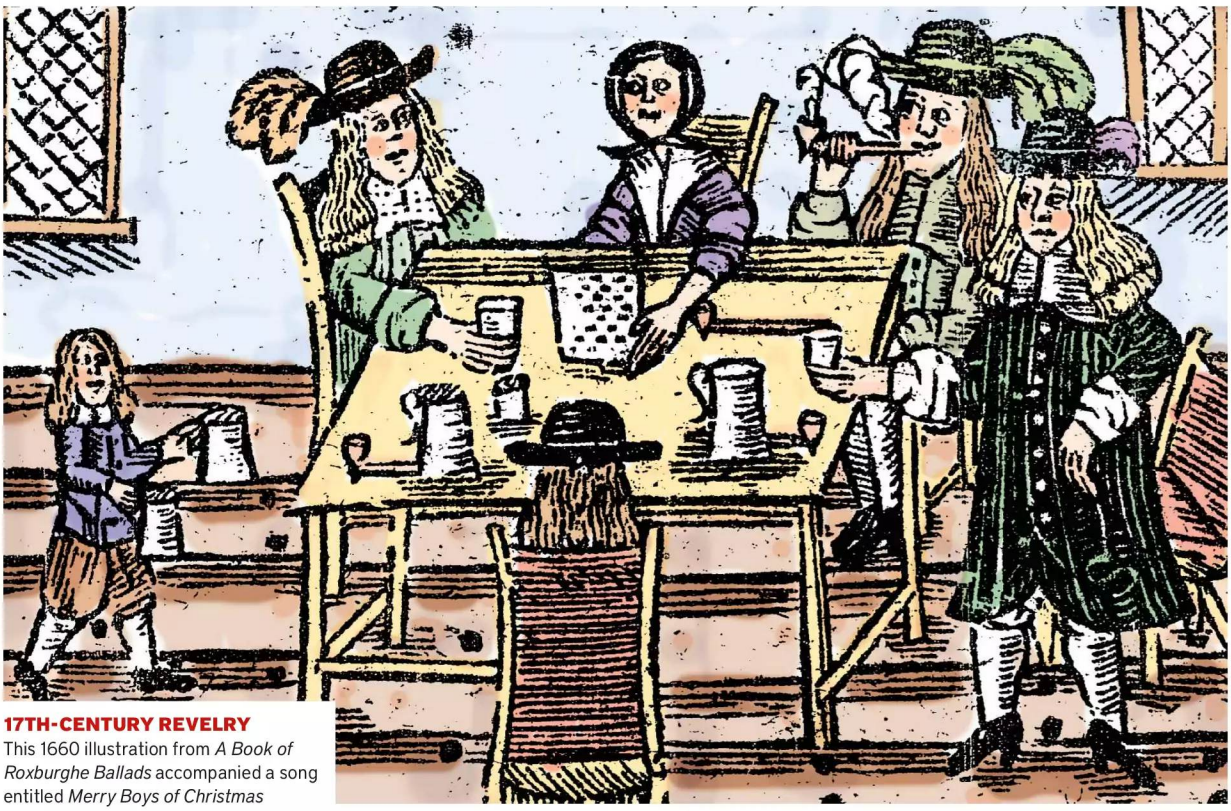
Any lingering hopes on the part of the royalists that popular anger at the abolition of Christmas might somehow transform their military fortunes were soon to be dispelled. During early 1646, Charles I's remaining field forces melted away almost as fast as the winter snow and by April the game was clearly up for the king. In the closing verse of a contemporary ballad, a gloomy royalist writer suggested that the collapse of the king's cause had sealed the fate of Christmas itself, remarking: "To conclude, I'll tell you news that's right, Christmas was killed at Naseby fight."

Yet matters were not so simple, for, even though the king's armies had been beaten out of the field and he himself had fallen into the hands of his enemies, most Englishmen and women continued to cling to their traditional Christmas customs. So strong was the popular attachment to the old festivities, indeed, that during the postwar period a number of pro-Christmas riots occurred. In December 1646, for example, a group of young men at Bury St Edmunds threatened local tradesmen who had dared to open their shops on Christmas Day, and were only dispersed by the town magistrates after a bloody scuffle.

Pro-Christmas riots
Worse was to follow in 1647 – despite the fact that, on 10 June that year, parliament has passed an ordinance which declared the celebration of Christmas to be a punishable offence.

On 25 December 1647, there was further trouble at Bury, while pro-Christmas riots also took place at Norwich and Ipswich. During the course of the Ipswich riot, a protestor named 'Christmas' was reported to have been slain – a fatality which could be regarded as richly symbolic, of course, of the way that parliament had 'killed' Christmas itself. In London, a crowd of apprentices assembled at Cornhill on Christmas Day, and there "in despite of authority, they set up Holly and Ivy" on the pinnacles of the public water conduit. When the lord mayor despatched some officers "to pull down these gawds," the apprentices resisted them, forcing the mayor to rush to the scene with a party of soldiers and to break up the demonstration by force.

The worst disturbances of all took place at Canterbury where a crowd of protestors



17TH-CENTURY REVELRY
This 1660 illustration from *A Book of Roxburghe Ballads* accompanied a song entitled *Merry Boys of Christmas*

first smashed up the shops which had been opened on Christmas Day and then went on to seize control of the entire city. This riot helped to pave the way for a major insurrection in Kent in 1648 that itself formed part of the 'Second Civil War' – a scattered series of risings against the parliament and in favour of the king, which Fairfax and Cromwell only managed to suppress with great difficulty.

Following parliament's victory in the Second Civil War and the execution of Charles I in 1649, demonstrations in favour of Christmas became less common. There can be no doubt that many people continued to celebrate Christmas in private, and in his pamphlet *The Vindication of Christmas* (1652), the tireless John Taylor provided a lively portrait of how, he claimed, the old Christmas festivities were still being kept up by the farmers of Devon.

Nevertheless, recent scholarship has shown that, as time went by, Christmas effectively ceased to be celebrated in the great majority of churches. It was ironic, to say the least, that while the godly had failed to suppress the secular Yuletide festivities which had vexed them for so long, they had succeeded in ending the religious observance of Christmas!

Following Cromwell's installation as lord protector in 1653, the celebration of Christmas continued to be proscribed. While he had not been personally responsible for 'cancelling Christmas' in the first place, it is evident that both Cromwell and the other senior members of his regime were behind the ban, frequently transacting government business on 25 December as if it were a day just like any other.

Only with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 was 'old Christmas Day' finally brought back in from the cold, to widespread popular joy. John Taylor had died some years before, but if he could have foreseen that, two centuries later, Charles Dickens would be reprising the role which Taylor had made his own – that of the mouthpiece of the 'true Christmas spirit' – and that more than a century and a half later still, the celebration of Christmas would remain as ubiquitous in England and Wales as ever, he would doubtless have felt that his labours had been worthwhile. The defenders of Christmas had weathered the storm. ●

Only with the Restoration in 1660 was 'old Christmas Day' brought back in from the cold

DREAMSSTIME

CHRISTMAS Q&A

A selection of historical **conundrums** answered by experts

What are some of the strangest Christmas traditions that have now gone out of fashion?

Festive traditions have always been changing. Even within living memory, we've seen some begin to disappear: carol singers no longer come to most people's doors, and telling ghost stories on Christmas Eve is no longer a big deal. Meanwhile, festive jumpers, which never used to be 'a thing', are now de rigueur.

But go a little further back in time and you find a vast number of practices, beliefs and games that are now extinct. Here are just a few…

Many Christmas celebrations involved upending the social hierarchy. Medieval churches and cathedrals elected 'boy bishops' and celebrated a Feast of Fools, in which a 'Lord of Misrule' or 'Abbot of Unreason' was appointed to supervise the revelry.

This mischievous form of merry-making was banned in England and Scotland after the Reformation.

Another archaic belief was that burning the biggest log the hearth could accommodate would turn the dark night of winter as bright as day. In the north of England, people would put a fragment of this 'yule log' under their beds to protect the house from fire and lightning for the rest of the year, and it might be used to light the following year's log. You could also throw a piece of it into the fire to quell a storm outside. This was a favoured practice in some Yorkshire coastal towns – perhaps to help fishermen out at sea.

Some of these lost traditions now seem bizarre, to say the least. In the 1600s, young men and women would throw food at the wall during Christmas dinner to see if the grub that stuck spelled the name of their future spouse. In Wales, the tradition of holly-beating, or 'holming', saw young men and boys hitting the bare arms of young women with holly branches until they drew blood. In some parts of the country, it was similarly the custom to beat the last person to get out of bed on Boxing Day.

In fact, even the name of Boxing Day comes from a tradition that is no longer practised. Traditionally, 26 December was the day on which delivery boys, tradesmen, tenants and servants collected their 'Christmas boxes' of money, food or other goodies.

Eugene Byrne is a freelance journalist and author.

ILLUSTRATION BY GLEN MCBETH

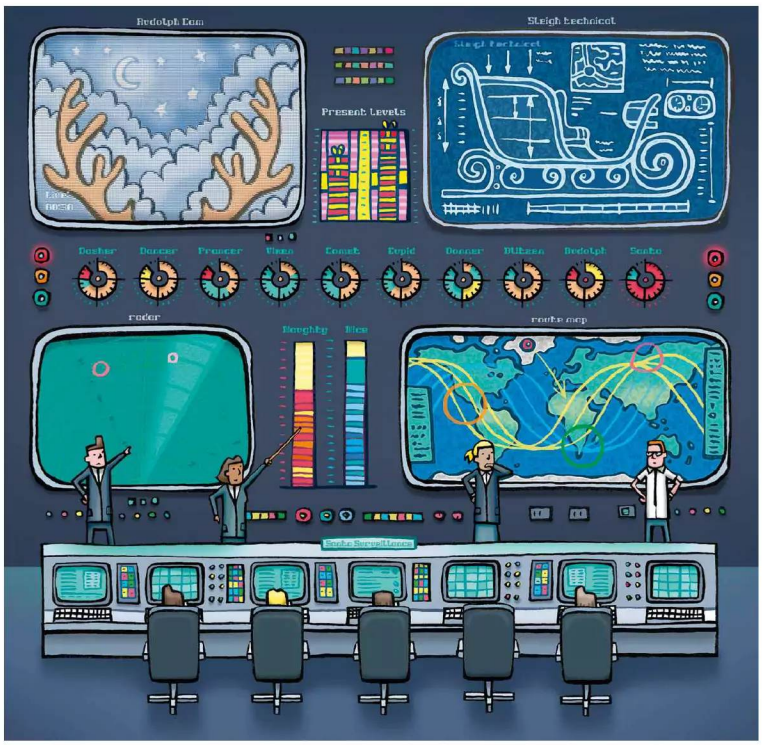


ILLUSTRATION BY GLEN MCBETH/ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

Why did NORAD begin tracking Santa Claus in the Cold War?

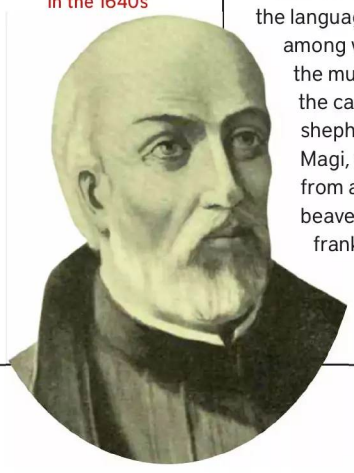
The North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) has been giving updates on the progress of Santa's sleigh since the 1950s. It's now followed worldwide each Christmas (via noradsanta.org/en).

The official version is that in 1955 an advert for an American department store Santa phone line misprinted the phone number, sending callers to NORAD's predecessor, the Continental Air Defense Command (CONAD) instead. Colonel Harry Shoup, in charge that night, assigned an officer to give other callers a "location" for Santa and his sleigh, and so the tradition was born. There are variations on this foundation story, but basically it happened by accident.

Perhaps the US military saw a public relations opportunity, or a Cold War message about how the free world has Santa and those communists do not. But the best answer really seems to be that Americans love Christmas, and that modern "radar tracking" of Santa just added to the magic.

Eugene Byrne is a freelance journalist and author.

Jean de Brébeuf, below in a 19th-century drawing, wrote a Christmas hymn in the 1640s



DID YOU KNOW...?

Burning urges

Snapdragon was a dangerous-sounding parlour game played on Christmas Eve in England for centuries. Raisins and brandy were placed in a bowl and set alight; participants then had to pluck raisins from the burning bowl. Dr Johnson described the game in his famous dictionary, writing that the raisins "may be safely snatched by a quick motion, and put blazing into the mouth, which being closed, the fire is at once extinguished". The game was very popular in the Victorian era.

Victorian revellers play snapdragon in an 1858 illustration

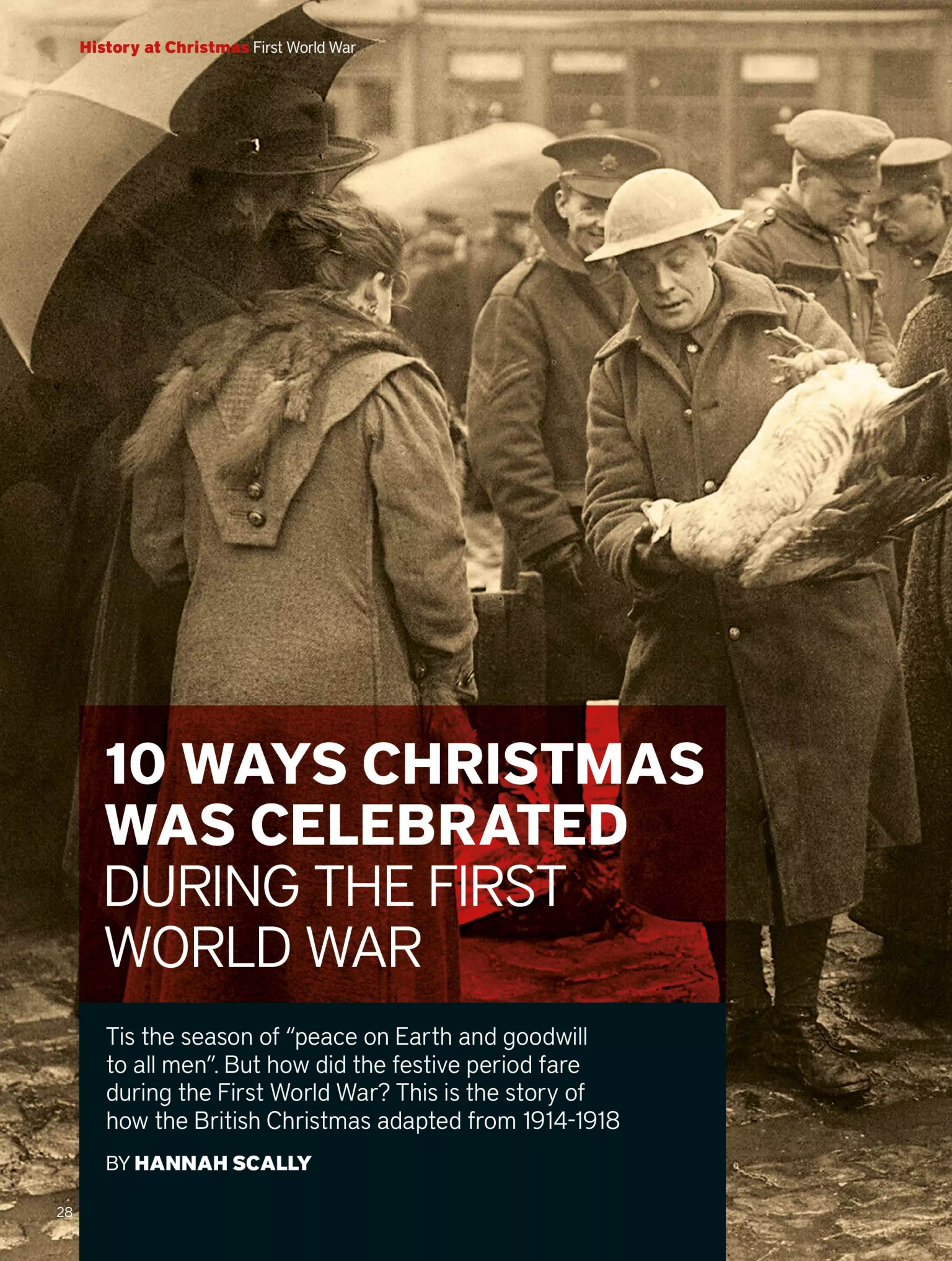
Festive film

The movie that was probably the very first Christmas special is just 76 seconds long. *Santa Claus*, made in 1898 by the pioneering British film-maker George Albert Smith, opens as two children are retiring to bed on Christmas Eve. Father Christmas is then shown on the roof before descending the chimney. By means of an early special visual effect, Santa appears in the room and distributes his presents. The children awake when he is gone and demonstrate their delight.

Colonial carol

Canada's oldest Christmas hymn was written in the 1640s by a Jesuit missionary, Jean de Brébeuf. Known as the 'Huron Carol', its original lyrics are in the language of the Indigenous people among whom de Brébeuf lived, set to the music of a French folk song. In the carol, Jesus is visited not by shepherds but by hunters, and the Magi, who are described as "chiefs from afar", bring gifts of fox and beaver pelts instead of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Nick Rennison is a writer and journalist specialising in history.



10 WAYS CHRISTMAS WAS CELEBRATED DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Tis the season of "peace on Earth and goodwill to all men". But how did the festive period fare during the First World War? This is the story of how the British Christmas adapted from 1914-1918

BY **HANNAH SCALLY**

NEED FOR NORMALITY
British troops purchase geese in the marketplace at Bailleul, France, for their Christmas dinner in December 1916. Christmas parcels and extra rations helped lift spirits on the front line

For those in charge of Britain's war effort, Christmas was a dangerous time of year, as seasonal cheer came up against the grim reality of war. Shortages began to appear in essential items like sugar, bread, petrol and paper, and Christmas cooking ingredients were difficult to come by. But national morale was considered by the government a priority, and Christmas was marked by a conscious attempt to celebrate as usual – keeping the old traditions, and promoting Christmas cheer.

While traditional Christmas extravagance became unfashionable – and impossible for most – Britain continued to embrace the Christmas spirit. Songs, useful gifts, charitable acts and ingenious cookery were all encouraged. And while this became harder as the war drew on – air raids and absent loved ones were a way of life – it was a deliberate moment of defiance against the death, destruction and deprivation of war. Here are 10 wartime ways in which Britain marked the Christmas season.

Maintaining national morale was vital for the war effort at home, so old traditions and Christmas cheer were widely encouraged

A soldier on leave at Christmas, 1917, and, below, a 'Con Amore' cigarette advert

1 Shopping for Christmas gifts

Wartime meant a change of attitude for Christmas shopping. For children, military-themed toys – soldiers, guns, uniforms – were all the rage. Among adults, the enthusiasm for Christmas gift giving was as strong as ever, but the moral consensus was to avoid frivolity. As one advertisement said: "It is in keeping with the times that only practical presents shall be given this Christmas."

Shoppers were encouraged to give useful, sensible items, particularly to their male relatives at the front. Shops entered the season with a raft of tools and tokens to help the fighting man. Suggested gifts included soldiers' work cases and wallets; warm gloves; pipe sets; correspondence cases; safety razors; tinder lighters and watches. Cigarettes, 'the fuel of the British Army', were particularly in demand.

The 'Con Amore' brand offered cigarettes with a regimental crest embossed, for the ultimate personal touch for absent sweethearts. Its slogan was: "In Trench, Mess, Billet or on Shipboard, every smoke will remind him of you – the giver."

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

2 Sending messages and gifts to the front

With so many men and women spending Christmas away from home, the demand for parcels at Christmas was greater than ever. Over the entire course of the war, the army postal service sent 114 million parcels from Britain to conflict zones, and 2 billion letters.

Army postmen were dubbed 'Santa Claus in khaki', as they laboured to deliver care packages to the front line and bring messages home in time for Christmas. Back in Britain, families were sending food, clothing, cigarettes and tobacco. Charities also rallied the British public to show their support for the troops, sending Christmas gifts en masse. Footballs, harmonicas, books, cigarettes and even Christmas puddings were sent in bulk.

In Christmas 1914, Princess Mary, daughter of George V, launched her own charitable Christmas initiative: a metal case of cigarettes for every soldier in the army. Non-smokers' boxes contained a packet of acid tablets, a khaki writing case, paper and pencil. Every box also contained a Christmas card and a picture of the Princess.

Princess Mary organised a metal case of cigarettes to be sent to every soldier in the British army for Christmas 1914

Christmas time at the front: the army delivered 114 million parcels during the war

3 Travelling home on leave

Christmas leave for soldiers was an uncommon stroke of luck – in some cases it was simply determined by drawing lots.

Soldiers were relatively well looked after on the journey home from the front, thanks to the activity of a number of wartime charities. Women volunteered to serve tea at railway stations to anyone in uniform, and special army club rooms and YMCA huts gave soldiers shelter en route. If the soldiers couldn't make it home in time for Christmas Day, the charities would throw cheerful Christmas celebrations for them instead – anything to help keep morale high at what was still a time of fear, anxiety and unease for the whole nation.

Soldiers arrive at a station in London to travel home for Christmas in 1915

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES/HAREWOOD HOUSE TRUST · GLEN SEGAL PHOTOGRAPHY

4 Making do in the trenches on the western front

The Christmas truce of 1914 is legendary as a moment of festive goodwill. An unofficial ceasefire allowed soldiers along the western front to emerge from the trenches, meet enemy combatants, exchange gifts and even play games.

The story of a Christmas truce football match taking place between the two warring sides in no-man's land has almost become mythical, and was even immortalised in a Christmas advert for Sainsbury's in 2014. Yet despite there being very little in the way of surviving evidence, arguments as to whether or not this remarkable act of camaraderie took place continue to rage.

Keen to present an official, positive view of war, the British press published photographs and illustrations of soldiers opening parcels from home, or cheerfully cooking their Christmas pudding in a pot made from a German helmet.

In reality, foul weather, flooded dug-outs and constant danger took a toll on the Christmas spirit. A cartoon from the soldier-artist Bruce Bairnsfather represented what was for many at the time a less cheerful Christmas: the dawn of a glum Christmas day, far from home in a war-torn landscape.

Fear of mutiny meant that a 'truce' rerun was strongly discouraged by army authorities in subsequent years, but soldiers still marked each Christmas as it arrived in the trenches with Christmas parcels and extra rations.

This illustration appeared on the cover of *The Sphere* magazine on 5 January 1918. The press was keen to promote a positive image of life on the front line

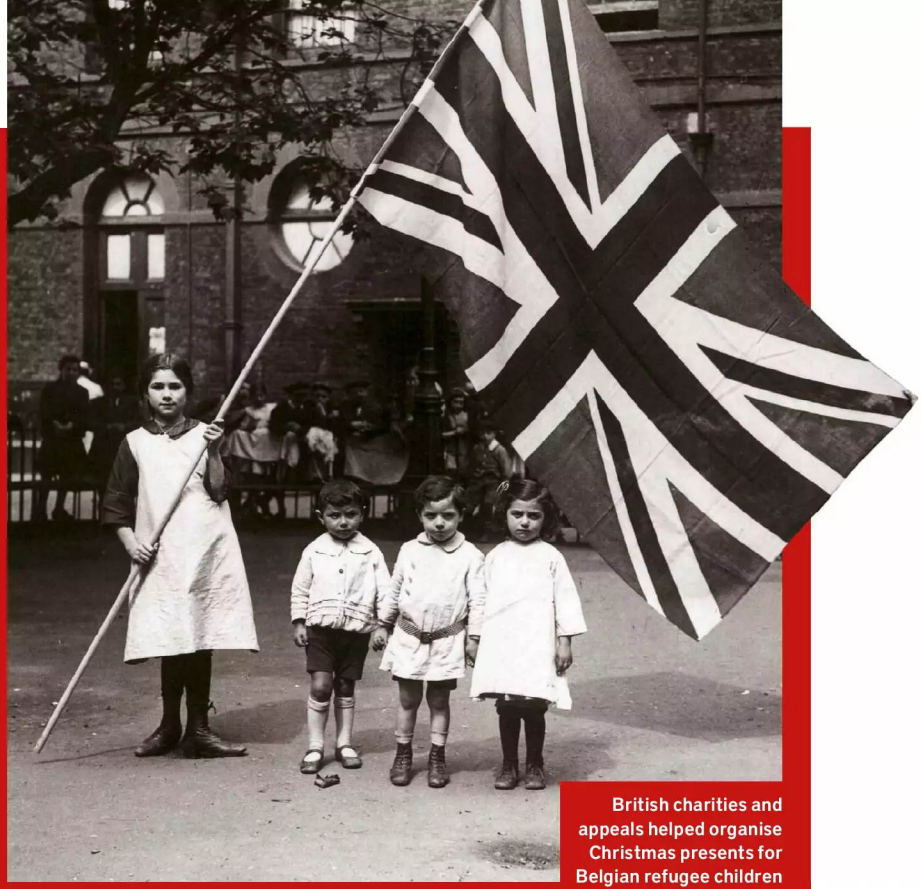
A 1969 painting depicting the 1914 'Christmas truce'. What actually took place between the British and the German troops continues to divide opinion

BRIDGEMAN/GETTY IMAGES

5 Christmas refugee shelters

War-torn Europe meant the mass displacement of civilian populations: around 250,000 Belgian refugees sheltered in Britain during the war. With Belgians receiving sympathetic treatment in the press, British support for their plight was considerable in the first years of the war. Thousands of charitable enterprises were launched to help them, from large committees and organisations to newspaper subscriptions.

In 1914 *The Bystander* launched an appeal for Christmas presents from their readers: "Over one thousand toys have been personally distributed among the Belgian refugee children now being looked after in English homes and hostels."



British charities and appeals helped organise Christmas presents for Belgian refugee children

6 Christmas in the navy

Christmas at sea came with its own traditions, as those serving in the Royal Navy during the war – some 380,000 people by 1918 – discovered. Their Christmas was formal and highly regulated in comparison with forces on land: after a religious service on the ship, the men would assemble in their messes, with decorated tables.

Here they were visited by the captain and officers, who would take a seat at each table in turn, sampling the food they had prepared. Many were serving on ships in the North Sea, where the stormy winter weather could make for a lively Christmas celebration.

Harcourt Kitchin, who served with the Royal Marines on convoy duty, recalled Christmas 1917: "[...] we struck very bad seas on the way out. And [...] all the fresh food disappeared, and we had a Christmas dinner of salt pork and rice, which wasn't very appetising."

British Sailors on HMS *Mermaid* prepare to celebrate a "highly regulated" Christmas in 1916

GETTY IMAGES

7 Christmas in hospital

Both in Britain and in war zones, many servicemen and women spent their Christmas in military hospitals. A bright, cheerful, healing environment was central to medical ethos, and at Christmas hospital staff went to particular effort to decorate the wards and entertain the wounded.

Wounded servicemen were so well treated at a hospital in Rochdale during Christmas 1916 that, according to signaller Leonard Ounsworth, "a number of them who'd been discharged the week before Christmas came back to the hospital for Christmas dinner, during their leave".

The ward walls are decorated at King George's Military Hospital, on 22 December 1916

GETTY IMAGES

8 A bittersweet Christmas at home

Christmas on the home front may have been more comfortable, but civilians were still feeling the impact of the war. In December 1914 Britain experienced its first attacks: Scarborough, Whitby and Hartlepool were bombarded on 16 December and 137 people were killed. A German aircraft then dropped two bombs into the sea in Dover five days later, before another attack on the 24th hit a civilian's garden and broke several windows.

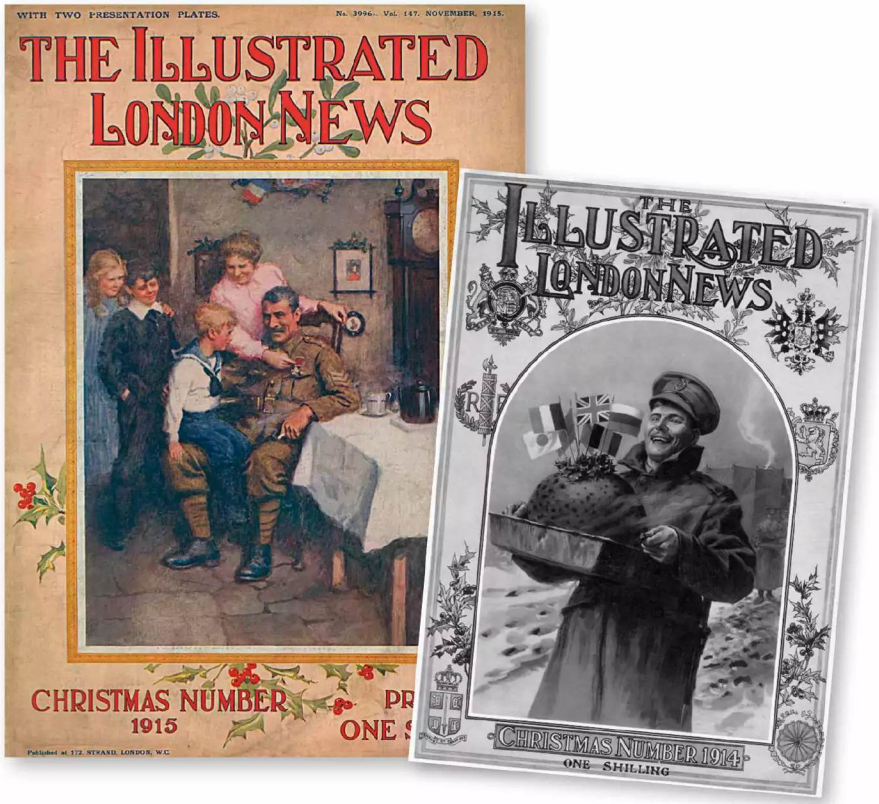
Apart from the shock of such direct attacks, absent loved ones made for a difficult Christmas during the war. Having them home on leave was a special wartime gift. The Christmas of 1915 was one of particularly happy surprises: delays in the post meant that some families did not get warning of their loved one's arrival until they appeared at the door.

By 1917, however, the national mood was low. On 23 December, *The Observer* noted: "It is the fourth Christmas of the war, and for many it is going to be a very quiet, if not a sad one. For the first time, though we are all making the best of things, Christmas has lost its festive air."

The war hits home: bombed-out houses in Hartlepool, on the east coast, in December 1914

9 In the papers

Newspapers were the main source of public information about the progression of war and the welfare of those fighting. At Christmas, as in prewar years, weekly papers like *The Illustrated London News* and *The Tatler* produced their annual Christmas issues. With beautiful images and short stories, these were careful to present a cheerful image of the wartime festivities. Sentimental images of soldiers returning home, or robins in the trenches aimed to integrate the experience of war with the spirit of Christmas.



1914 and 1915 covers of *The Illustrated London News*, which was keen to spread festive cheer

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

10 In the theatres

Pantomimes were a major Christmas tradition before the war, and continued throughout the conflict. During the war, they adapted to popular interests, incorporating favourite war sing-alongs such as 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary' and 'Keep the Home Fires Burning'.

With their expensive scenery and raucous antics, much about them seemed at odds with the war effort, while soldiers risked their lives at the front. But they were also utterly British, and a cultural emblem of Christmas cheer and communal good will. This wasn't merely escapism, but a concerted effort to lift spirits. As one theatre review said in 1914: "Before you have been long at the Drury Lane pantomime you feel with even more certainty that when you entered the building that we are going to win this war."

A scene from 'Alice in Wonderland' at the Savoy Theatre, London, December 1917. Pantomimes helped lift people's spirits during the First World War

CHRISTMAS QUIZ PART 1

'Tis the season to test your knowledge of all things historical with our fiendish festive quiz

Compiled by Nick Rennison Answers to all questions can be found on page 121

It happened at Christmas

1. What did four Scottish students do in Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day 1950?
2. Where did a Baptist preacher lead an 11-day uprising of enslaved people at Christmas in 1831?
3. Who dined on 'Goose Pye' (actually Gannet Pie) on Christmas Day 1769?
4. Who was murdered during a Christmas service in 820 by assassins disguised as members of the church choir?
5. On Christmas Day 1661 who quarrelled with his wife over dinner and went up to his chamber in a bad temper?
6. Which French explorer died in Quebec on Christmas Day 1635?

Reindeer and other beasts

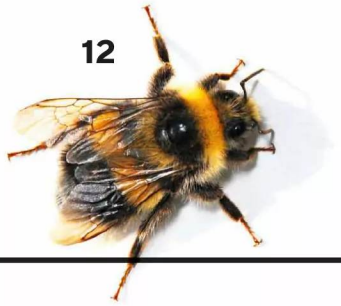
7. In which poem of 1823 did the now generally accepted names of Santa's reindeer first appear?
8. What small bird was traditionally hunted on 26 December?
9. What has been constructed in the central square of Gävle, Sweden every Christmas since 1966?
a. A giant donkey made of wood
b. A giant goat made of straw
c. A giant turkey made of papier-mâché
10. Which Christmas legend is described in Thomas Hardy's poem *The Oxen*?

11. In which American state is there a belief that Papa Noël delivers his presents not on a sleigh pulled by reindeer but on a boat pulled by alligators?
12. According to Irish folklore, what do bees do on Christmas Eve?
a. Fly in a swarm towards the east
b. Sting those who have committed adultery during the year
c. Hum the 100th Psalm

Christmas music

13. Who wrote a Christmas cantata entitled *Hodie (This Day)* which was premiered in Worcester Cathedral in 1954?
14. Which Christmas song did Judy Garland sing in the 1944 film *Meet Me in St. Louis*?
15. Who wrote a piece called *The Shepherds' Farewell*, which he initially passed off as the work of a fictional 17th-century composer named Ducré?
16. Why is the *Sussex Carol* so called?
a. Its words were written by a 17th-century poet from Eastbourne
b. The tune to which it is most often sung was first recorded near Horsham, Sussex
c. It was originally sung in an 1823 Christmas concert by a glee club from Brighton
17. Which American Christmas song, written in 1864, became a hit for the singing cowboy Gene Autry nearly 90 years later?
18. Which familiar Christmas carol is usually sung to music taken from a cantata to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Gutenberg's invention of a printing press with moveable type?

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES



Twelve days of Christmas

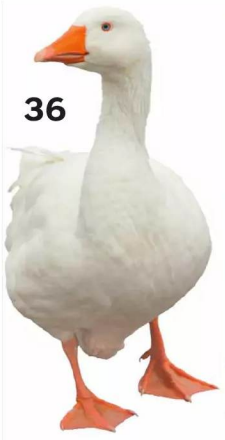
19. Which Partridge was at school with Arthur Conan Doyle and a Punch cartoonist for many years?
20. In a poem entitled *Epithalamion*, who wrote of "my beloved love/My truest turtle dove"?
21. In the 1840s and 1850s, what was 'Hen Fever'?
a. An epidemic of avian flu in southern France
b. The title of a magazine issued by the National League of Poultrymen
c. A craze for acquiring and breeding exotic breeds of poultry
22. Which Shakespearean character sings of "The ousel cock so black of hue/ With orange-tawny bill"?
23. In ancient Rome what was the 'ius anuli aurei'?
24. What is the more familiar name of Charles Perrault's 1697 work *Histoires ou contes du temps passé avec des moralités*?
25. What did the bishop of Bath and Wells's daughter teach the swans in the bishop's palace moat to do in the 1850s?
a. Swim in figures of eight
b. Ring a bell for their food
c. Attack the cathedral dean whom she disliked
26. Who painted a portrait known as *The Milkmaid* in the 1650s?
27. Which queen is said to have danced "six or seven galliards" as her morning exercise?
28. Which English lord won a gold medal in the 400m hurdles at the Amsterdam Olympics in 1928?
29. What links *The Wind in the Willows* and Pink Floyd?
30. Who was John Lincoln Clem?
a. The original drummer in Buddy Holly's backing group, The Crickets
b. A drummer boy in the Union army during the American Civil War
c. The drummer in the Count Basie Orchestra during the 1930s

Food and drink

31. What Christmas treat is mentioned in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*?
a. Brandy butter
b. Mince pies
c. Gingerbread
32. Which 20th-century British writer was the unlikely creator of a recipe for Christmas pudding in an unpublished article of 1945?
a. George Orwell
b. Evelyn Waugh
c. Graham Greene
33. Which Christmas tipple gave its name to a 19th-century riot at the West Point military academy in New York?
34. What dish, a favourite at Christmas in the past, takes its name from the Latin word for 'corn'?
35. Which drink, particularly popular at Christmas in the 1960s and 1970s, was invented by the brewer Francis Showering?
36. Which Sherlock Holmes short story involves the surprising contents of a Christmas goose?

A section on Santas

37. Who wrote a 1946 play entitled *Santa Claus: A Morality* in which the two main characters are Santa and Death?
38. Why did a Texan named Marshall Ratliff dress as Santa Claus on 23 December 1927?
a. He was distributing presents to children in an orphanage in the town of Lubbock
b. He was an actor taking the lead in a silent movie about Santa Claus visiting Texas
c. He was disguising himself to lead a bank robbery in the town of Cisco
39. Who did Santa Claus conquer in a 1964 film?
40. Which cartoonist drew an illustration of Santa delivering presents to the Union troops in the American Civil War?
41. Who composed the *Santa Claus, Christmas Symphony,* first performed on Christmas Eve 1853?
42. Which classic children's author wrote a story entitled *A Kidnapped Santa Claus*?



Turn to page 80 for Christmas Quiz part 2

ALAMY/DREAMSTIME/GETTY IMAGES

Carols, pantomimes and feasting: join us on a journey through the history of some of our favourite festive pastimes

CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

An **unexpected** history of **Christmas**

The season of peace and goodwill? Not quite. Historically, Christmas has actually been a time of evil spirits, subversive snowmen and killer frogs

BY **JAMES DAYBELL** AND **SAM WILLIS**

GETTY IMAGES

FESTIVE GREETINGS? A c1880 Christmas card shows a frog committing murder before making off with its victim's money

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

Yuletide spite

The custom of friends and family exchanging cards during the festive season was a Victorian invention, with the first commercial card produced in 1843 by Henry Cole. From the 1870s onwards, the introduction of the half-penny stamp made postage more affordable, which boosted the popularity of sending cards. Many examples of 19th-century greetings cards survive in collections of scrapbooks held in libraries around the country.

Among the cheerful Yuletide messages – many of which were distinctly secular – a number strike a more sinister, spiteful note. Examples include an image of a dead robin, a child boiled in a teapot, a clown sneaking up on a policeman to assault him, and sinister-looking snowmen. And finally, of course, nothing quite says happy Christmas like a depiction of a frog murdering a fellow frog with a dagger to the soft underbelly and then running off with the dead frog's money. And the message? "May you have a Merry Christmas, unlike this unfortunate amphibian."

Now viewed by many as a charming symbol of the festive period, robins were once seen as the harbingers of death

Hard luck stories

In the past, Christmas was a time full of superstition and thought to be fraught with bad luck. The robin, for example, is viewed today by most as a charming symbol of winter-time, and one that adorns many a festive card. Yet in Gloucestershire in the 1950s, there is evidence that some greeted the receipt of such cards with horror. This stemmed from the widespread belief that a wild bird entering the house signified an impending death in the family.

Likewise, if holly was brought into the house at any time of year – with the exception of Christmas – it was seen as a harbinger of death, and even in the Christmas period was either burned or ceremonially disposed of once the festive period was over. In the early 19th century, it was bad luck for fire to leave the house on Christmas day, which meant that, in a time before commercial 'lucifer' matches, neighbours would not share light from their fires to ignite wood or candles. To ask a neighbour for a light was a gross insult.

→

Evil beings

Romantic accounts of Saint Nicholas descending chimneys to deposit presents in stockings – stories that first flourished in the US during the 19th century – stem from earlier traditions connected to evil spirits. The chimney throughout European folklore was associated with the supernatural and as an entry point into the home, whether for good or evil. In Greece and Serbia, for example, Kallikantzaroi or Christmas goblins, were believed to live underground for most of the year, surfacing during the 12 days of Christmas to slip down chimneys in order to wreak havoc.

A way of preventing these evil beings from descending your chimney was to light a Yule log over the festive season. A further precaution was to throw a pair of foul-smelling shoes onto the flames.

EVIL SPIRITS
Saint Nicholas, the half-demon Krampus, and shoes packed with festive treats, sit on a Christmas table in an 1896 painting

Obscenity and subversion

Christmas was a time for subversion during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period, when snowmen were regularly built as winter effigies. During the cold winter of 1510–11, the citizens of Brussels built around 110 individual snowmen. Some of these depicted folklore figures such as unicorns and mermaids, and others explored religious and political themes. Meanwhile, some used extreme sexual and scatological imagery. One of the more sexualised sculptures could be found in Rozendal, the city's red light district. It depicted a naked prostitute and a "dog... ensconced between her legs".

Of the more scatalogical was a snow-cow that delivered "turds, farts and stinking". There was also a defecating centaur; a "manneken pis" fountain depicting a small boy urinating into the mouth of a drinker; and a drunk drowning in his own excrement. Jolly Frosty the snowman, it seems, has vulgar ancestors.

Christmas cheer has long been in short supply for China's seahorses

Animal cruelty

In recent years animal charities have highlighted how the festive season can be miserable for animals – and festive animal cruelty has a long history. In *A Child's Christmas in Wales* (1954) the poet Dylan Thomas offers a semi-fictional, autobiographical account of a young boy's experience of Christmas during the first half of the 20th century. It was a time of year when, according to Thomas, it "was always snowing". One passage describes two boys waiting in the snow "hands wrapped in socks" and armed with snowballs to attack the local cats. The wanton mischievousness of these boys, sketched in a moment of poetic genius as "Eskimo-footed arctic marksmen", opens a door into a well-documented history of mistreatment of cats.

Cats are not the only animals to find Christmas miserable. Another species that has had a rough time of it at Christmas is the seahorse. An endangered species but favoured as a remedy in traditional Chinese medicine (it is said to cure a flagging libido), for more than a century seahorses have also been caught and sold for their popularity as Christmas decorations.

AGK IMAGES/ GETTY IMAGES

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Magical shoe fillers

Shoes were not simply a noxious deterrent for evil sprites, but also a precursor to the now customary stockings as receptacles for Yuletide gifts. Earlier depictions of Saint Nicholas associate him with dropping gold coins down the chimney. In 16th-century Holland, this led to the tradition of children placing their shoes on the hearth on the eve of the feast of Saint Nicholas, and awaking in the morning to find them filled with gifts and sweets. In Italian folklore, an old woman named Befana (the 'Christmas witch') slipped gifts into shoes left by the fireplace on the eve of epiphany (6 January). These earlier chimney-related traditions no doubt passed into usage in the US via migration.

Festive serendipity

Chimneys often contain artefacts that have been bricked in or lodged up the flue. Serendipity has left us with one of the most interesting types of documents to be discovered in chimneys: children's letters to Father Christmas. For historians, they are a joy. "I want a baby doll and a waterproof with a hood and a pair of gloves and a toffee apple and a gold penny and a silver sixpence and a long toffee," wrote the breathless Alfred and Hannah Howard in 1911 before placing the letter in the fire.

The letter started to burn before being picked up by a draft and whisked to safety on a tiny shelf inside the chimney of the family home in Dublin. It was discovered by a couple renovating the house 81 years later. Such letters can be magical because they don't just record a list of material objects, but also a child's hopes and fears, too.

Carrots with everything!

During the world wars, with rationing imposed and the supply lines of the British empire greatly reduced, luxury Christmas treats were a pipe dream. More humble ingredients had to be used. The carrot, in particular, was much lauded as a versatile and plentiful foodstuff, so much so that during the Second World War a recipe booklet was produced with instructions for thrifty carrot-based dishes, including carrot soups, carrot savoury, carrot croquettes and the war-and-peace pudding.

An alternative to Christmas pudding – and first produced in Canada during the First World War – the war-and-peace pudding was made with carrots instead of mincemeat. It consisted of flour, breadcrumbs, suet, and grated raw potato and carrot to bulk out the mixed dried fruit and spice – and note the lack of fortified spirits. So popular was this that many never went back to eating a richer pudding.

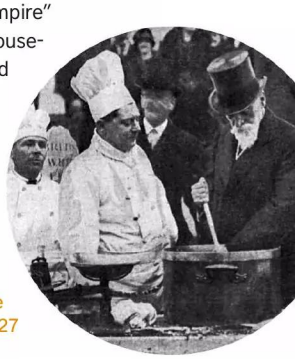
Violent eruptions

Oliver Cromwell and the puritans sought to abolish Christmas, which they viewed as a "popish superstition". One parliamentary ordinance in June 1647 threatened with punishment anyone who celebrated this festival. The ban did not go down well, and in December many of the citizens of Canterbury defied it. The pamphlet *Canterbury Christmas: Or a True Relation of the Insurrection in Canterbury on Christmas Day Last* describes how shops that stayed open on this holy day were ransacked. The city's mayor, aldermen and constables were attacked, and the sheriff knocked down, his head "fearfully broke, it was gods mercy his brains were not beat out".

In 1776, early in the American Revolutionary War, the rebel militia guarding the maritime route to Fort Ticonderoga, New York state, was a simmering pot of class and cultural rivalry, a situation exacerbated by cold and boredom in the winter darkness. Extra alcohol on Christmas day saw an eruption of violence as soldiers turned on each other like hungry dogs.

Empire pudding

A very different kind of Christmas pudding was enjoyed by George V and his family at Sandringham on Christmas Day in 1927. The pud was produced by royal chef André Cédard, who used in his recipe ingredients from around the empire: currants from Australia, raisins from South Africa, minced apple from Canada, demerara sugar from the West Indies, ground cloves from Zanzibar and brandy from Cyprus. Lord Meath of the Royal Colonial Institute called it "a symbol of unity of empire" and desired that every household in the country should eat such a pudding as a way of supporting the trade of empire.



Lord Meath stirs ingredients for the Empire Christmas pudding, destined for the royal dinner table in 1927

Tales from a Tudor Christmas

How did Henry VIII and Elizabeth I celebrate Yuletide? From a green-clad Father Christmas to Lords of Misrule and mince pies with real meat, here we provide a snapshot of Tudor festivities

BY **ALISON WEIR & SIOBHAN CLARKE** ILLUSTRATION BY **BECCA THORNE**

The Protestant Reformation, triggered by Martin Luther in 1517, rocked European Christianity to its core – and it wasn't too long before the centuries-old tradition of celebrating Christmas would be caught in the crossfire. In the first half of the 16th century, though, it seemed that Christmas might emerge from these years of upheaval relatively unscathed. Luther permitted his followers to continue celebrating the festival, while in England, King Henry VIII embraced Yuletide enthusiastically.

One popular aspect of modern festivities – Father Christmas – was already in place in the Tudor period. In fact he can be traced back at least as far as the Vikings, who often referred to their god Woden as 'Yule-Father', believing he came down to Earth at Yuletide, leaving gifts and spreading goodwill.

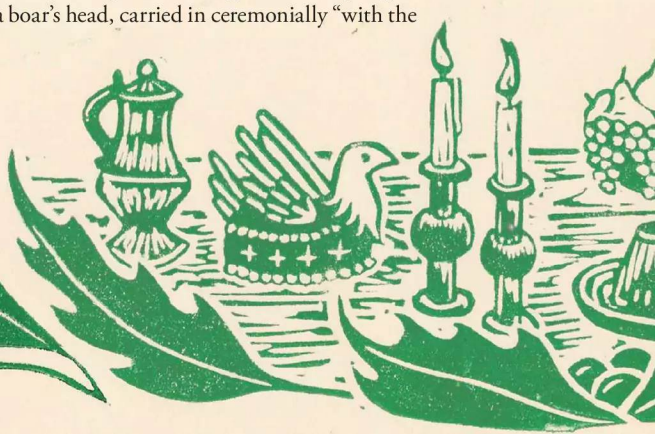
However, by the 16th century, Father Christmas – or Old Christmas and Old Man Winter, as he was also known – had become a favourite comic character in plays. While the modern Santa is a warm, avuncular figure bedecked in red, his 16th-century predecessor was far more forbidding. Clad in green, and wearing a grotesque mask and a wig, he would rampage about, shouting and brandishing a great club, exhorting his audience to behave themselves and maintain the old customs of Yuletide.

Another larger-than-life character in Tudor Christmas celebrations was the Lord of Misrule, whose job it was to preside over the 12 days of merrymaking in aristocratic households (everyone from the Lord Mayor of London to Henry VIII himself employed one). The Lord of Misrule – sometimes known as 'Captain Christmas' or 'Prince Christmas' – was tasked with ensuring that everyone toed the line and made merry during the festive period. These helpers certainly took their job seriously, often carrying a mock gibbet so that anyone who disobeyed them could be 'executed'.

Proud peacocks and a pastry Jesus

Feasting was fundamental to the Tudor Christmas – especially if you were lucky enough to occupy the higher rungs of England's social ladder. Kings and nobles kept open house, offering a smorgasbord of entertainment throughout the 12 days of Christmas, which ran from Christmas Day until 5 January. That entertainment was, inevitably, most lavish at the royal court, where there were two or three courses at every feast, each with a wide selection of dishes.

None were more extravagant than those served up for Christmas dinner. Following an appetiser of plum porridge, the feasting would really begin with a boar's head, carried in ceremonially "with the



blast of trumpets". The second course comprised rich meats. Poultry was often served in its plumage, while "the peacock in his pride" and swan were particularly popular at court.

Turkey first arrived from the New World in 1526, and was an established Christmas dish by the end of Elizabeth I's reign. Stuffing, known as forcemeat, and made with egg, currants, pork and herbs, was served with poultry from at least 1538.

For dessert, diners would often tuck into 'frumenty' – a boiled wheat pottage flavoured with milk and currants – which would later evolve into our Christmas pudding. Mince pies (or Christmas pies, as they were known) were made with shredded meat, suet, sugar and spices – often with a pastry baby Jesus placed on top. All of it was washed down by large quantities of Christmas ale and beer – sometimes finished off with a glass of mulled wine known as Hippocras, served just before bedtime.

Anyone expecting presents on Christmas morning in Tudor England, though, would have been disappointed. New Year's Day, not 25 December, was the time for exchanging gifts – and it was a practice that Henry VIII and Elizabeth I embraced wholeheartedly. Both monarchs expected a present from each and every one of their courtiers and servants. Luckily, they weren't above buying gifts themselves – usually items of gold, silver or silver-gilt plate, such as cups and bowls engraved with the royal cipher, each weighted according to rank. In one year, 1511, Henry VIII spent the equivalent of £400,000 on new year's presents.

By 1 January, the royal court was eight days into the festive period, yet it seems the appetite for extravagance and over-indulgence was undimmed. The Tudor monarchs went in procession to chapel, wearing their crowns and their royal robes lined with ermine, then presided over a great feast, topped off by (another) night of revelry.

However, New Year's Day was also a time for pondering your conduct over the past year and resolving to turn over a new leaf in the months ahead. The roots of the modern tradition of making new year's resolutions may lie in this century. Either way, it was certainly established by New Year's Eve 1661, when the famous diarist Samuel Pepys wrote: "I have newly taken a solemn oath about abstaining from plays and wine, which I am resolved to keep according to the letter of the oath which I keep by me." Within three weeks, Pepys had broken it.

Changing Christmas

Christmas took on a different tone during the reign of Henry VIII's son, Edward VI. Following in the footsteps of the reformer John Calvin, Edward sought to reclaim Christ's nativity, purged of the 'abomination' of the Catholic mass and its obsession with graven images and iconography.

Edward's Act of Uniformity (1552) removed any vestiges of the Catholic faith, while his officials whitewashed medieval wall-paintings, destroyed stained glass and defaced images of saints. Christmas cribs and nativity scenes, too, began to disappear. The Christmas church service would also now be conducted entirely in English (as opposed to the traditional Latin) from the *Book of Common Prayer*, written by Thomas Cranmer, the reforming archbishop of Canterbury, in 1549.

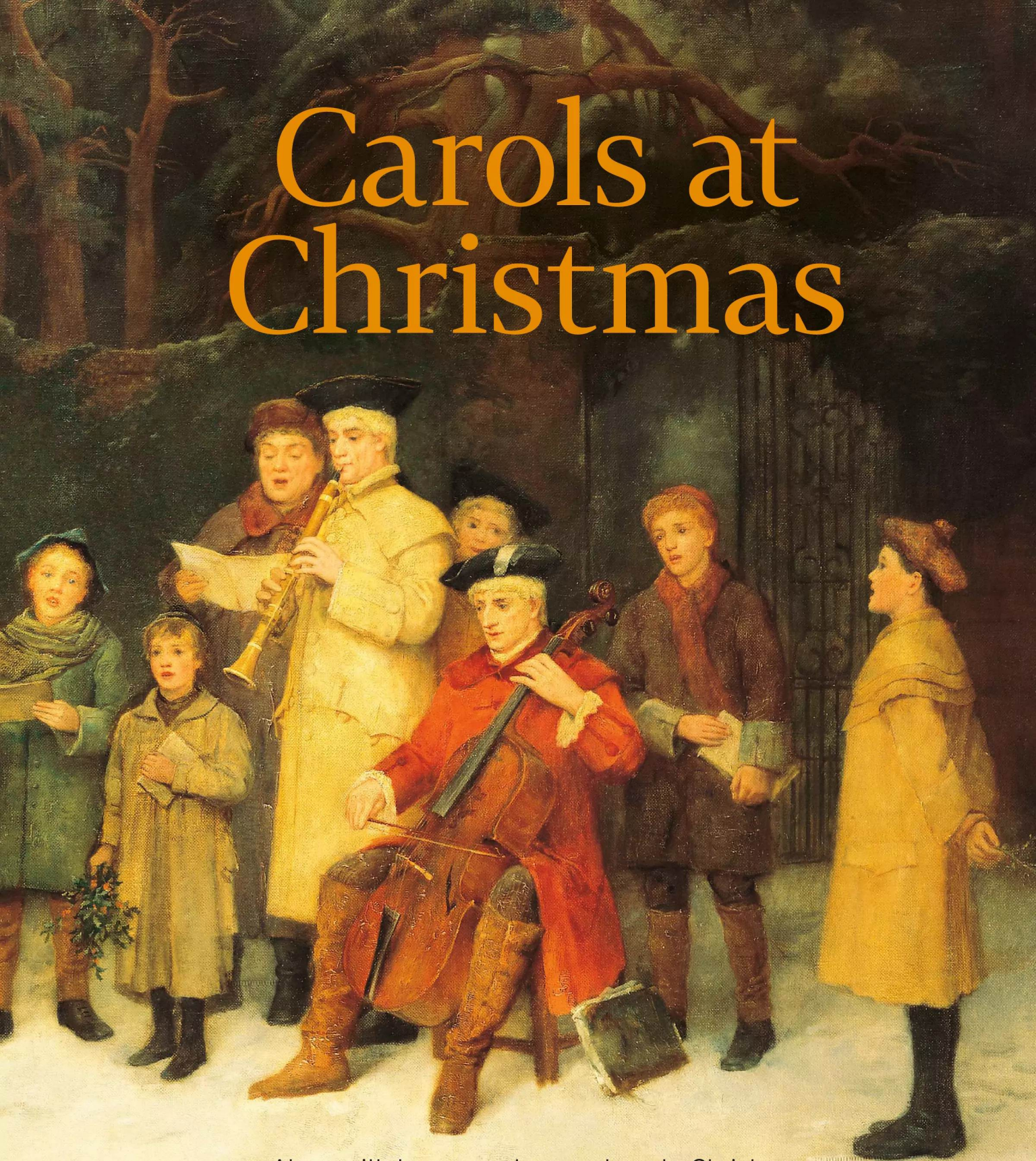
The reign of Mary I saw a return to Latin liturgy, Christmas cribs and nativity scenes but these practices would not long outlive her. In the reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603), England again turned Protestant, although a few Catholic traditions remained, particularly in church music.

With so many rituals of the old Roman mass stripped away, it is a wonder that Christmas was celebrated at all in Tudor England. The simple reason for its survival was its popularity at all levels of society.

ILLUSTRATION BY BECCA THORNE

ALL TOGETHER NOW!
Caroling became popular in the 19th century. This painting dates from around 1890

Carols at Christmas



GETTY IMAGES

Along with trees, crackers and cards, Christmas carols were mostly a Victorian tradition, but why did they become so popular?

BY **EUGENE BYRNE**

Although Christmas was celebrated in song in the Middle Ages, most carols in use now are less than 200 years old. Only a handful, such as *I Saw Three Ships* or the decidedly pagan-sounding *The Holly and the Ivy*, remind us of more ancient yuletides. Carols fell from favour in England after the Reformation because of their frivolity (see also the famous cancellation of Christmas during Cromwell's rule) and were rarely sung in churches until the 1880s when EW Benson, Bishop of Truro (later Archbishop of Canterbury) drew up the format for the *Nine Lessons and Carols* service which has remained in use ever since.

Silent night! Holy night!
All is calm, all is bright.
Round yon Virgin Mother and Child.
Holy Infant, so tender and mild...

Silent Night

Date: **1818**
Words: **Josef Mohr**
Music: **Franz Xaver Gruber**

Arguably the world's most popular Christmas carol comes in several different translations from the German original. It started out as a poem by the Austrian Catholic priest Father Josef Mohr in 1816. Two years later, Mohr was curate at the parish church of St Nicola in Oberndorf when he asked the organist and local schoolteacher Franz Xaver Gruber to put music to his words.

An unreliable legend has it that the church organ had been damaged by mice, but whatever the reason, Gruber wrote it to be performed by two voices and guitar. It was first performed at midnight mass on Christmas Eve 1818, with Mohr and Gruber themselves taking the solo voice roles. Mohr later said it was "one of the most treasured moments of my life".

Its fame eventually spread (allegedly it has been translated into over 300 languages and dialects) and it famously played a key role in the unofficial truce in the trenches in 1914 because it was one of the only carols that both British and German soldiers knew.

Good King Wenceslas

Date: **1853 or earlier**
Words: **John Mason Neale**
Music: **Traditional, Scandinavian**

The Reverend Doctor Neale was a high Anglican whose career was blighted by suspicion that he was a crypto-Catholic, so as warden of Sackville College – an almshouse in East Grinstead – he had plenty of time for study and composition. Most authorities deride his words as "horrible", "doggerel" or "meaningless", but it has withstood the test of time. The tune came from a Scandinavian song that Neale found in a rare medieval book that had been sent to him by a friend who was British ambassador in Stockholm.

There really was a Wenceslas – Vaclav in Czech – though he was Duke of Bohemia, rather than a king. Wenceslas (907–935) was a pious Christian who was murdered by his pagan brother Boleslav, and after his death a huge number of myths and stories gathered around him. Neale borrowed one legend to deliver a classically Victorian message about the importance of being both merry and charitable at Christmas. Neale also wrote two other Christmas favourites: *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* (1851) and *Good Christian Men, Rejoice* (1853).

Good King Wenceslas looked out,
On the feast of Stephen,
When the snow lay round about,
Deep and crisp and even...

DREAMSTIME/ GETTY IMAGES

Once in Royal David's city
Stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid her Baby
In a manger for His bed ...

Once In Royal David's City

Date: **1849**
Words: **Cecil Frances Humphreys Alexander**
Music: **HJ Gauntlett**

Cecil Frances Humphreys was born and grew up in Dublin in a comfortable Anglican family. In 1848 she published *Hymns for Little Children*, a book of verse explaining the creed in simple and cheerful terms and which gave us three famous hymns. So to the question who made the world, the answer was *All Things Bright and Beautiful*. Children's questions on the matter of death were answered with *There is a Green Hill Far Away*, while *Once in Royal David's City* told them about where Jesus was born. The book was an instant hit and remained hugely popular throughout the 19th century, running to almost 100 editions.

The organist and composer Henry Gauntlett put music to it a year later and nowadays it traditionally opens the King's College Cambridge *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*.

Cecil married the Reverend William Alexander, later Bishop of Derry and Raphoe and then Primate of all Ireland, and threw herself into working for the sick and poor, turning down many requests to write more verse. Much of the proceeds from *Hymns for Little Children* went to building the Derry and Raphoe Diocesan Institution for the Deaf and Dumb.

God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen

Origin unknown

This is thought to have originated in London in the 16th or 17th centuries before running to several different versions with different tunes all over England. The most familiar melody dates back to at least the 1650s when it appeared in a book of dancing tunes. It was certainly one of the Victorians' favourites. In fact, it's featured in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*:

The owner of one scant young nose, gnawed and mumbled by the hungry cold as bones are gnawed by dogs, stooped down at Scrooge's keyhole to regale him with a Christmas carol: but at the first sound of – "God bless you merry, gentleman! May nothing you dismay!" – Scrooge seized the ruler with such energy of action, that the singer fled in terror ...

If you want to impress people with your knowledge (or pedantry), then point out to them that the comma is placed after the "merry" in the first line because the song is enjoining the gentlemen (possibly meaning the shepherds abiding in the fields) to be merry because of Christ's birthday. It's not telling "merry gentlemen" to rest!

DREAMSTIME

Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"

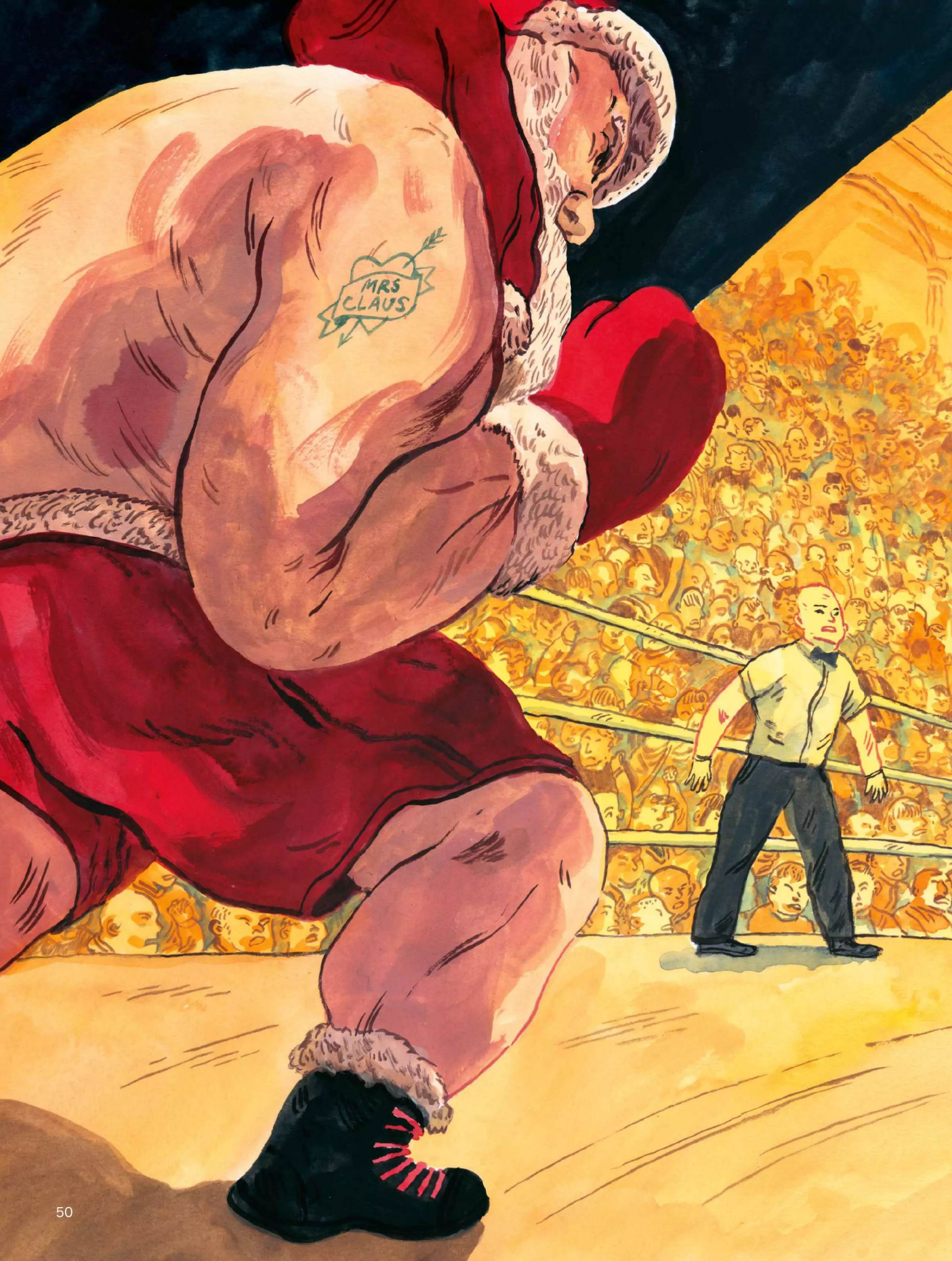
Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

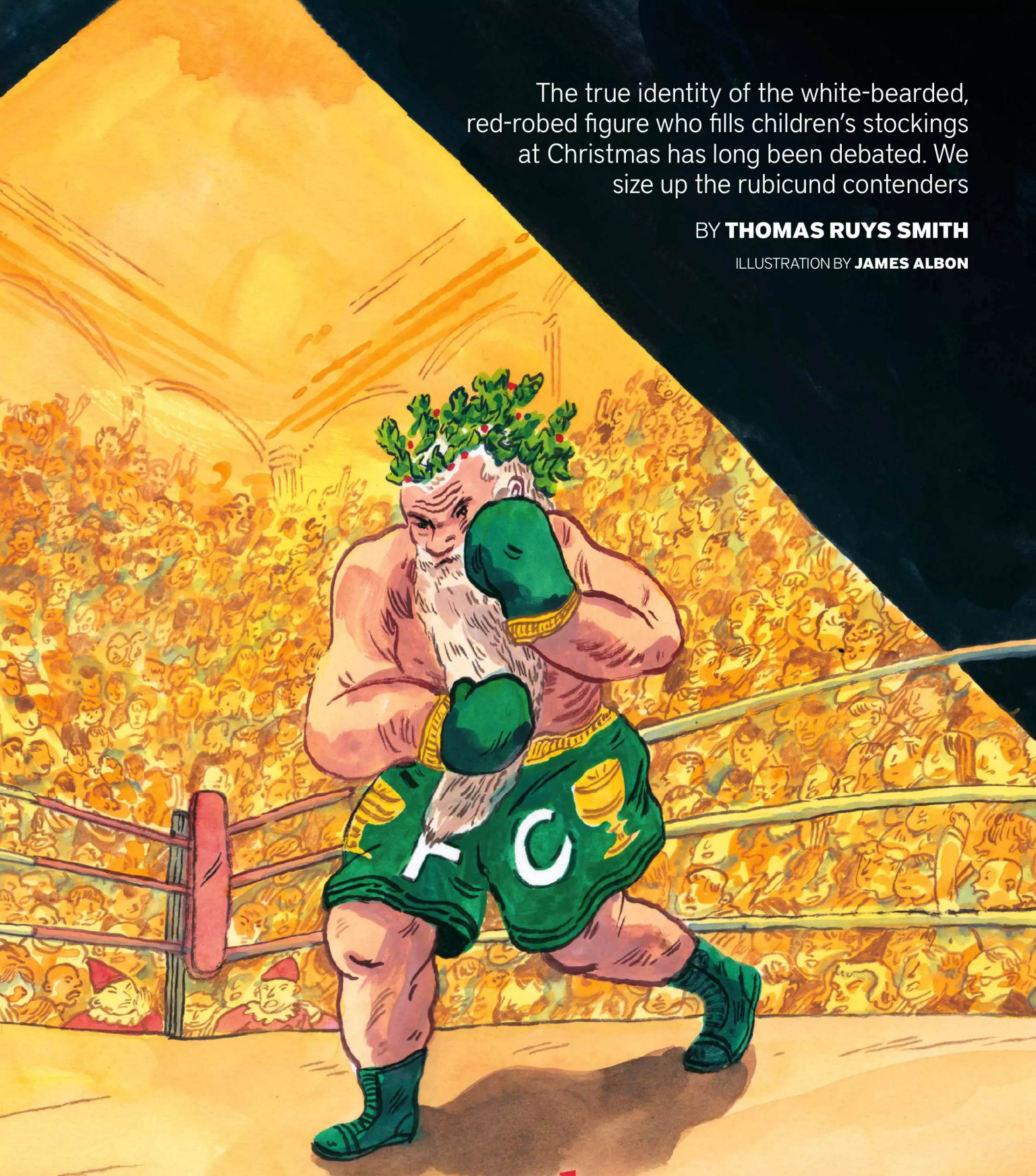
Date: **1739 or earlier**
Words: **Charles Wesley**
Music: **Felix Mendelssohn**

Charles, the brother of Methodist founder John Wesley, penned as many as 9,000 hymns and poems, of which this is one of his best-known. It was said to be inspired by the sounds of the bells as he walked to church one Christmas morning and has been through several changes. It was originally entitled *Hark How All the Welkin Rings*, welkin being an old word meaning sky or heaven.

As with most of his hymns, Wesley did not stipulate which tune it should be sung to, except to say that it should be "solemn". In earlier times it was sung to the tune of *Amazing Grace* and to that of Wesley's great Easter hymn, *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*. The modern version came about when organist William Hayman Cummings adopted it to a tune by German composer Felix Mendelssohn in the 1850s. Mendelssohn had stipulated that the music, which he had written to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the invention of the printing press and which he described as "soldier-like and buxom", should never be used for religious purposes.

God rest you merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay.
For Jesus Christ our Saviour,
Was born on Christmas Day ...


MRS
CLAUS



Santa Claus v Father Christmas

The true identity of the white-bearded, red-robed figure who fills children's stockings at Christmas has long been debated. We size up the rubicund contenders

BY **THOMAS RUYS SMITH**

ILLUSTRATION BY **JAMES ALBON**

'Tis the night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature is stirring… but someone is. While the household sleeps, a jolly visitor carefully places presents in stockings hung by the fireplace. After taking a sip of whatever tipple has been thoughtfully left out for him, he pockets a carrot and disappears up the chimney. With a tinkle of sleigh bells he disappears into the night with his faithful reindeer, a merry laugh echoing across the rooftops. It's a familiar ritual – with one fundamental point of contention.

Who do you think it was that brought you these presents? Are you a Father Christmas fundamentalist or are you a Santa Claus supporter? Each figure has his passionate partisans, and each is wrapped up with issues of national and regional identity. A recent YouGov poll of around 4,000 British residents suggested that the UK is split right down the middle on the topic – though Santa enjoyed a narrow lead by a couple of percentage points. What you may find surprising is that this isn't a modern conundrum. In fact, the ongoing battle for seasonal supremacy has created a schism in British culture since the Victorian era. Despite what some Father Christmas traditionalists might think, Santa Claus is not some recent American arriviste. The forgotten history of the friendly rivalry between this pair of festive icons goes much deeper, and takes us on a transatlantic journey through popular culture back to a time even before our modern celebration of Christmas was taking shape.

Nick of time

Let's start at the beginning – or as close as we can get to it. The figure of Father Christmas is undoubtedly more venerable than Santa Claus – in English culture, at least. References to characters who served to personify the period of yuletide feasting and merrymaking can be traced back to at least the 15th century, but Father Christmas really emerged as a champion of the season when Christmas came under threat in Britain. He joined the fray in the midst of religious and cultural arguments during the Civil War when Puritans attempted to suppress traditional Christmas celebrations. One anti-Puritan pamphlet written in 1652 lamented that Father Christmas, who could once "knock down Hercules", was lately suffering from "a deep consumption", his former might sadly diminished.

Christmas celebrations and Father Christmas both returned with the Restoration. But it wasn't until the Victorian revival of historic traditions, and its creation of new ones, that Father Christmas was truly reinvigorated as the presiding spirit of the season. Certainly, Charles Dickens' portrait of the jovial Ghost of Christmas Present in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) owes a lot to the established idea of Father Christmas as the personification of yuletide celebrations – crowned with winter greenery, and accompanied by bountiful piles of food and a brimming wassail bowl. This Father Christmas had no truck with reindeer, though, and he certainly never stuffed a stocking – at least, not until his American rival started to descend British chimneys.

Enter Santa Claus. Tracing his origins takes us across the Atlantic to 18th-century New England. Puritan colonists, in common with their English counterparts, had been positively averse to Christmas celebrations. But plenty of European immigrants imported their Christmas celebrations to America, where they took root and found new forms. A wealth of winter gift-bringers set up shop in their respective immigrant communities, from the Dutch Saint Nicholas (and his secularised counterpart Sinter Klaas) to wilder figures such as Knecht-Ruprecht and Belsnickel from Germany. Undoubtedly, Father Christmas made the trip across the Atlantic too; despite the Puritans' best efforts, he found a warmer reception in the Southern colonies.

Father Christmas really emerged as a champion of the season when Christmas came under threat in Britain

The figure of Santa Claus emerged from this characteristically diverse American melting pot. Tantalising references to a distinctive new seasonal gift-bringer started to emerge in the late 18th century. As his name suggests, Santa Claus took inspiration from Saint Nicholas, a fourth-century bishop of Myra (in what's now Turkey), about whom tales were told of secret gift-giving. But elements of other European traditions are evident, too. In appearance, Santa was more rough and ready than might be imagined. And, rather than appearing on 5 or 6 December (the feast day of Saint Nicholas), when he came to homes in many parts of central Europe, Santa Claus visited American families on Christmas Eve.

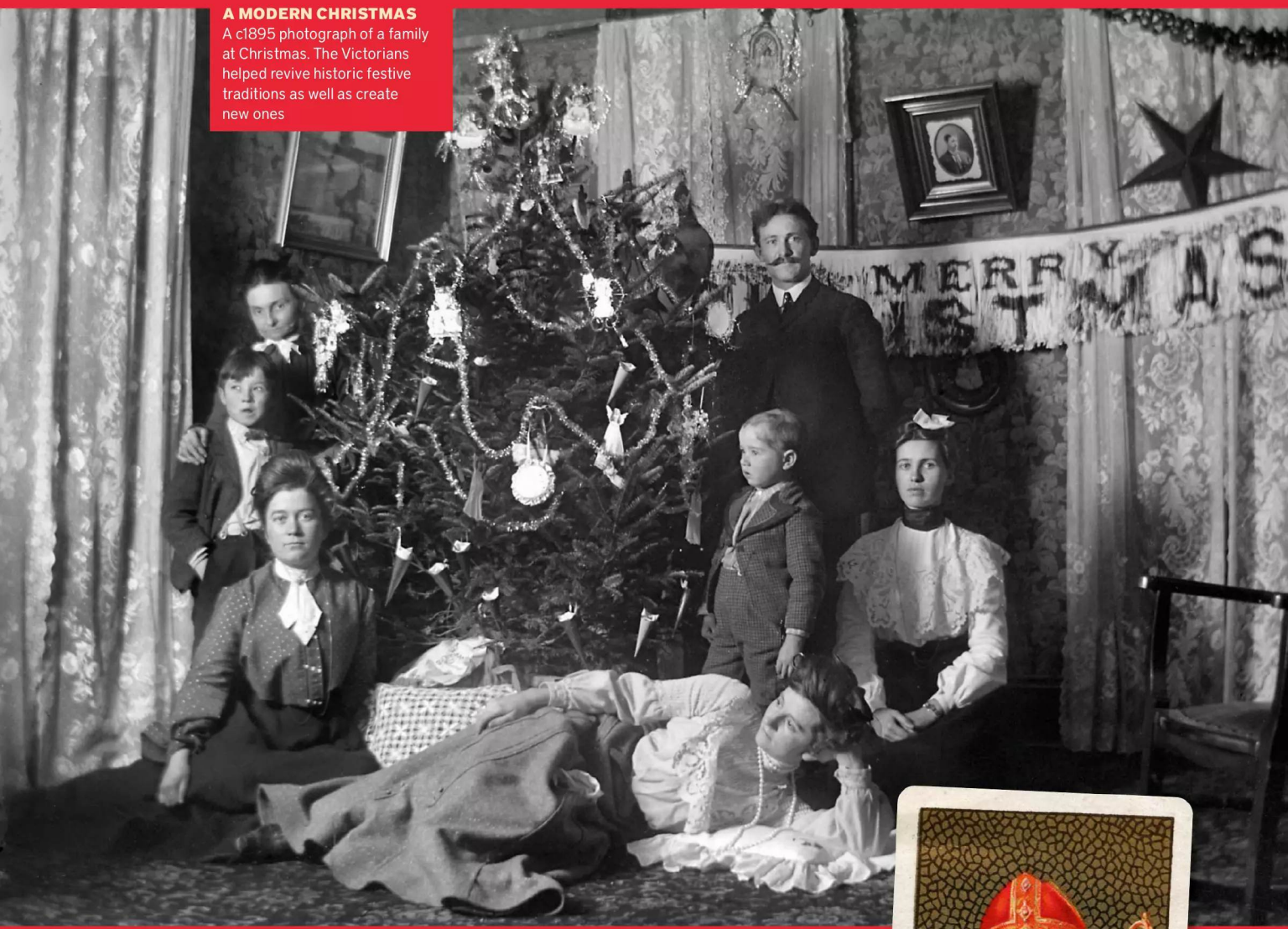
The age of Santa

Though the exact origins of Santa Claus remain murky, 1821 certainly marked a key moment in his emergence on the seasonal stage. That Christmas, an ephemeral publication for young readers called *The Children's Friend* was published in New York. From its richly illustrated pages leapt the now-recognisable figure of "Old Santeclaus". This character, dressed in red, visited children on Christmas Eve, left presents in their hanging stockings, and travelled in a sleigh pulled by reindeer. Whether this poem reflected folk traditions that were already in evidence or newly invented them for its young readers – probably a bit of both – the age of Santa had arrived.

Almost immediately, his public profile was boosted by the 1823 publication – initially anonymous – of a poem that is still very familiar to us today: Clement Clarke Moore's *A Visit from St. Nicholas*. Though that title called him by his older name, the newspaper in which it appeared introduced the verses as a "description of that unwearied patron of children... Sante Claus". Moore's timing was perfect: soon the poem had become an emblem of a new kind of domestic Christmas centred on the family, the home and the excitement of children waiting for their stockings to be filled by a magical visitor. In the US, it did much to spread the legend of Santa Claus to eager young ears. "Just think of it!" exclaimed an American commentator in 1875. "Until we had heard or read this, we didn't know much about him."

Over the decades that followed, American writers and artists continued to develop Santa's backstory, locating his base in the North Pole, revealing his workshop of elves, and even giving him a

A MODERN CHRISTMAS
A c1895 photograph of a family at Christmas. The Victorians helped revive historic festive traditions as well as create new ones



CHRISTMAS IMPORTS
The 17th-century oil painting, *The Feast of St Nicholas*. Dutch immigrants would have taken their Saint Nicholas to America during the 18th century

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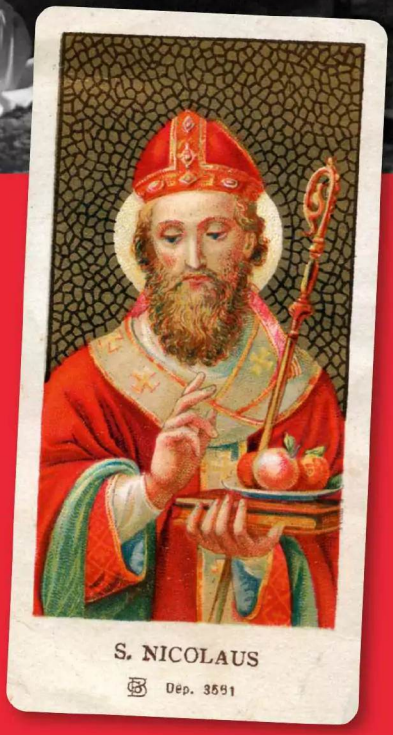

THE FIRST SANTA?
A c1890 lithograph of Saint Nicholas of Bari, also known as Nicholas of Myra, a fourth-century bishop from whose appearance America's Santa took shape

A NEW KIND OF CHRISTMAS
A c1870 illustration of the American Clement Clarke Moore's 1823 poem *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, which introduced the idea of hanging up a stocking. The poem had made its way to Britain by the 1850s

20TH-CENTURY PATRIOTISM
A c1910 postcard printed in Germany showing Santa Claus. In England, there was a preference for a home-grown gift-bringer, ie Father Christmas

RECOGNISABLE FIGURE
A c1900 American Christmas card depicting Santa Claus as we still know him today – red suit, sleigh full of presents and flying reindeer

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

wife. By the middle of the 19th century, Santa Claus' reach had expanded from his regional base in and around New York to become a ubiquitous figure in American Christmases. "Nobody ever saw him," as one American described in 1853, "though everybody has heard of him." Emboldened by such success, Santa looked to expand his empire further still.

Then as now, the potent slices of American popular culture that crossed the Atlantic had a profound effect on the seasonal behaviour of the young (not to mention their demands on their parents) in Britain. Slowly but surely, Santa Claus gained a foothold in the Old World, his legend disseminated in popular literature. Reprints of Moore's poem were certainly circulating in Britain by the 1850s, and probably earlier. Printed in the *Illustrated London News* in 1855, it was accompanied by some useful advice for British children looking to emulate their American counterparts: "Before going to bed, the children hang their newest stockings near the chimney, or pin them to the curtains of the bed. Midnight finds a world of hosiery waiting for favours; and the only wonder is that a single Santa Klaus can get around among them all."

Stocking filler

One American book, now largely forgotten, seems to have had a particular impact on the profile of Santa Claus in Britain. Sisters Susan and Anna Warner shot to fame in 1850 when the former published *The Wide, Wide World*, one of the bestselling books of the 19th century. Hundreds of thousands of British readers read of its heroine, Ellen Montgomery, hanging up her stocking for Santa at Christmas-time – and perhaps emulated her hopeful act.

Even more significant was the sisters' 1853 story *Carl Krinken'; or, a Christmas Stocking*. The tale of a poor young American boy visited by Santa Claus one Christmas Eve, it seems to have captivated a generation of young Victorians. Looking back to her mid-century childhood, British writer Sarah Tooley recalled that the Warners' book did more than anything "to popularise the visits of Santa Claus in our own country"; when British children read the story of Carl's adventures, it "caught their imagination, and 'St. Nick' is now almost as popular in London as in New York". New British editions of the book were still being produced in the closing years of the 19th century.

As early as 1856, taking stock of the transformations of Christmas celebrations over the previous decade or so, one Birmingham newspaper marvelled that Christmas stockings were already an established part of the season, "for Santa-Claus has had the temerity to scale the wooden walls of old England, of late years". Having once scaled those walls, Santa became a familiar presence in British Christmases for the remaining years of the 19th century. As the London *Evening Standard* judged in 1861, "the children of England may be pleased with the advent of Santa Claus." Even as late as 1896, a writer for the *Manchester Courier* could still declare: "I do think that Santa Claus is the most beautiful myth which ever comes into our lives." So, when Victorian children hung up their stockings, it was Santa Claus that they expected to fill them.

Not that Father Christmas retreated entirely in the face of Santa's celebrity. He increasingly appeared on cards and in magazine illustrations as an embodiment of the festive season. In the late 19th century, at least, there was clearly room for both figures in the landscape of British Christmas celebrations. In 1876, for example, the *Darlington & Richmond Herald* found space in its account of the coming "Christmastide" for a tribute to both "Old Father Christmas" as the incarnation of the "merry season" and the American newcomer who had become a central part of domestic celebrations: "We envy not the home where the Christmas stocking... is not an established institution and Santa Claus one of the patron saints of the children's calendar."

Since the Victorian era, the pair have been locked **in a struggle for Britain's stockings**

It wasn't long, though, before the outlines of these defined figures, with their distinctive roles, began to blur and merge. Even in the 1880s, Father Christmas was sometimes named as the figure who filled festive stockings. The shadow of war and a growing jingoism seems to have sped up that process, and national tensions found their way into Christmas debates.

American fiction

In 1912, one rather confused memoirist, looking back to his childhood in the mid-19th century, declared: "I am glad to say that in those days people knew nothing (at any rate, they knew nothing in our part of England) about such German things as 'Christmas Trees,' or such German saints as 'Santa Claus.' Our Christmas presents were found in stockings, and put there by Father Christmas." He was taken to task for this assertion by a correspondent to *Notes & Queries* magazine, who attempted to set the record straight. "I am as John Bullish as may be but I do not remember finding any gifts in my youthful socks or stockings," they wrote, "and have an impression that my first introduction to the contemplation of such cornucopias was in the pages of an American story-book."

Such memories soon faded, though, and by 1933 one newspaper laid out a deceptively simple answer to the question of who exactly stuffed British stockings: "Here we call him Father Christmas, in America he is Santa Claus." The patriotic preference for a home-grown gift-bringer was, at least temporarily, in the ascendancy.

Since then, the pair have been locked in a struggle for Britain's stockings. If Father Christmas's stock rose in the 20th century, Santa Claus has clearly made inroads into the psyche of Britain's children in recent decades; apparently, he has even gained a narrow lead this century. However, even the most ardent Father Christmas fanatic shouldn't panic about this apparent Americanisation of British culture. Arriving from across the Atlantic at the precise moment that our modern Christmas was taking shape in the Victorian era, Santa Claus should be considered as much a part of our traditional celebrations as Christmas trees, Christmas crackers, Christmas cards – and good old Father Christmas himself.

In the spirit of the season, let's call a truce between these jovial icons. This yuletide, if you really want to honour festive tradition, raise a glass to Father Christmas in thanks for your family's feast and the blessings of the season – but make sure to hang out your stocking for Santa Claus.

GOLDEN BOY

Over the past 200 years, Dick Whittington has become one of Britain's best-loved pantomime heroes. Yet, as **Michael McCarthy** tells Jon Bauckham, the real-life story that inspired Dick's rags to riches tale is even more remarkable than the fiction

UPWARDLY MOBILE
A 1618 engraving of Richard Whittington, who served as mayor of London four times from 1397. His illustrious career inspired the tale of the boy who moved to the capital in search of streets paved with gold

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

Every Christmas, British theatres are taken over by a 'usual suspects' roster of pantomimes: Jack and the Beanstalk, Aladdin and Snow White being among the most common. But while many of these stories are based on fables or fairy tales, one much-loved production – Dick Whittington, the story of the boy who heads for London in search of streets paved with gold – draws a surprising portion of its narrative from real-life events.

The titular 'Dick' is based on Richard Whittington, the medieval mayor of London who, just like his panto counterpart, left his home in the countryside and made his fortune in the big smoke. But how much of the story, which has captivated theatre-goers for centuries, is drawn from reality? And how much is plucked from the realm of fantasy? And, perhaps most importantly, did Whittington really have a pet cat?

These are questions that have long fascinated Michael McCarthy, author of *Citizen of London: Richard Whittington, The Boy Who Would Be Mayor*. The book sees McCarthy providing a detailed account of the real Whittington's remarkable rise to prominence, which is no mean feat given the difficulties of piecing together aspects of Whittington's early life.

"Whittington first arrived in London around 20 years after the Black Death, which had peaked in Europe in the mid-14th century," says McCarthy. "However, the problem we have is that the pandemic killed around 50 per cent of England's rural clergy, who were the main people responsible for the recording of births, marriages, deaths and other key events at this time. Due to the turbulence of the period, many of the records you would normally expect to find simply haven't survived."

Fortunately, by working backwards from later documents, McCarthy has deduced that Richard was born around the year 1358. And, in contrast to the impoverished pantomime character, Whittington certainly wasn't of poor stock. In fact, he hailed from a relatively prosperous family in Gloucestershire, though compromised financially by his father's untimely death.

Learning his trade

Tragically, William died around the time of Richard's birth, leaving his widow, Joan, to raise the couple's children on her own. But if Whittington thought he was going to live a comfortable life on the back of his father's wealth, then he was very much mistaken. As the youngest of three sons, he was unable to benefit from the tradition of primogeniture, so was instead forced to make his own fortune. To this end, he was sent away to become an apprentice to Sir Ivo Fitzwarin, influential as a military figure, courtier and mercer, when he was about 10 to 12 years old.

"Whittington's mother, by now a single parent, would have likely gone to consult local mercers in the city of Gloucester, asking for their recommendations about who she should send her son to," explains McCarthy. "Or, if she had already made her decision, she would have wanted to know that she was correct in the judgments she was making. But the Fitzwarin connection also ran deeper: Whittington's father had served as a knight under Fitzwarin's father during the Hundred Years' War."

"There is no evidence to suggest that Whittington owned a cat," reveals McCarthy

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In contrast to the impoverished pantomime character, Whittington certainly wasn't of poor stock

Whether Whittington would have been aware of these military connections before he set foot in London is unknown, but it seems he soon settled into the life of a young apprentice. Taking up residence in the Fitzwarin household, he shadowed his master and became skilled in the art of selling expensive textiles – such as silks and velvets – to London's great and good. Importantly, he also began exporting raw wool to Florence and Venice, where it was turned into cloth of the finest quality. In contrast to the pantomime, Whittington's story is perhaps best described as a tale of luxury fabrics, rather than rags, to riches.

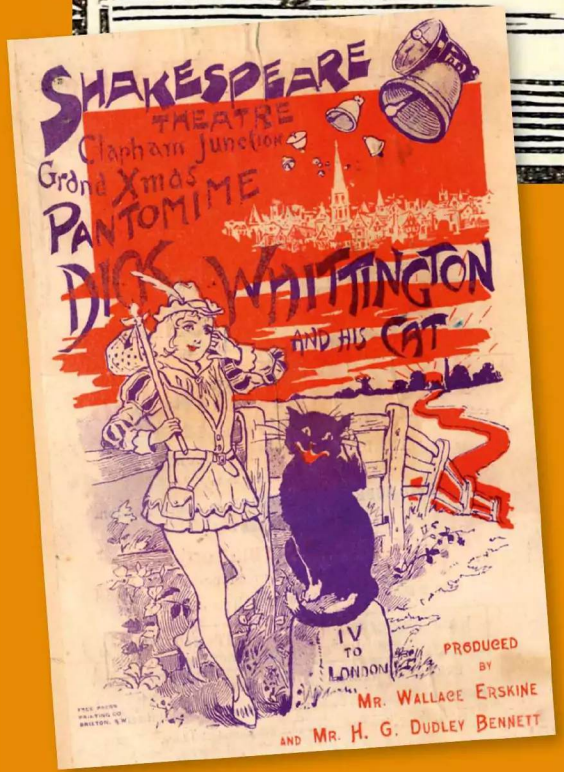
Upwardly mobile

Serving under Fitzwarin enabled Whittington to meet two hugely significant people in his life: Fitzwarin's daughter, Alice, whom he went on to marry at some point between 1402 and 1410, and Richard II, to whom he was introduced in 1379 . As Whittington began building his own fortune, he even started acting as the monarch's private moneylender. But it wasn't just the king who came knocking. "The Hundred Years' War, combined with the upheaval caused by the Black Death, meant that London was in a state of social flux, with land changing hands on a frequent basis," explains McCarthy. "However, unlike some of his contemporaries, who went round buying up houses along the Thames, Whittington kept his money liquid and developed a reputation for integrity; he was trusted. So, over time, very senior people began approaching him for loans. I wouldn't say that he was opportunistic, but he was certainly far-sighted and intelligent enough to use these connections to his advantage."

By the final decade of the 14th century, Whittington's star was truly in its ascendancy. In 1393, having already gained valuable experience as a common councillor, he was appointed sheriff of the City of London, which put him in prime position to land one of the most important roles of all. "In the summer of 1397, the mayor of London, Adam Bamme, died in office," says McCarthy. "Bamme had been a very popular mayor,

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

HIS MASTER'S BLESSING
A woodcut from an 18th-century chapbook shows a young Richard Whittington bowing to London mercer Sir Ivo Fitzwarin, to whom he was apprenticed from a young age



STAGE ADAPTATION
A 20th-century poster advertising the tale that has become a staple of Britain's pantomime season

TRADING PLACES
Textile, gold and silver merchants peddle their wares in a 14th-century illustration. Dick Whittington made his mark on society by selling silks and velvets to London's movers and shakers

The cast of Dick Whittington on stage at the Birmingham Hippodrome. The tale of the benevolent mayor has captivated theatre-goers since the 17th century

Pantomime hero

How a medieval merchant morphed into an icon of the stage – and where his legendary cat comes in

Richard Whittington certainly deserves to be more than a mere footnote in London's history. But how did his story become synonymous with dames, horse costumes and frenzied shouts of "it's behind you"?

The answer to that question, it seems, lies in a mixture of oral tradition and the written word. While the pantomime character of Dick Whittington didn't properly develop until the early 19th century, versions of the story were already circulating soon after the real Whittington's death.

"Thirteen years after he died, Whittington was described by an unnamed poet as the 'sonne of marchandy' – the ultimate mercer, if you will," says Michael McCarthy. "But it seems that the story really started to take off around the 1530s, when some of his good works were beginning to bear fruit, through the auspices of the Mercers' Company and other institutions that he had founded. Playwrights were starting to hook on to his tale and think, 'There's an interesting story to be told here'."

The story of the benevolent mayor was still doing the rounds among writers of the Stuart period, with evidence that Whittington's life formed the basis of both a 'drama play' and a ballad in 1604 and 1605 respectively. And, according to a diary entry from September 1668, even Samuel Pepys recalled an outing to "Southwarke-Fair", where he watched "the puppet-show of Whittington, which was pretty to see".

By the 17th century, Whittington was no longer a boy from noble stock, as in real life, but a poor country lad who is said to have absconded from his master's household, only to have been lured back by the sound of Bow Bells calling him to "turn again" and fulfil his destiny as "thrice lord mayor of London".

But what about Whittington's beloved pet cat, who, in the pantomime, secures the boy his fortune after being sold to the sultan of a distant, rat-infested kingdom?

"There is no evidence to suggest that Whittington owned a cat," reveals McCarthy. "However, is it possible that a young apprentice, entrusted with looking after parts of his master's household, would have owned a cat as part of efforts to keep rats at bay? Absolutely. Whittington was serving his apprenticeship only 20 years after the Black Death, and would likely have been responsible for going into the cellars and hallways and keeping them free of vermin."

McCarthy sees Whittington's fabled feline companion as a possible allegory. "Cats were not only associated with witchcraft, they were also connected to good luck, so I don't think it's an accident that some versions of the story used the cat as the device that makes Whittington his fortune."

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having saved Londoners from starvation by negotiating an important grain deal some years before. But Richard II, who was deeply unpopular within the city, did not want to wait around for another election and feared instability. Instead, he turned to Whittington, by then a highly respected figure, and installed him in the post."

Despite effectively being a caretaker mayor, Whittington proved that he was more than worthy of carrying on in the role on a permanent basis. After serving out the brief remainder of Bamme's term, Whittington was formally elected mayor of London in the autumn of 1397. In total, he would serve in the post four times, winning further elections in 1406 and 1419. The erroneous assertion in the pantomime, which sees Whittington becoming "thrice mayor of London", stems from a basic historical error: whoever first coined that catchy phrase neglected to include his first stint filling in for his late predecessor.

As Whittington moved from early adulthood into middle age, he continued to serve as a supplier and moneylender to royalty – even in the cut and thrust world of medieval kingship. In fact, when Richard II was deposed by Henry Bolingbroke in 1399, Whittington did not find himself banished from the court: quite the opposite. Having already been a long-standing client, Bolingbroke carried on using Whittington's services even after he had taken the throne as Henry IV. Then, when Bolingbroke's son Henry V became king in 1413, Whittington's relationship with the crown only deepened, and he was even tasked with overseeing construction of a new roof at Westminster Abbey.

Man of the people

Despite his royal affiliations, Whittington felt his strongest sense of duty to the ordinary people of London. During his time as mayor, and in other civic roles, he embarked on several public building projects, including a ward for unmarried mothers at St Thomas' Hospital and even a block of public toilets, known as the 'Longhouse', which survived until the Great Fire of London in 1666.

Whittington also took a personal interest in improving the lives of the capital's prisoners, as McCarthy explains. "Very early on in his career, Whittington developed a huge anger and distaste for London's prisons, and in particular Newgate, which was horrifically filthy and overcrowded. As his wealth grew, he made it his mission to see that the prison was rebuilt – something that was achieved shortly after his death."

When he died in March 1423, Whittington left his entire fortune to charity

Much of Whittington's philanthropy occurred posthumously, because, when he died in March 1423, he left his entire fortune to charity. "Whittington's wife Alice had already died, and the couple had not produced any children," explains McCarthy. "So in 1421, Whittington began writing up his will with help from his friend, John Carpenter, who he also named as his chief executor. But that's not all: Whittington placed Carpenter in charge of a four-man task and finish group, entrusted with spending Whittington's money after he had passed away."

Worth £7,000 – estimated to be as much as £7m in modern terms – Whittington's bequest was enormous not only in volume, but also in the sheer breadth of how it was distributed. Remarkably, his generosity is still reflected across London today – we have a Whittington College, now based at Felbridge; a Whittington Hospital, established in 1473; and a Whittington NHS Trust that oversees it. In London, there are also schools, parks and community facilities named after him. Six centuries after he changed the face of the capital, the name of this extraordinary individual lives on.

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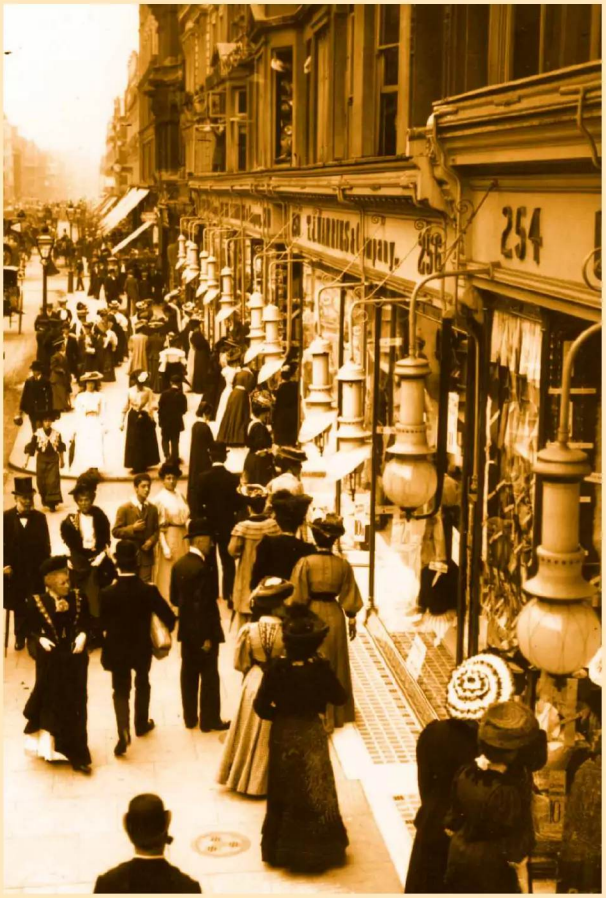
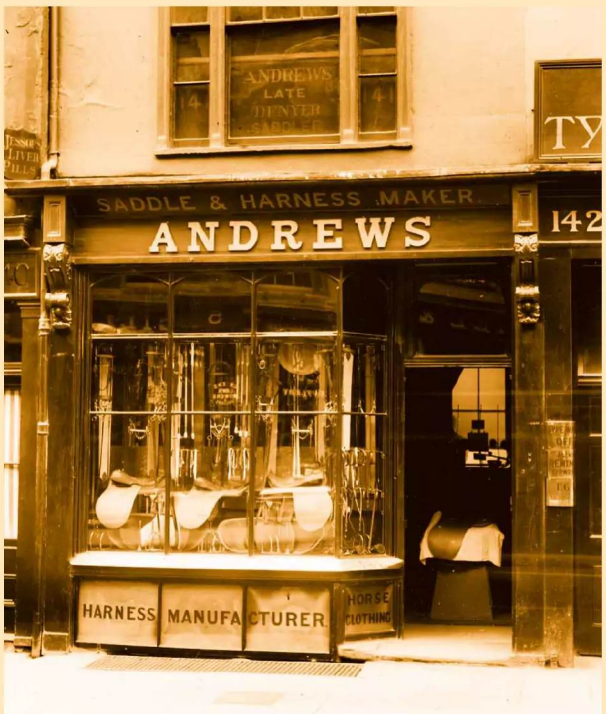
GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN
Whittington's name lives on in London's Whittington Garden – next to his burial place of St Michael Paternoster Royal church

Richard II, shown in a c1390 portrait, would become a useful ally to Whittington – as would his cousin, arch-rival and successor, Henry IV





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Annie Gray is a historian, cook, broadcaster and writer specialising in the history of food and dining in Britain since 1600; A photograph of shoppers on London's Oxford Street, 1909; A c1726 painting of Covent Garden, London; An early 20th-century photograph of Andrews, a saddle and harness shop in Oxford

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELISSA RODRIGUES–JERSEY HERITAGE/ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

“All previous predictions about the disappearance of the high street have been confounded”

As more and more of us head online to do our Christmas shopping, where does that leave the British high street? In an interview first published in 2024, **ANNIE GRAY** tells Ellie Cawthorne how its evolution has been a story of growth and diversification – but also of enduring appeal

Ellie Cawthorne **What can looking at a high street in any given era tell us about that period?**

Annie Gray So much. If you walk down any high street, you’ll see the things that people want and need on an everyday basis. So if you were strolling down a high street in, say, 1903, you’d have saddlers and leather workers, and specialist shops selling pork and different meats. You’d see a lot of shops selling cloth, because ready-to-wear clothing wasn’t around then. And you’d encounter lots of items that we simply don’t have a role for in our lives today – tiny little bits of ironmongery and things like that.

Alongside the quotidian stuff, high streets have always been relatively prestigious areas for leisure shopping, featuring the likes of jewellers, swordsmiths, clockmakers and lace merchants. Luxury goods such as these are often imports, so they can tell you a lot about Britain’s place in a global context.

Take tea for example: it was first sold in china shops, then in high-end grocers, then – as it became cheaper – everywhere. Just following the journey of tea reveals so much about the way in which people interacted with the global landscape of commercialisation.

When did a cluster of shops that we might recognise as a high street first appear in British towns?

The evolution of the high street was a really gradual process. The market was still the most important place to shop – certainly for the working classes – well into the 20th century. Market day was always the busiest day in town. But between 1650 and 1750, most towns in Britain begin to have some fixed shops, usually around or leading from the market.

One of the first types of shop to move into fixed premises was the butcher. That kept mess away from the main shopping area, and enabled butchers to lock up stock and install cold stores.

Traditionally, the market square was also a gathering place – somewhere people went to enjoy entertainment, to jeer at criminals in the stocks or to hear political proclamations. Slowly, these aspects became features of the high street, too. It was where you’d find sex workers, beggars, people ranting on street corners, hustlers drumming up custom for the bear fight being held the next day – that kind of thing. In my book, I argue that the high street isn’t just about shops. It’s a place for the community to come together.

What items have been enduring staples of the high street?

The most significant products sold there have been clothing and food, but the ways those things are sold have changed hugely. In 1700, a typical grocer would offer raisins, dried ginger and spices, but it would also sell you a couple of nails and maybe a bit of cloth as well. Gradually, though, shops became more and more specialised.

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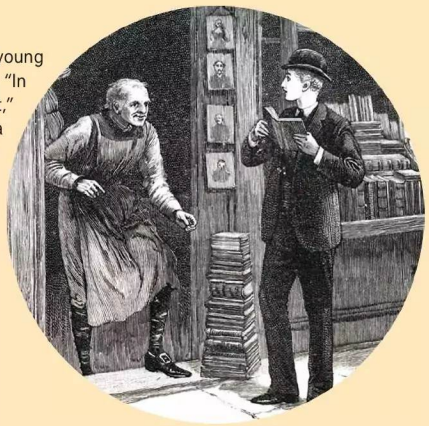

A 19th-century illustration of a young man reading outside a bookshop. "In the early days of the high street," says Gray, "booksellers were a mark of a well-appointed town"

> "Leisure was very much built into the whole experience, and bookshops embraced the idea of shopping as a pleasure"

In the 19th century, high-end grocers emerged calling themselves 'Italian warehouses', selling Italian products such as olive oil and jars of preserves. Then, in the second half of the 19th century, chain grocers such as Lipton's, the Maypole Dairy and Home & Colonial were established to serve the lower end of the market. When the first Sainsbury's shop opened in Drury Lane, London in 1869, it sold only eggs, milk and butter. There was a lot of money to be made in these early chain grocers, many of which sold just a small range of products.

By the postwar period, multiple chain grocers were operating, including Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose. Then Britain saw the rise of the out-of-town supermarket – which is modelled on the market, only supersized – and the start of a move away from food shopping on the high street.

What are some of the most interesting high street shops now lost to time?

The fabric shop is a fascinating example of something that has all but disappeared. The story of clothing on the high street began with the sale of cloth, then cut cloth, then almost ready-to-wear – then, finally, truly ready-to-wear clothing. That final step didn't really happen until the 20th century. Even when I was growing up in the 1980s, there was a popular chain of fabric shops called Gordon Thoday; I remember my mum spending hours in one. Just within my lifetime, fabric shops have virtually vanished from the high street, apart from some very small independent outlets. I think that if you told someone from 160 years ago, or even 60 years ago, that today we all buy off-the-peg clothes in randomly assigned sizes, they would have been flabbergasted.

There was also a level of real specialism on the high street that I think we've now lost. You might have a lawnmower shop next door to a piano shop next to the oil man, who sold oil paints and different types of oils for cooking or fuel. It's very rare to find really specialist shops anymore, especially given modern rent pressures.

That said, one of the success stories of the past few years is the bookshop. Booksellers have always been prevalent, and in the early days of the high street they were a mark of a well-appointed town. People would stroll past to look at the prints in the window, each one displayed in its own pane of glass.

In the past, booksellers were usually printers, too. Inside you could tell them which book or collection of poems or sermons you'd like, and then you would choose your own binding. Some booksellers would also operate as circulating libraries. These were quite relaxed, exclusive spaces where you could sit and browse. Leisure was very much built into the whole experience, and bookshops embraced the idea of shopping as a pleasure to really lean into.

When did shopping become seen as a leisure activity rather than just another chore?

It always has been, to some extent. Even before the 17th century, if you were wealthy you would delegate the task of going to the market, but you might still go along to a selling fair. A lot of those still exist in a changed form: think of the Goose Fair in Nottingham, or the Midsummer Fair in Cambridge.

Today these are big entertainment events with rollercoasters and candyfloss, but when founded they were international selling fairs. They would last up to a week, and you would spend a lot of time discussing possible purchases, which would be brought out and spread before

INTERNATIONAL GATHERING
A picture of Goose Fair, Nottingham, 1926. The selling fair was first mentioned in the Nottingham Borough Records of 1541, though it probably dates back further than this, and still exists to this day

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END OF THE ROAD?
A confectionery shop and livery stables just off Putney high street, 1897. Since the 19th century, people have fretted about small-scale grocers being forced out of business by 'Big Shops'

GETTY IMAGES

you to inspect. You might even have salespeople come to your home.

The idea that you would go out to spend a day just having fun shopping in town really took off in the late 17th and early 18th century – and it caused a lot of concern at the time. Many people hated the idea of browsing – a notion that, unsurprisingly, was widely associated with women. Quite clearly, men were just as guilty, but women were the ones who took the flack. It was known as 'tumbling', in reference to women who would grab at bolts of cloth, tumbling the fabric all over the place without buying anything.

Shopping was seen as a game into which you entered with whoever was selling. Most places didn't have fixed prices until the mid-18th century, so you needed to bargain. Trying to get a good price – to get the better of the shopkeeper, as it were – was treated as a kind of intellectual exercise.

Napoleon supposedly called Britain a "nation of shopkeepers". How have shopkeepers been regarded over time?
For much of history, shopkeepers were not regarded as society's most upstanding members. If you go back to the medieval period, there was a really strong idea that you should shop directly from the producer, often a farmer – which all sounds very idyllic and organic and local. But, even back then, that idea was utter rubbish. Even in the Middle Ages, there were people buying stuff from producers, then selling it on. Such on-sellers were widely hated, considered immoral and profiteering.

Gradually, though, people began to realise that producers aren't necessarily very good at selling, and that maybe people who are really good at making cheese should just make really good cheese, while a specialised salesperson, perhaps with a network of agents, should sell that cheese. People came to appreciate that, though there might be a bit of profit in on-selling, those profits ultimately find their way into the system, so it's quite good for the economy overall.

What can you tell us about the rise of the department store?
The concept is not actually very old. It was only from the 1860s onwards that the 'Big Shop' – a brilliantly descriptive term – emerged on the high street. Such establishments weren't called 'department stores' at the time; when that term did start to be used, it was a pejorative Americanism for something that was seen as a bit shabby and downmarket.

A lot of the early Big Shops evolved out of other, more specialist shops that just started selling additional items. For example, mercers originally sold only silk, but then many mercers became drapers, then the drapers also started to sell

> “One store had a Swedish diver plunge from the mezzanine into a pool five storeys below – only for her to lose her swimming costume on the way down”

Anita Kittner at Bendalls in Kingston on Thames. The interwar period was the golden age of the department store stunt

furniture, then carpets and clothes and homewares. They might move into ready-to-wear, and add some toys, and perhaps an entire house-fitting service. Then, before you knew it, you had yourself a Big Shop.

A lot of the early Big Shops extended into adjacent premises, ending up with a real mishmash of buildings. When department stores became established, though, they often sported glorious, usually neoclassical frontages that you could spot a mile away: think big columns, huge atriums with multiple floors, and massive windows. Many department stores also had staff quarters on the top floor, because the shop assistants would live in.

The idea of the window display was really driven by department stores. Selfridges displayed a monoplane, and Lewis's of Liverpool placed a hand excavated from Pompeii in its window. Another innovative sales technique introduced by department stores was the big marketing stunt. Gordon Selfridge – very brash, very American – was very well known for this. He thought British high streets were incredibly backward, and even had the law changed in order to build his massive store on Oxford Street. But the golden age of the big department store stunt was the interwar period.

Bentalls in Kingston upon Thames was great at such affairs. When the first hoover was launched, a giant hoover was installed in its atrium. On another occasion, it had a Swedish diver called Anita Kittner plunge from the mezzanine into a tiny swimming pool five storeys below. The floor had to be reinforced because of the velocity with which she hit that pool. Alarmingly, she lost her swimming costume on the way down.

Other stores would hold cookery demonstrations, and catwalk shows were common right up until the 1970s. It was all about bringing people in through the door, making the department store a hub for more than just shopping.

DOWN THE HATCH
Thomas Rowlandson's early 19th-century depiction of people enjoying hot saloop, which was once a popular drink served on street corners in Britain

What refreshments were on offer for hungry shoppers?

As they are today, refreshments have always been a huge part of the high-street experience. In the modern context, I'm not fond of a chain cafe, but it's important to acknowledge that early examples were crucial to the development of the high street.

Take Lockhart's Cocoa Rooms. Cocoa was traditionally associated with institutional living – workhouses, hospitals – and Lockhart's was squarely aimed at the poor. You could bring your own food, and sit in one all day. So I think they deserve an honourable mention, though I wouldn't necessarily want to go and spend all day there, sipping cocoa and eating a sausage.

Some street-seller offerings from the past are really interesting, too – things such as saloop. Very few people in Britain today have heard of saloop, but it's still a popular drink in the Middle East [where it's now commonly called salep]. Made from powdered orchid root, it's a pick-me-up that was frequently served on street corners in 18th-century Britain. So I think a mug of saloop would have been worth stopping for.

What debates about high streets have raged over the centuries?

People have always been concerned about the high street. First of all, they were worried that shopping was immoral, and that everyone would waste their

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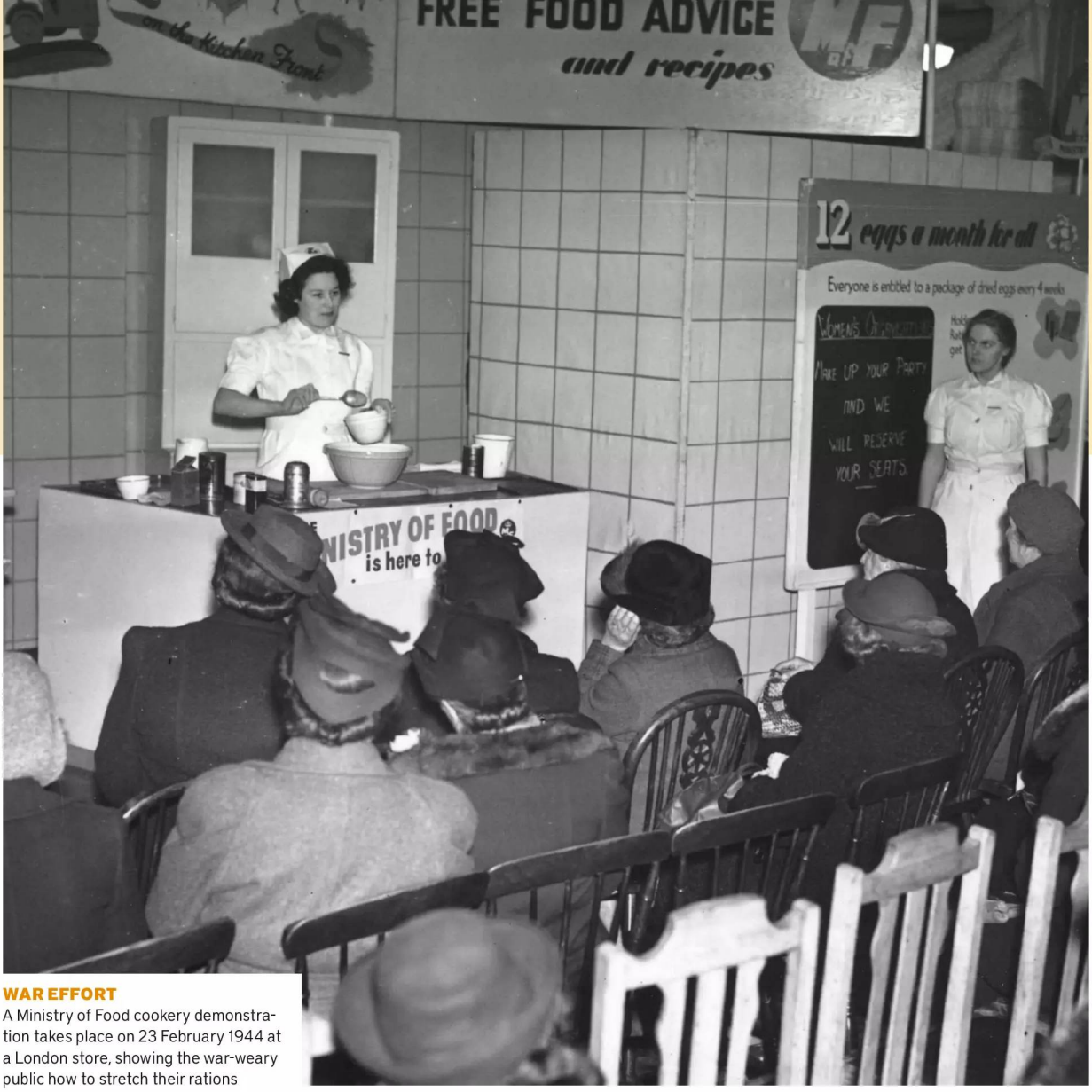


WAR EFFORT
A Ministry of Food cookery demonstration takes place on 23 February 1944 at a London store, showing the war-weary public how to stretch their rations

GETTY IMAGES

hard-earned money. Then, when shops became more established and we all realised that we loved them, concerns shifted to the issue of small shopkeepers being driven out of business by Big Shops. People have been arguing over that since at least the 1850s.

In the early 20th century, the debate focused on the 'death of the grocer' – the idea that small-scale specialist grocers would be forced under by Big Shops with food halls and unskilled workers. That took a lot longer than people at the time thought it would, but it has undeniably happened.

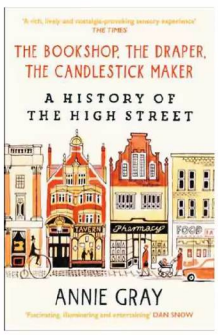
The class aspect – whether a high street is being gentrified or is in slow decline – has long been a topic of debate. Ethically, too, there are many choices to make when shopping, because another argument that has raged forever concerns the treatment of producers. There was a huge boycott of slave-produced sugar from the late 18th century, while in the 1890s people were concerned about dressmakers being worked to the bone. We still have debates today about working conditions and modern slavery in terms of how our products are made.

Many people have talked about the 'death of the high street'. Should we be worried?

I think we should bear in mind the idea of 'use it or lose it', but actually I believe there's more hand-wringing than there needs to be. So long as we still have a community hub, it might not be such a bad thing if the high street constricts.

I do think, though, that we would definitely lose something if our high streets disappeared entirely – and modern surveys reveal that 98 per cent of the population agrees with me.

We can't turn back the clock, but even though we've got fewer shops now, history shows us that all previous predictions about the disappearance of the high street have been confounded. ●



The Bookshop, The Draper, The Candlestick Maker: A History of the High Street
by Annie Gray
Profile Books, 416 pages, £10.99

CHRISTMAS Q&A

A selection of historical **conundrums** answered by experts

Is it true that, because of laws passed during the rule of Oliver Cromwell, it is still illegal to eat mince pies at Christmas?

No, it's not true – and it never was. Christmas was an important festival in the 17th-century calendar: a 12-day event marked with sports, games, feasting, drinking and – traditionally at New Year – the exchange of gifts. Recusants and secret Catholics allegedly celebrated it with special enthusiasm.

For Puritans, though, Christmas did not just epitomise immoral excess and ungodly behaviour, it was also a relic of popery. In Civil War-era London, and then in the interregnum parliaments, various laws were debated (though not always passed) and ordinances issued to stop the observance of traditional holy days,› including Christmas.

But Christmas continued to be celebrated, and local authorities trying to enforce the ban were often met with disorder, such as the so-called Plum Pudding riots that broke out in Canterbury in 1647.

The laws and ordnances proscribing the celebration of Christmas do not once mention mince pies, which were probably also eaten at other times during the winter. Even if parliament had specifically outlawed mince pies (usually served as a single large dish, as opposed to the little morsels we eat nowadays), ordinances concerning holy day observances were torn up at the Restoration in 1660 anyway.

Yet the idea that Cromwell 'banned' mince pies is one of our unshakable urban legends, along with assertions that it's 'still legal' to kill Welshmen in Chester, or that sticking a stamp with the monarch's head upside down is treason.

Eugene Byrne is a freelance journalist and author.

ILLUSTRATION BY GLEN MCBETH

The themes within *A Christmas Carol* have become central to how we mark Christmas

ALAMY/BRIDGEMAN/GETTY IMAGES

Which Christmas traditions, if any, is Charles Dickens responsible for?

Many of the Christmas traditions enjoyed in the UK today were introduced or popularised during Dickens' lifetime: the first Christmas card was sent, crackers were invented, and Prince Albert famously introduced Christmas trees from his native Germany. Old traditions such as carol singing, feasting, and giving presents were reinvigorated in the Victorian era and became closely associated with Christmas time.

Dickens himself wasn't responsible for these traditions. However, his vibrant and evocative depictions of Christmas celebrations cemented his association with the time of year and encouraged others to enjoy Christmas anew.

The most enduring example is *A Christmas Carol* (1843). With this novel, Dickens capitalised on and helped to drive a burgeoning Christmas publishing trade. He also wrote books that could be given as gifts: in addition to *A Christmas Carol*, he published four other Christmas books, as well as extra Christmas issues of his weekly magazines. These editions were distributed every Christmas for almost 20 years, and they became an anticipated fixture in the publishing calendar.

But it is *A Christmas Carol* that has best stood the test of time. Its depictions of family, hardship, cruelty and kindness, but most importantly personal transformation and forgiveness, have become central to how we understand and mark Christmas. For many, it is the act of returning to this story – whether through books, theatre or film – that has now become a tradition of the festive season.

Emma Curry and **Aine McNicholas** are V&A postdoctoral research fellows, who worked on the *Deciphering Dickens* project.

DID YOU KNOW...?

Will Little Larry live?

In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Tiny Tim was nearly Puny Pete. Dickens had a habit of playing around with his characters' names: for *Martin Chuzzlewit*, written about the same time as the tale of the miser Scrooge, the hero's surname could have been Chuzzletoe. For Bob Cratchit's disabled son, Dickens considered not only Puny Pete but other alliterative names such as Little Larry and Small Sam before settling, wisely, on Tiny Tim.

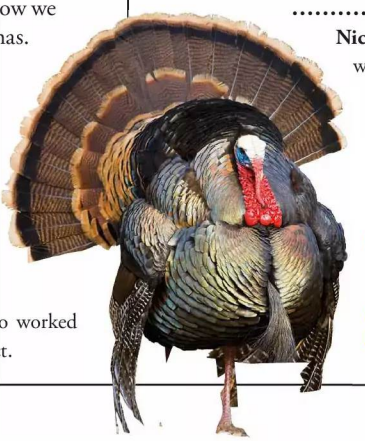
Jingle bowls

The first advertising jingle heard on radio was aired on Christmas Eve 1926 in Minneapolis. It was for the breakfast cereal Wheaties, and was sung by a barbershop quartet. "Have you tried Wheaties?" the foursome sang. "They're whole wheat with all of the bran. Won't you try Wheaties? For wheat is the best food for man." Sales rocketed in Minneapolis, and the jingle was soon heard throughout the USA.

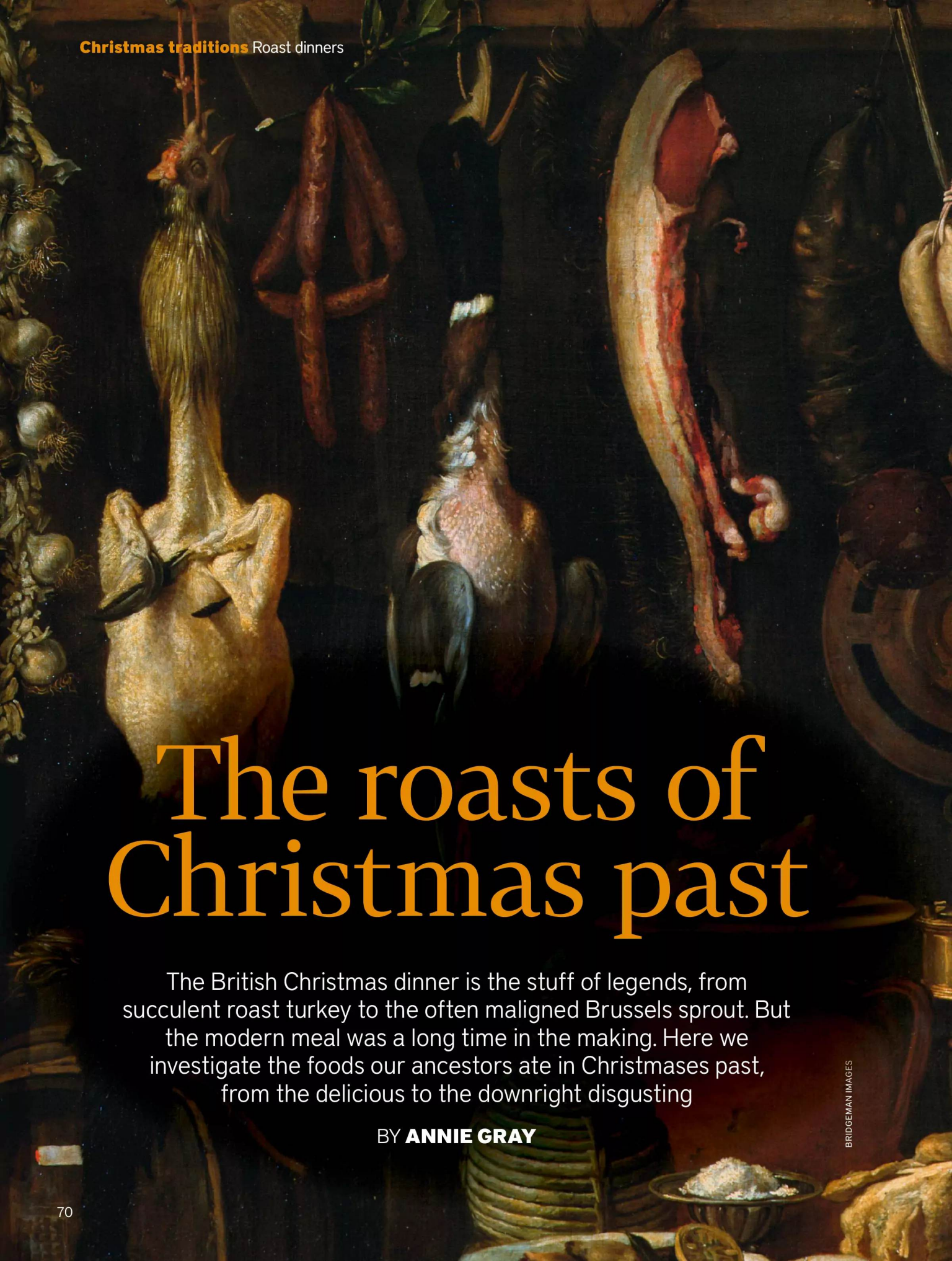
Turkey trekkers

Before the railways made transport easier, turkeys often walked from Norfolk to London in the weeks before Christmas, many of them wearing tiny boots. Turkey farmers needed to get their birds to the capital in time for the festive season. The easiest way was to drive them there on foot. The journey could take several weeks, and some farmers supplied their turkeys with tiny shoes made of leather or sacking to protect their feet from the muddy ruts in the roads.

Nick Rennison is a writer and journalist specialising in history.



Before the railways were built, farmers would have to walk their turkeys up to London



The roasts of Christmas past

The British Christmas dinner is the stuff of legends, from succulent roast turkey to the often maligned Brussels sprout. But the modern meal was a long time in the making. Here we investigate the foods our ancestors ate in Christmases past, from the delicious to the downright disgusting

BY **ANNIE GRAY**

BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

LAVISH FAYRE
Birds such as goose, swan and peacock were often on the late medieval festive menu

In the 16th and 17th centuries alcohol was integral to Christmas, as the Twelve Days were seen as a time to over-indulge in drink

LATE MEDIEVAL / TUDOR

Gluttons, devils and wine-bibbers

Winter is grim, and for the medieval church Advent was a period of religious fast. During this time people couldn't eat dairy, eggs or animal products, although fish was permissible. So the chance to light big fires, drink and eat was a release of tension and an officially sanctioned period in which to blow off steam. For those who could afford it, Christmas extended over the full Twelve Days, each with feasting and play.

Up to the 16th century there were no foods entirely specific to Christmas, but there were dishes connected to celebration and showing off. By the end of the 16th century, some of these were more associated with Christmas than others. Big birds were "in" because farmed fowl was in season – thus goose, capon, swan (raised from that year's cygnets) and peacock were all consumed. When turkey was introduced from the Americas in around the 1530s it was enthusiastically adopted, served roasted with head and legs intact, or with elements of the plumage used as decoration for raised pies. For those who could not afford such lavishness, hospitality was taken seriously. Landlords and employers gave gifts of meat, fuel and ale to the poor.

Mentions of specific Christmas pies appear during the Tudor period, too. These were sometimes the meat-heavy equivalents of today's multi-bird roasts, but it was also a name for mince pies, made with up to 50 per cent meat, bulked out with sugar, spice and all things very nice – and very rich. Plum pottage was another seasonal food (like mince pies, eaten throughout winter), consisting of a hefty beef stock, breadcrumbs, spice and dried fruit.

Excess drinking was very much a part of the season. So much so that by the 17th century the Puritan writer William Prynne said that Jesus might be thought of as "a glutton, an epicure, a wine-bibber, a devil".

Couples in states of undress under the mistletoe, in Thomas Rowlandson's 1812 etching. Some saw Christmas as the season of revelry, but the elites looked down on extended frivolity

GEORGIAN

The end of excess?

"Old Christmas is coming," cried Charles Lamb in 1826. "He cometh not with his wonted gait, he is shrunk 9 inches in the girth, but is yet a Lusty fellow." By the late 18th century Christmas was a slippery thing. For enthusiasts such as Lamb, it was a season of celebration, a chance to get very drunk and party. After all, it was only a few generations ago that parliament had tried and failed to reduce the whole thing to the status of any other Sunday. But for the Georgian fashionable elites, the Puritans had had something of a point. All that riotous celebration and forced jollity seemed to them a tad plebian.

By the early 19th century the Twelve Days had dwindled to one, sometimes two, days of excess. All that feasting was now concentrated into one meal, Christmas dinner, held generally around 5pm on the 25th (later for the very fashionable). At its core were the two edible emblems of England, trotted out for any celebratory feast – roast beef and plum pudding, which appeared as part of the upper-class three-course à la Française (where every dish is served at the same time) meal. The beef was roasted in front of a roaring fire, while the pudding was a cousin of plum pottage, sharing with it the dried fruit and spice, but now mixed with suet and flour and boiled in a cloth to form a cannon-ball shaped pudding. The two were consumed as complementary flavours and surrounded with a choice of other dishes, including unseasonal vegetables and a lot of game. Both were a demonstration of wealth.

Other specifically Christmassy foods included mince pies; turkey and other farmed birds; and Twelfth Cake, a rich fruit cake, iced and decorated in often lurid forms, eaten on Twelfth Night. In the early Georgian period a bean would be concealed within, the finder becoming king for the night. By the 1780s, the beans had been replaced with revellers buying packs of character cards, which were available at all price points and very popular.

ALAMY/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

VICTORIAN

Cooking up the modern Christmas

The Victorians have the reputation for creating the modern Christmas. This is largely true, and Christmas became both more family-friendly and more commercialised in the almost 64 years Victoria was on the throne. It is to the Victorians that we owe the rebranding of Twelfth Cake to Christmas cake, and plum pudding to Christmas pudding. The decoupling of the pudding from roast beef, as well as its placing toward the end of the meal, would have been unthinkable in 1837, but was largely complete by 1901.

For the rich, beef remained a huge part of the Christmas spread, along with roast game. Meat in general was prestigious. The poor joined goose clubs, saving all year for their Christmas goose. In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Bob Cratchit's bird would have come from such a source. Stuffed and roasted in front of a fire, the normal accompaniments were potatoes and Brussels sprouts, the first printed recipes for which appeared in the 1840s. The wealthy still favoured unseasonal produce, including asparagus. Jerusalem artichoke soup also enjoyed a brief vogue as a Christmas(ish) starter.

Service style was changing too, from the simultaneous serving of many dishes at once that the Georgians had favoured to the new, sequential style known as à la Russe. But it was slow to catch on, especially at Christmas, for the lure of a groaning table was hard to resist (and à la Russe was ridiculously complicated and expensive for the vast majority of people, as it required many servants.)

Queen Victoria adopted the new style in the 1870s. Her Christmas dinners were remarkably consistent. Roast beef, woodcock pie, a raised game pie, a stuffed boar's head and a huge brawn (a vertical slice of pig, rolled and poached) appeared every year on the sideboard.

> The poor joined goose clubs, saving all year for their coveted Christmas bird

The main meal included sprouts, game and mince pies, now with very little meat.

Another common dish on upper-class tables was boiled turkey. In 1861 journalist and cookery book writer Isabella Beeton wrote: "Christmas dinner, with the middle classes of this empire, would scarcely be a Christmas dinner without its turkey." However, it was still far from the majority choice.

TURKEY DINNER Christmas dishes from one of Mrs Beeton's cookery books, 1890. By the 1860s turkey featured on many British festive menus

MODERN FEAST Four pigs carry Christmas dishes in this c1880 image. The Victorians paved the way for many 21st-century Christmas celebrations

ALAMY/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

A butcher displays Christmas turkeys and encourages shoppers to register so they can buy a bird, 1946. Rationing and shortages made procuring meat difficult

SECOND WORLD WAR

Mock meals and chronic shortages

In many ways it was the stresses of life in wartime, and the 14 years of rationing that accompanied it, that cemented the Christmas menu in England. (Irish Christmases remained more beef-based and the Welsh favoured goose, while in Scotland Hogmanay was more important.) Because so many foods that had come to symbolise Christmas were unobtainable during the war, when they returned it was to jubilation. Meals also became smaller in the 1950s, while some traditional dishes fell away. Of course, the meals people ate were still varied, but the ideal Christmas menus printed in books and newspapers became increasingly rigid.

In 1939 Christmas was not unduly challenging, but with 1940 came rationing. Although the ration would fluctuate, for most of the next decade – and beyond – there tended to be very limited fat, sugar, eggs and meat. Even those things that remained unrationed (or, later, were restricted by a points system), such as dried fruit, were scarce. But Christmas was incredibly important for morale, and at a time when diaries and letters are full of food – getting it, longing for it, lacking it – dinner remained a focus. Writers and broadcasters rushed to suggest ways to get by, from custard powder in lieu of eggs (nasty), to dried eggs (nastier), to a wide and rather optimistic range of "mock" dishes. Mock meats were based on potato and sausage-meat, and mock marzipan on dried beans. The Ministry of Food remained upbeat, declaring that fruit bowls were easily replaced with vegetables: "The cheerful glow of carrots, the rich crimson of beetroot, the emerald of parsley – it looks as delightful as it tastes."

Christmas dinners inclined toward meat and lots of veg. Those who had space kept rabbits or chickens, to be sacrificed for the festive table. Dig for Victory was in full swing, and potatoes, carrots and other easily grown specimens were ubiquitous. Restaurants also remained open, albeit restricted, and boomed. The rich, as ever, fared better – the Savoy and other such hotels sourced game and salmon from their clients and raided their well-stocked larders. But even there, the Christmas puddings were more carrot than fruit, and custard came from a tin.

DIG FOR CHRISTMAS A girl holding allotment-grown potatoes, 1941. Dig for Victory was in full swing, so home-grown vegetables were a Christmas meal staple

> Food swaps included custard powder in lieu of eggs and mock marzipan made from dried beans

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21ST CENTURY

Out with the new, in with the old

If you read the papers in December, you might be forgiven for thinking that the British Christmas meal is utterly uniform: turkey, roast potatoes and sprouts, with Christmas pudding to follow, plus mince pies and Christmas cake. But only around 70 per cent of us eat turkey, even fewer opt for sprouts, and Christmas pudding is in decline.

However, for many of us, today's typical Christmas meal is almost identical to menus from the 1930s, 1950s and 1970s. And in the idealised presentation with all of the main course dishes served on the table at once, it isn't that far removed from the dinners of 250 years ago.

The average Christmas dinner in the 21st century is around 5,000 calories and meat-heavy: reflective of earlier, more physical eras when such feasts were much anticipated one-offs. And it requires a huge amount of work (often still reliant on female labour), for when it came together, from around 1870 to 1940, in middle-class homes, servants – even if only a daily char – were still the aspiration, if not the norm.

A trot through Christmas dinners in the past shows that our apparently traditional meal is anything but. Whether rich or poor, we've eaten a vast range of foods at Christmas in previous centuries, and although that range has narrowed in the last 200 years, the emphasis on certain staples is more in the mind than on the table. The ideal 21st-century Christmas dinner is old-fashioned, partly as it is a time of huge nostalgia and memory-making, and partly precisely because we only eat it once a year.

It doesn't have to be this way, though. If we truly embrace the past, our repertoire would expand immensely. So try the raised pies, hearty stews, glazed vegetables and rich ice creams. For if we really liked turkey and trimmings, surely we'd eat it more than once a year?

> The average meal is around 5,000 calories, reflective of earlier eras when such grand feasts were one-offs

A dining table set with traditional Elizabethan foods. "Try the raised pies, hearty stews, glazed vegetables and rich ice creams," Annie Gray urges

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

Although the modern Christmas dinner is expected to feature turkey and Brussels sprouts, these foods aren't on every table. Only 70 per cent of Britons eat turkey, for instance

HISTORY COOKBOOK

ELEANOR BARNETT serves up festive classic favourites from three eras of British history

A Christmas feast

The history of our annual blowout and the dishes that we still devour today

In the midst of the Christmas festivities of 1577, the parson of the Cheshire village of Winwick preached against "gluttons and dronkerdes" who "thincke they maye eate and drinke as much as they will" during the season of goodwill. This "oftentimes" meant consuming "so much as they cannot disgest", cramming "themselves like swine… till they bee out of theyr wittes like beastes". Sound familiar? Since at least the ninth century, Christmas has been associated with feasting and mirth in the Christian tradition. In fact, in the medieval period, Christmas was just the start of 12 full days of riotous consumption and celebration that ended on Twelfth Night (5 January) with another massive blowout.

Today, turkey takes centre stage on the Christmas Day menu. Native to the Americas, turkey arrived in Britain only in the 1520s and, though it featured in feasts of some of Britain's wealthiest people, alongside swan and peacock, it wasn't until the early 20th century that turkey came to be associated with the holiday. Instead, beef or goose were the roast meats of choice; earlier medieval Christmases often featured brawn – preserved salted boar's meat or pork.

By the late Tudor era, mince pies had become popular festive treats. Contrary to popular myth, Oliver Cromwell never explicitly banned them, even when the puritans outlawed celebrating Christmas itself in England in the 1640s and '50s. Unlike the bite-sized fruity snacks we enjoy today with a glass of sherry, the mince pies of the 16th and 17th centuries were huge, intended to feed a lot of people as part of the main course. And, as the name suggests, the filling in mince pies was actually meat – veal, mutton, pork, turkey, capon (castrated cockerel) or beef, as in the recipe shared here, which is adapted from Robert May's 1660 recipe book. With the familiar festive flavours imparted by dried fruits and spices such as nutmeg, mace and cloves, the meaty versions are also quite delicious.

Do you end your feast with a traditional Christmas cake or a Christmas pudding? The history of these holiday desserts is intertwined. Christmas pudding – more on which on the next spread – in its original form, included dried fruits and – you guessed it – more meat. The word pudding, in fact, derives from the French boudin, meaning animal innards, while 'plum' referred to any type of dried fruit. From the 17th century, the mixture thickened and took on its modern spherical shape; until the end of the 19th century it was served as an accompaniment to the main meat.

Meanwhile, Christmas cake evolved from a spiced currant cake known as a Twelfth cake that was traditionally consumed on Twelfth Night. In the medieval era, a bean was hidden inside the cake, and the lucky partygoer who found it in their slice was crowned king of the festivities. A hidden pea might also designate a Twelfth Night queen. Over time, the legume was replaced with a coin, and in the Victorian period it migrated into the Christmas pudding. Along with the paper crowns that we hide in Christmas crackers, Christmas cake is a remnant of Twelfth Night revelry. The Georgian chef John Mollard published the first printed recipe for a Twelfth cake in 1803. Give it a go – and why not hide a dried bean or pea in it for some added festive cheer?

A Twelfth Night party is in full swing in this 17th-century painting by David Teniers the Younger

GETTY IMAGES

In need of a little booze to wash all this down? I'd recommend a smoking bishop. Made with port, roasted oranges and/or lemons, sugar and spices, this is an easy-to-make historical take on mulled wine that was associated with Christmas in the Victorian period. It also features in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. When the old miser Scrooge has his pivotal change of heart, he tells his clerk: "A merrier Christmas, Bob, my good fellow, than I have given you, for many a year!… we will discuss your affairs this very afternoon, over a Christmas bowl of smoking bishop, Bob!"

The recipe here is based on English food writer Eliza Acton's 1845 version. The drink is probably described as 'smoking' because of the steam that rises from it. Replace the port with claret wine and you've got a smoking archbishop; use champagne to make a smoking cardinal; or use Hungarian white Tokaji wine for a smoking pope. Happy feasting!

Meat, as the name suggests, was the traditional filling in a mince pie, and is used here in a recipe adapted from Robert May's 1660 recipe book

Stuart mince pie

Serves: 8–10
Difficulty: 6/10
Time: 2 hours

INGREDIENTS

For the hot water crust pastry:
500g plain flour
1 tsp salt
250ml water
110g fat (unsalted butter, lard or beef suet)
1 egg yolk
For the filling:
200g beef mince (or other meat), parboiled or roasted
200g beef suet
100g raisins
100g currants
1 tbsp sugar
½ tbsp salt
1 tsp ground nutmeg
½ tsp each ground black pepper, cloves, mace, ginger
Optional: finely sliced orange or lemon peel

METHOD

1. To make the pastry, sieve the flour into a bowl with the salt. Put the fat and water in a saucepan and bring to the boil. Make a well in the flour and pour in the fat and water mixture. Mix it together to form a dough.
2. Finely chop meat and suet; add to a bowl along with raisins, currants, sugar, salt, spices and chopped peel, if using.
3. Roll the pastry and lay it over a buttered and lined 20cm cake tin. Fill with meat mix.
4. Cover with more rolled-out pastry and pinch together with the base to seal. Pierce a hole in the lid to allow steam to escape.
5. Bake for 30 minutes at 200C (fan) /gas mark 6, turn down to 150C /gas mark 3 and bake for an hour until golden.

ELEANOR BARNETT

Georgian Twelfth cake

Serves: 8–10
Difficulty: 8/10
Time: 6 hours 30 minutes

INGREDIENTS

400ml milk
800g flour
2 sachets (7g each) dried yeast
110g butter
140g caster sugar
500g currants
1 tsp cinnamon
½ tsp each cloves, mace, nutmeg
40g candied orange and/or lemon peel
½ tbsp salt
1 dried pea and/or bean (optional)

METHOD

1. Mix 100ml warm milk with the yeast.
2. Put flour into a bowl and make a small hole in the flour into which to pour the milk/yeast mixture. Cover lightly with some more flour, and lay a tea towel over a bowl for at least 30 minutes until the yeast mixture bubbles. Mix lightly and leave for a minimum of 30 minutes more.
3. Cut the butter into squares and dot around the flour.
4. Add currants, sugar, spice, peel and salt.
5. Add in the rest of the warm milk.
6. Mix into a dough, then knead well for at least 10 minutes or longer if by hand.
7. Cover and leave to prove for 2–3 hours until the dough springs up when poked.
8. Grease and line a 20cm cake tin, add the dough, and leave for another half an hour.
9. Hide your pea/bean in the dough (optional).
10. Bake at 150C/gas mark 3 for 1½ hours.
11. Decorate with icing sugar or leave.

Victorian smoking bishop

Serves: 8–10
Difficulty: 2/10
Time: 30 minutes

INGREDIENTS

2 large oranges
8–10 whole cloves
250ml water
½ tsp each ground cinnamon, cloves, mace, ginger, allspice
750ml ruby port
2 tbsp sugar
Juice of ½ lemon
Pinch of nutmeg

METHOD

1. Stick cloves into the oranges and roast at 200C/gas mark 7 for 20 minutes.
2. Boil the water with the spices until the liquid has reduced by half.
3. Meanwhile, boil the bottle of port.
4. Mix liquids with sugar and lemon juice.
5. Cut the roasted oranges in half and add them to the mixture so they float.
6. Sprinkle with a pinch of nutmeg to serve.

The Christmas classic

The story of how this seasonal recipe with medieval origins became a boozy family favourite

A round, dense cannonball of fruity, rich, alcoholic goodness with a sprig of holly on top, doused with brandy and ceremoniously set alight: it's the iconic image of Christmas pudding. And, like much else about modern celebrations of the season, it's a Victorian invention.

Its origins go back much further, however, to the medieval dish plum pottage, also known as frumenty – a thick soup or stew made with dried fruits (the word 'plum' then referred to all dried fruit) and meat, spiced with cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg, and thickened with breadcrumbs. By the 17th century it was sometimes called plum pudding, the chopped meat had been replaced by suet, and it was boiled in a cloth.

Plum pudding soon became a recognisable sign of Britishness, featured in a famous cartoon by satirical artist James Gillray in 1805, showing British prime minister William Pitt the Younger and Napoleon carving a steaming globe into spheres of influence. Plum pudding was served alongside meat, especially roast beef, by then also a well-known symbol of British identity.

Only in the Victorian era did this dish come to be known as Christmas pudding. It became a dessert and, as Christmas became the more prominent celebration, the coin traditionally hidden inside the Twelfth Night cake for Epiphany (6 January) was placed into the Christmas pudding instead.

Here I've followed Mrs Beeton's 1906 recipe, but added a little sugar. Despite the long list of ingredients, this is really simple to make, though takes a fair bit of time to steam on the stove.

The pudding can be served straight away, but you might wish to make it in advance and 'feed' it regularly with brandy or dark rum to keep it moist and well-preserved.

In the mid-19th century, the Sunday before Advent was given the tongue-in-cheek nickname 'Stir Up Sunday'. This was a reference both to the church's official collect (prayer) for the day, which began 'Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord', and to the custom of stirring up the ingredients for Christmas pudding well before the big day. In reality, not many Victorians would have done this, but it was the beginnings of what is now a much-loved tradition among many. Depending on how many people you're feeding, I'd suggest making two smaller puddings from this recipe so that there are no leftovers.

A Victorian card shows Father Christmas slicing into a plum pudding – by then a favourite seasonal dessert

BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

The now-iconic practice of serving Christmas pudding with a sprig of holly, and doused with brandy, dates from the Victorian age

Victorian Christmas Pudding

Serves: 8–10
Difficulty: 4/10
Time taken: 45 mins prep, 4–5 hours cooking

INGREDIENTS

220g raisins
220g sultanas
110g currants
220g beef or vegetable suet
60g self-raising flour
220g brown breadcrumbs
110g chopped, candied orange & lemon peel
60g almond flakes
150g brown sugar
½ grated nutmeg
1 tbsp mixed spice
1 tbsp ground cinnamon
Pinch of salt
4 small eggs
140ml whole fat milk
200ml rum or brandy, plus extra to 'feed', if desired
Juice of 1 lemon

ELEANOR BARNETT

METHOD

1. If time permits, soak currants, sultanas and raisins in rum or brandy overnight.
2. Finely chop the suet.
3. Put all of the dry ingredients into a bowl.
4. Lightly beat the eggs and add to the bowl.
5. Add the milk and lemon juice, then mix thoroughly till all ingredients are well combined.
6. Take two 2-pint pudding basins (or one large 4-pint basin) and grease with butter.
7. Place the pudding mixture into the basin(s) until about three-quarters full.
8. Lay a large piece of greaseproof paper on top of an equal-sized piece of foil; brush the upper surface with butter.
9. Hold both pieces and make a little pleat in the middle to allow space for the pudding to rise in the basin beneath it.
10. Place greaseproof paper and foil on top of the pudding basin – buttered side down, foil on top – and mould around the edge.
11. Tie foil and paper in place under the lip of the basin with kitchen string.
12. Use more kitchen string to make a little handle by threading it beneath the ring of string around the lip and across the top of the basin.
13. Trim off excess foil and paper, and fold the edges together to seal.
14. Using the handle, place in a large saucepan of boiling water reaching halfway up the side of the pudding basin.
15. Steam on the hob for at least 4 hours, adding water when needed to prevent the pan from boiling dry. The dish is cooked when a fork inserted into the pudding comes out clean.
16. Leave to cool, then either serve straight away or wrap in greaseproof paper or foil and store in a cool, dark place, 'feeding' with brandy or rum every week or so.
17. To reheat, cover with fresh greaseproof paper or foil, and steam for 2 hours.

CHRISTMAS QUIZ PART 2

'Tis the season to test your knowledge of all things historical with our fiendish festive quiz

Compiled by Nick Rennison Answers to all questions can be found on page 121

Born on Christmas Day

1. Which future Chevalier came into the world on Christmas Day on Basse-Terre Island in the West Indies?

2. Melusine von der Schulenburg, born on Christmas Day 1667 and long the mistress of George I, kept a raven as a pet in her final years. Why?

a. She believed ravens possessed occult powers

b. She believed it to be the reincarnation of the dead king

c. She believed that she could teach it to speak German

3. Which 18th-century English poet, born on Christmas Day, is commemorated by a monument in Chichester Cathedral?

4. Which queen of the cosmetics industry, born on Christmas Day, snubbed Marcel Proust at a party because "he smelt of mothballs"? "How was I to know he was going to be so famous," she later said.

5. The lyrics to which American Civil War song were the work of a Christmas Day birthday boy?

6. Born on Christmas Day 1742, who wrote a play about Dido, Queen of Carthage, which paralleled her own relationship with a famous German writer?

7. Which pioneer of the French film industry, born on Christmas Day, had been a dealer in exotic parrots in an earlier career?

a. Georges Méliès

b. Louis Lumière

c. Charles Pathé

Proof of the pudding

8. Where did a plum pudding unexpectedly arrive on Christmas Day 1899, together with "compliments of the season"?

9. Which pudding was first given its name by Hannah Glasse in her 1747 book *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*?

10. Which character in children's literature encounters a talking plum pudding which objects when she tries to take a slice out of it?

11. What American society owes its name to a traditional English dish similar to porridge?

12. Who wrote that, "One's favourite book is as elusive as one's favourite pudding"?

a. Aldous Huxley

b. George Orwell

c. EM Forster

13. Where can you see Pitt the Younger and Napoleon Bonaparte carving up a globe?

Party time

14. Who hosted 'The Banquet of Chestnuts', an orgiastic feast reputedly held in the Vatican in 1501?

a. Cesare Borgia

b. Pope Julius II

c. Michelangelo

15. Which composer once ran the length of a room and hurled himself through a giant laurel wreath at a party to celebrate the premiere of his latest work?

16. At 'Christmas on Earth Continued' in December 1967, advertised as "An All Night Christmas Dream Party", which performer ended his appearance "dazed and motionless on stage, his arm hanging limp at his sides"?

17. Belshazzar's Feast, described in the Old Testament's Book of Daniel, has been the subject of which of the following:

a. A gospel song by Johnny Cash

b. A 19th-century painting by John Martin

c. A choral work by William Walton

18. What foodstuff was the centrepiece of a reception thrown in 1837 by American president Andrew Jackson to celebrate the anniversary of George Washington's birth?

19. Who wrote: "I am for those who believe in loose delights, I share the midnight orgies of young men; I dance with the dancers and drink with the drinkers."

a. DH Lawrence

b. Walt Whitman

c. Charles Baudelaire

DREAMSTIME/GETTY IMAGES

a b c d e f

Bah! Humbug

Six anti-Christmas quotes. Six people. Match the person to the quote.

20. "What pious Christian heart bleeds not with tears of blood, when he beholds the sacred nativity of his spotless Saviour transformed into a festivity of the foulest devils?"
21. "I don't like Christmas and always feel rather as though I have come through a long and fearful battle when it is over."
22. "Early in life I developed a distaste for the Cratchits that time has not sweetened... I particularly disliked Tiny Tim."
23. "The whole Christmas buffoonery is a curse to humanity – perhaps one of the worst curses that Christianity has brought in."
24. "Santa Claus has the right idea. Visit people only once a year."
25. "How many observe Christ's birthday! How few, his precepts! O! 'tis easier to keep holidays than commandments."

a. HL Mencken
b. Victor Borge
c. Benjamin Franklin
d. Roald Dahl
e. William Prynne
f. Robertson Davies

28

The holly and the ivy

26. In classical mythology, which of the Muses was depicted as crowned with ivy?
27. In a verse by George R Sims, when, and where, were "the cold bare walls... bright with garlands of green and holly"?
28. Whose cover version of the Leiber and Stoller song 'Poison Ivy' beat the Beatles to the number one spot in the Australian charts during the Fab Four's only tour down under in 1964?
29. Which Holly acted as the guardian of a supposedly reincarnated ancient Greek in a Victorian novel?
30. Which Ivy was described by the French literary critic Nathalie Sarraute as "one of the greatest novelists England has ever had"?

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Oh, yes, it is!

31. Which pantomime character first appeared in an 1861 play written by a distant cousin of the poet Lord Byron?
32. Of whom did Max Beerbohm write: "The moment he capered on, with that air of wild determination, squirming in every limb with some deep grievance, that must be outpoured, all hearts were his."
33. Who took the principal boy role in amateur pantomimes at Windsor in the 1940s?
34. The name of which style of comedy derives from a special effect used in commedia dell'arte?
35. In the 1710s, which artist painted a portrait of the commedia dell'arte character, Pierrot?

35

Raise a glass and join us as we explore the New Year's resolutions, rituals and remedies of people in past centuries

THE NEW

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YEAR

An *unexpected* history of NEW YEAR'S EVE

Today, we associate New Year's Eve with raucous and optimistic parties, followed the next day by hungover resolutions to change our ways in the months ahead. But New Year celebrations haven't always been so...

BY **JAMES DAYBELL** AND **SAM WILLIS**

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Henry VIII would receive gifts from his courtiers on 1 January, the details of which were recorded in 'gift rolls', such as the surviving example below from Elizabeth I's reign, dated 1579

The traditional history of New Year is all about making decisions to be kinder, more caring, more generous, to eat less, watch what you drink, to quit smoking, to exercise more, to take up a hobby, read more, or to attempt a healthier work-life balance. However, we think the subject of New Year really comes alive if you take an unexpected approach to its history. Yes, promises, dieting and charity all have fascinating histories, but the history of New Year is also all about power, sobriety, paranoia, migration and failure, as we demonstrate here in five curious historical facts.

Power in Tudor England

At the Tudor court, New Year was intimately connected to power. The long-standing custom of courtiers giving gifts to the monarch on 1 January was a ritualised and lavish public ceremony that took place at the heart of the Tudor court, in the royal presence chamber. The master of the Jewel House and his assistants carefully recorded gifts both given to and received from high-ranking nobles and members of the royal household. These details were transferred to 'gift rolls', sheets of paper or membranes of vellum stuck or stitched together to form a single document measuring up to 11 feet in length, and which were then rolled up and stored in the Jewel House.

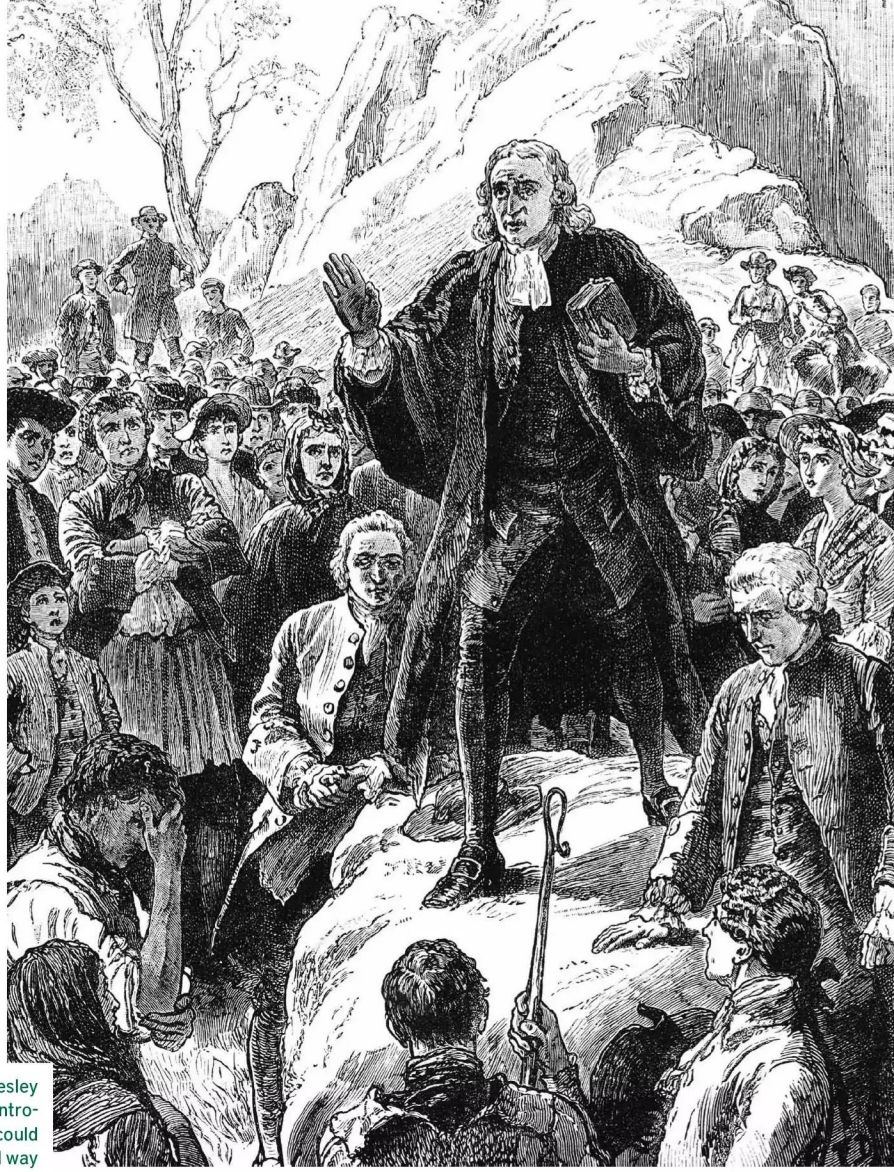
One of the most intimate depictions of gift-giving at the court of Henry VIII survives in a 1538 letter from John Husee, the court agent of Lord Lisle, the lord deputy of Calais. In it he notes, "The King stood leaning against the cupboard, receiving all things; and Mr Tuke at the end of the same cupboard penning all things that were presented." This was a remarkably personal political system that brought courtiers into direct contact with the monarch.

In 1585, the courtier Elizabeth Wingfield counselled the countess of Shrewsbury that gifts of money to Elizabeth I would be "ill liked". That's because the queen preferred thoughtful gifts suited to her own tastes such as cloth, personal jewellery and trinkets. These were far more likely to please the monarch and lead to advancement. Elizabeth's loyal spymaster and principal secretary, Sir Francis Walsingham, clearly understood this. In 1585, he presented the queen with a sumptuously decorated "French gown of russet satin flourished with leaves of silver bound about with a passamayne [or lace] of Venice gold with pendant sleeves lined with cloth of silver". →

18th-century sobriety

New Year's Eve is traditionally a time of merriment, associated with drunken and raucous celebration. But this is not everyone's cup of tea, and it was clearly not how the English clergyman John Wesley, the co-founder of Methodism alongside his brother Charles, thought that people should celebrate the turning of the year. In 1740, as an antidote to this debauchery, Wesley instituted watch night services (also known as covenant renewal services), to be held on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day.

Among Christians, this time of year was commonly a period for reflection, for looking back at how one had lived one's life in the previous 12 months and resolving to do better going forward. The new service allowed Methodists to do this in a more structured way, with participants singing hymns and reading from scriptures. In *The Religious Life of London* (1870), James Ewing Ritchie noted of the sect: "In the institution of the watch-night it boldly struck out a new path for itself. In publicly setting apart the last fleeting moments of the old year and the first of the new to penitence, and special prayer, and stirring appeal, and fresh resolve, it has set an example which other sects are preparing to follow." The popularity of the watch night service spread among evangelical churches, and such services are commonplace in the USA among African-American congregations today.



In a bid to curtail debauchery, John Wesley (right, preaching in an 1891 illustration), introduced watch night services where people could reflect on the previous year in a structured way

In Devon in the early 20th century, pea soup had to be made with whole peas instead of split peas on New Year's Day otherwise the next year would prove unlucky

Pea-soup paranoia

For millennia, all human societies were entirely dependent on the unpredictable climate for health and welfare. This meant that harvests were celebrated, while the New Year was anticipated with a certain degree of uncertainty and fear. This helps to explain the high degree of paranoia visible in folk traditions around the New Year, as people sought to influence their fortunes in the coming year by controlling their behaviour in the present.

A long-established English folk tradition maintains that, "What is done on New Year's Day will be done all the year." An instance in the West Country in 1926 demonstrated the power of this superstitious belief when labourers refused to work on New Year's Day "lest it should result in hard work all the year long". Similarly, in Devon, pea soup was only ever made with whole peas on New Year's Day and not split peas, as split peas would "split the luck" for the coming year.

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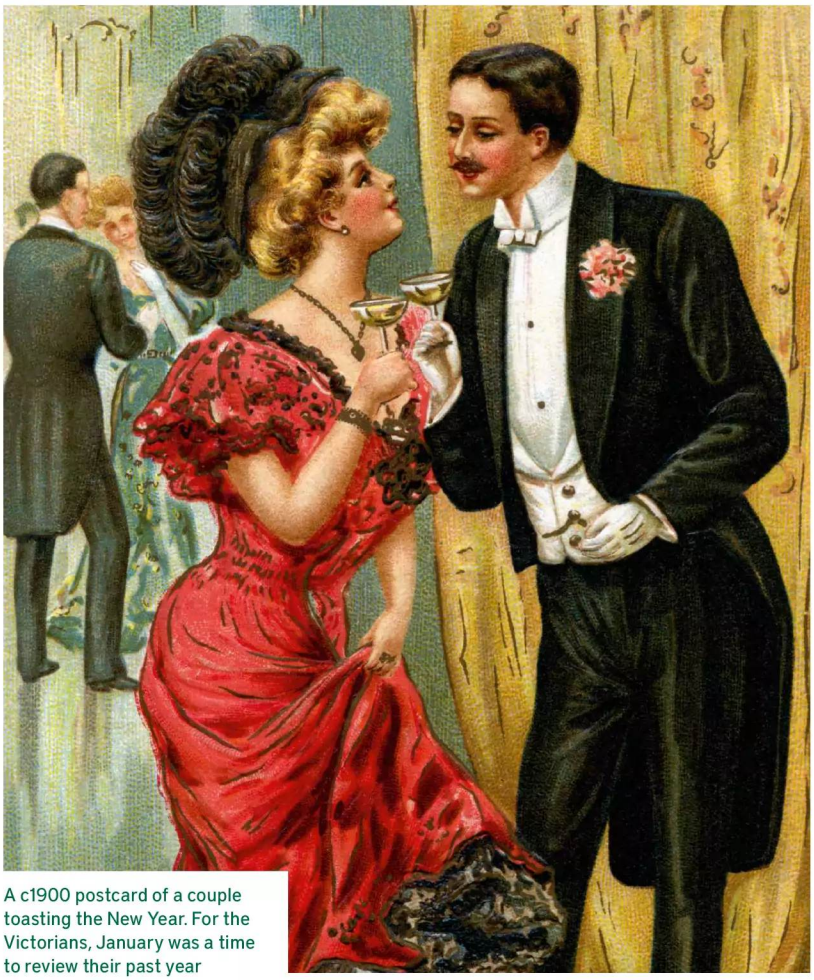
Chinese mass migration

The Chinese have a long and fascinating relationship with New Year. During the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) five separate festivals were celebrated: a fiscal New Year in the autumn; the winter solstice in December; a people's New Year in January; a lunar New Year, which began some time between 21 January and 20 February; and a seasonal New Year in spring. Today, however, Chinese New Year has become almost entirely focused on the period around just one of those five festivals, the lunar New Year, in an extended celebration that lasts for more than a month.

One of the most ancient traditions of this New Year is to reunite with one's family, as western cultures do at Christmas. Since the 1970s, Chinese society has radically changed as huge cities have grown and drawn millions of workers out of the countryside – in a similar fashion to the urbanisation experienced in the western world during the industrial revolution. A spectacular improvement in transport networks throughout China in the same period now means that, during the lunar New Year celebrations, an estimated three billion journeys are made in what is considered the world's largest annual migration. So many people leave Beijing that the city's mean temperature actually falls.

Hongqiao railway station, Shanghai, taken on 20 January 2023. Across China, an estimated three billion journeys are made during the lunar New Year celebrations



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A c1900 postcard of a couple toasting the New Year. For the Victorians, January was a time to review their past year

Victorian mistakes and regrets

For the Victorians, the New Year was all about failure. The beginning of January was a time to take stock, to look back at the old year, for individuals to "review more or less carefully and impartially the history of the past year as it concerned themselves", and remember their "mistakes" and "regrets". This introspective look at one's recent past – in true Scrooge-like fashion – was accompanied by "resolutions of amendment and promises of avoiding habits and customs that have been injurious".

Yet despite all these good intentions, such high-minded notions were usually fleeting and doomed to failure, something that was recognised at the time. Indeed, an editorial in the *Worcester Journal* of 6 January 1883 stated, "It unfortunately happens that New Year's Day resolutions are often of the most transitory kind, and they pass away almost with the mists of the morning on which they are formed." The editorial offers the idea it would be better not to make any resolutions "for there is nothing so destructive of self-respect as the abandonment of purposes for self-discipline which had been deliberately formed and openly avowed".

How our resolutions mirror the Middle Ages

From drinking less to enjoying the great outdoors more, our New Year's resolutions today have surprising parallels with the ways in which medieval people thought about health and well-being

BY **KATHERINE HARVEY**

TREND-SETTERS
Illustration showing wine drinking from the 14th-century *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, a sort of medieval guidebook to health and wellbeing, which was as important for people in the medieval era as it is today

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When millions of people around the world pledge to change something about their lives at the end of each year, they're participating in a tradition dating back to at least the 17th century. On 31 December 1661, for example, Samuel Pepys recorded in his diary that "I have newly taken a solemn oath about abstaining from plays and wine."

[It's worth noting that 31 December wasn't actually the last day of 1661. In Britain, the New Year began on Lady Day, 25 March, from 1155 until 1752, which was when the country switched from the Julian to Gregorian calendar.)

We don't know for certain whether this was a well-established practice or a new fashion, but medieval people certainly saw January as a time for looking forwards: as early as the 10th century, Anglo-Saxon monks attempted to make predictions about the weather, agriculture, and politics based on the conditions of the 12 days proceeding Christmas and New Year's Day itself.

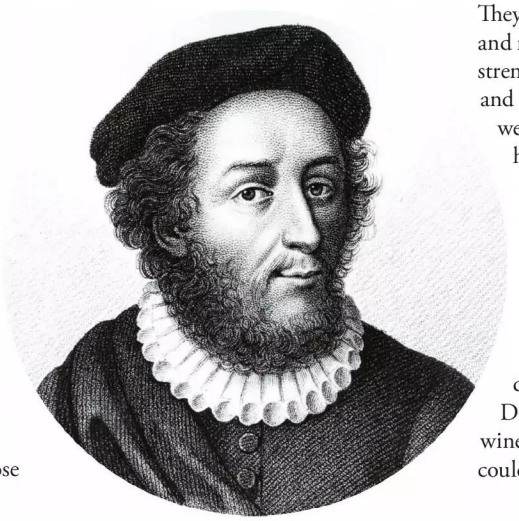
Whether or not medieval people made New Year's resolutions, they certainly would have understood our desires to get fit or stress less. This is because the contemporary obsession with lifestyle as a form of preventative medicine is not a new phenomenon. Just as we read lifestyle books which promise us longer, healthier lives, medieval people followed regimens – books which told them what they needed to do to stay healthy. Like us, they worried about their diet, exercise, sleep patterns, and emotional health. So what would medieval people have made of some of our most popular New Year's resolutions?

Improve diet

Medieval people were less preoccupied by body size than us, but they did recognise obesity as a health problem. According to the French surgeon Guy de Chauliac (c1300-1368), fatness became an issue when an individual "could no longer walk normally, nor touch the ground, nor put on his shoes on account of the girth of his stomach, nor even breathe without difficulty". Towards the end of the Middle Ages, some wealthy people commissioned regimens to help them lose weight: physician Conrad Heingarter's recommendations for Jean de la Goutte in the late 15th century included eating and drinking less, sleeping on his back (to prevent stagnation of the humours, which would turn into fat), and using laxatives.

While it is unlikely that medieval people would have embraced 'Dry January', they would certainly have agreed that some people ought to drink less

An 18th-century engraving of Guy de Chauliac (c1300-1368), a French surgeon who recognised obesity as a health problem



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Our ancestors also shared our belief in the power of a balanced diet, although they classified foods in humoral terms, as hot or cold, and wet or dry. The best foods (such as chicken) were warm and moist, but some surprising things (including uncooked fruit) were considered unhealthy.

Also, overeating was frowned upon for both for both medical and spiritual reasons: not only did it produce humoral excesses which could cause disease, but to eat too much (or to enjoy one's food too much) was to commit gluttony, one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Very restricted diets (including plant-based diets) were usually motivated by piety rather than health concerns. Weight loss was a likely side-effect, but the central purpose was to subdue the flesh and to bring Christians closer to God.

Drink less alcohol

Contrary to popular belief, medieval people drank water, and were not constantly drunk. Ale and beer were also popular beverages, but physicians had a low opinion of them: they were cold, and caused problems with the head, stomach, and nerves. Plus, they were more intoxicating than wine – a costlier drink, but also a healthier one.

Physicians praised it for its warm, dry nature, claiming that it strengthened the body, promoted digestion, corrected humoral imbalances, produced healthy blood, and improved the drinker's mood. They saw wine as part of a healthy diet, and recommended it for those who needed strengthening, including pregnant women and the elderly. And medieval wine buffs were often preoccupied with the humoral properties and health benefits of their favourite drink. The Italian lawyer Lapo Mazzei's letters to his merchant friend Francesco Datini (d1410) include numerous tips about the best types of wine to drink during the hot summer months.

But wine's medicinal properties didn't justify unlimited indulgence. Doctors recommended watered-down wine, and warned that excessive drinking could cause clumsiness, trembling, and

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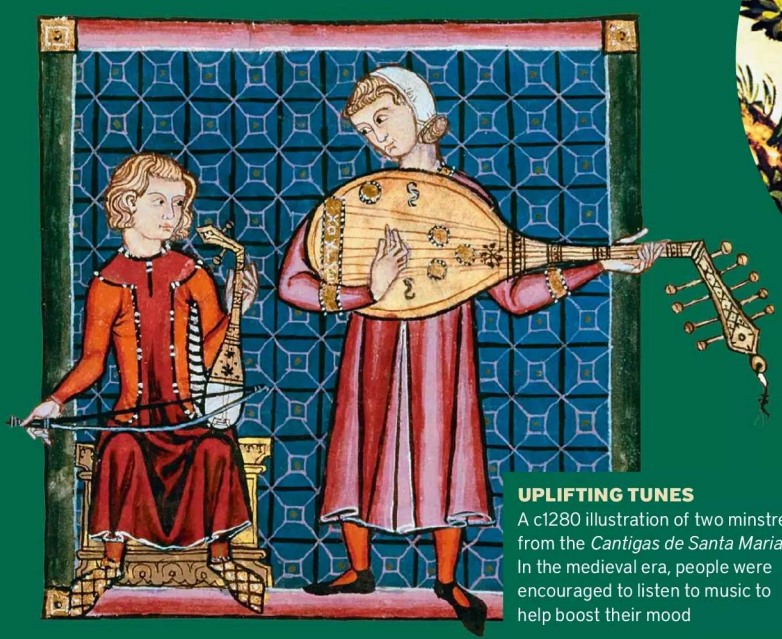
BALANCED DIET
Illustration of a butcher's shop from the 14th-century *Tacuinum Sanitatis*. "Plant-based diets were usually motivated by piety rather than health concerns," says Katherine Harvey

LIQUID DIET
Drinking wine, as shown here in another image from the *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, was considered part of a healthy diet, but "drunkenness was a sin, and it led to other sins, particularly lust", says Harvey

TIME FOR BED
A married couple retires to their bed in this early 14th-century Italian fresco. "Medieval doctors agreed with their modern counterparts that about eight hours sleep was best," says Harvey

ACTIVE LIFESTYLE
A 14th-century illustration of a man enjoying the fresh air, which was just one of many perceived benefits of exercise in medieval times



UPLIFTING TUNES
A c1280 illustration of two minstrels from the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*. In the medieval era, people were encouraged to listen to music to help boost their mood

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even brain damage. It was particularly dangerous for the young, who were naturally hot, and thus prone to overheating if they drank too much alcohol. Drunkenness was a sin, and it led to other sins, particularly lust. So, while it is unlikely that medieval people would have embraced 'Dry January', they would certainly have agreed that some people ought to drink less.

Do more exercise

Just like us, medieval people believed that exercise would improve their physical and mental health and help them to live longer. Perceived benefits included improved digestion, the elimination of bodily wastes, and better sleep – plus all the delights of the great outdoors, including pleasant sights and fresh air. Most regimens focused on moderate exercise, such as walking and riding.

In 1315, the Valencian physician Peter Fagarola reminded his student sons to go for a walk morning and evening. If it was cold, they should run; if it was wet, they should exercise at home by jumping, climbing the stairs, and lifting "a big heavy stick like a sword." He also recommended ball games, although concerns about dignity meant that public exercise was not suitable for everyone. John Mirfield (a priest living in late 14th-century/early 15th-century London) suggested that clergymen should lift weights and climb ropes in the privacy of their own chamber.

Worrying that you don't get enough sleep is not a new phenomenon: medieval people shared our concerns that chronic sleep deprivation could make a person ill, and even shorten their life. It was widely believed that sleep facilitated digestion, rested the sensory functions, and sharpened the mind. It also helped the sick to recover, and could ward off negative emotions. Medieval doctors agreed with their modern counterparts that about eight hours sleep was best.

Unfortunately for night owls, they also advised early nights and rising early – and the Church condemned people who stayed in bed rather than going to mass. Regimens included lots of tips about how to get a good night's sleep, many of them familiar: avoid naps, don't eat or drink alcohol too close to bedtime, prioritise relaxing activities before bed, and sleep in a darkened room.

Although we often assume that mental health is a more recent idea, medieval people shared our conviction that managing their emotions was key to a happy, healthy life. Broadly speaking, positive emotions were good, whereas negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, and anger upset the body's humoral balance and damaged its physical health. Consequently, physicians encouraged their patients to engage in cheering activities such as travel, spending time with friends, or listening to music.

We often assume that mental health is a more recent idea, but medieval people shared our conviction that managing emotions was key to a happy, healthy life

Medieval people also worried about the consequences of overwork. In the early 13th century, a St Albans monk called Alexander de Langley began to have "fits of raving" and lost his wits; his fellow monks attributed his condition to overwork. The English poet and civil servant Thomas Hoccleve (c1367–1426) complained that too much writing had left him with back pain, digestive problems, and poor eyesight. Both of these men needed, it seems, to improve their work-life balance, and they (or at least their contemporaries) recognised that.

Thoroughly medieval resolutions

Although there were numerous parallels between medieval and modern ideas, including the benefits of eating a healthy diet and the importance of avoiding stress, medieval medical theory also encompassed some less familiar ideas.

For example, the belief that it was possible to die from having too much or too little sex may have influenced people's approach to their love life. Or the prominence of regular phlebotomy in preventative medicine might have led a medieval person to resolve to be bled more often. In comparison, going meat-free for Veganuary feels like a relatively pain-free resolution! ●

ALAMY

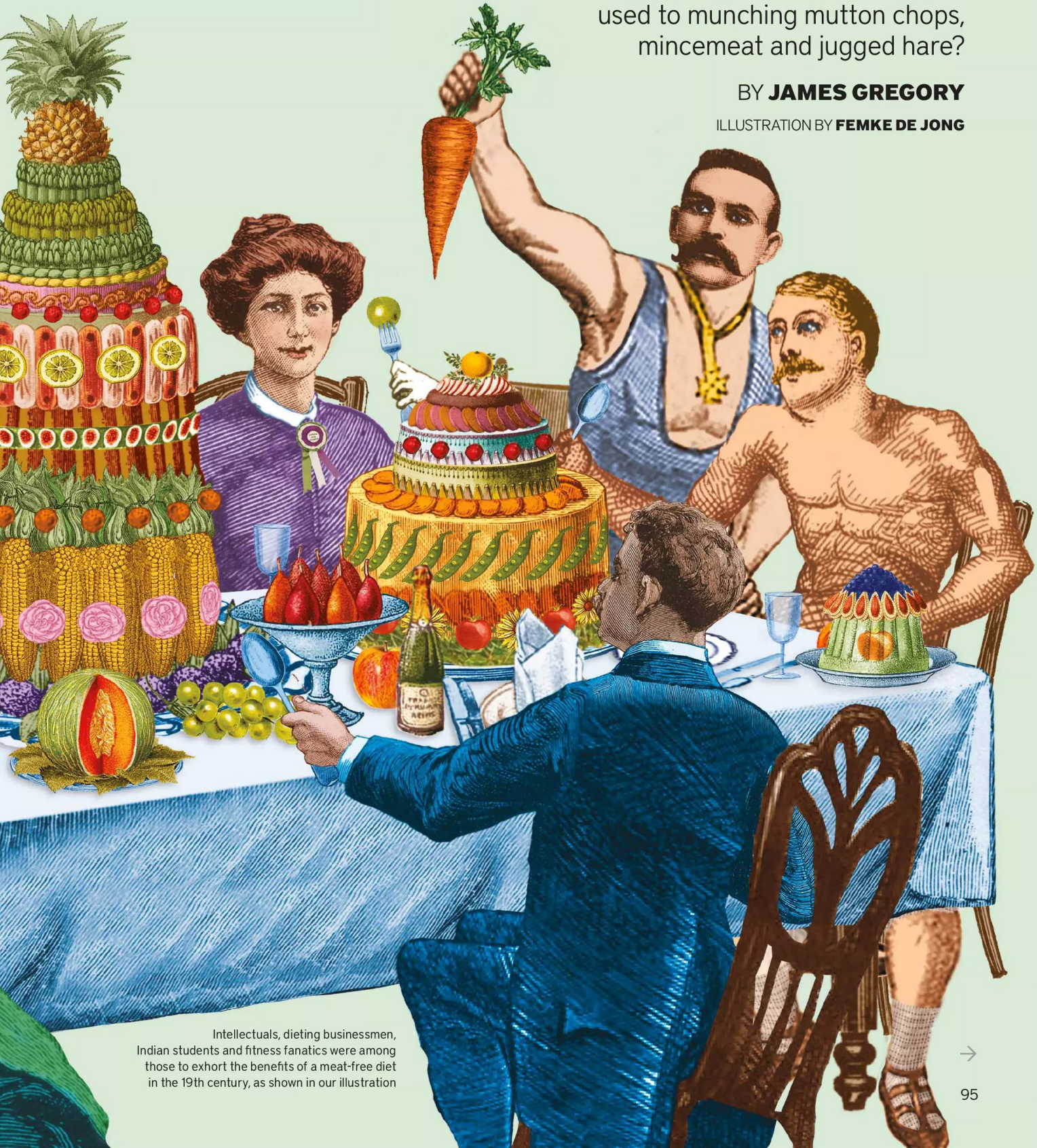
An illustration of a medieval doctor bleeding a patient. Regular phlebotomy was popular as a preventative form of medicine

Veggie Victorians

Are you considering a change in diet to counter the Christmas excess? Then you might be surprised to learn that the idea of going vegetarian has been around since the 1840s. But how did the idea of meat-free meals go down with a population used to munching mutton chops, mincemeat and jugged hare?

BY **JAMES GREGORY**

ILLUSTRATION BY **FEMKE DE JONG**



Intellectuals, dieting businessmen, Indian students and fitness fanatics were among those to exhort the benefits of a meat-free diet in the 19th century, as shown in our illustration

On 30 September 1848, the satirical magazine *Punch* regaled its readers with reports of a peculiar new society that had started holding meetings across Manchester. The society, *Punch* revealed with thinly veiled incredulity, "devotes its entire energies to the eating of vegetables, and the members meet occasionally for the purpose of masticating mashed potatoes and munching cabbage-leaves. 'Sweets to the sweet' is a popular maxim, and 'greens to the green' may fairly be applied to the vegetarians."

Victorians were well versed in the Bible, so many would have read how the ancient Babylonian king Nebuchadnezza ate a diet of grass instead of meat. Others may too have been aware that the eccentric poet Lord Byron once attempted to lose weight via a 'vegetable diet'. Nevertheless, back in 1848, comparatively few would have heard the term 'vegetarian'. So why did a small but significant number of our Victorian forebears choose to abstain from eating flesh? And where should we look to find the roots of the vegetarian movement? The answer lies in the the target of *Punch*'s faintly mocking report.

Formed in September 1847, the Vegetarian Society was the brainchild of a collection of social reformers, philanthropists and devout Christians who sought to woo the population away from the "fleshpots" of meat, just as the temperance movement had promoted abstention from alcohol.

It was a formidable challenge – after all, many Britons, especially those who were too poor to afford all but the most meagre servings of beef, pork and mutton, sought to eat more meat, not less. But it was a challenge that vegetarian activists attacked with gusto, spreading the word through the classic Victorian strategies of staging public meetings and attempting to win the press around to their cause.

And it worked. The late Victorian satirical press and newspapers were fascinated by the new cohort of youthful clerks, intellectuals, dieting businessmen and Indian students converging on the vegetarian restaurants that were popping up across Britain's biggest cities. In August 1851, the *Illustrated London News* told its readers how, at an event at the Freemasons' Tavern in London, "the vegetarian course consisted of savoury pies, bread and parsley fritters, moulded ground rice, blancmange, cheesecakes, and fruit, all of which dishes were consumed with an evident relish by the company… whose healthy appearance betokened the benefits to be derived from the innocent regimen".

Media coverage wasn't always so glowing, of course. But even dismissive jibes in the press helped turn the meat-free diet into an 'ism'. And if they couldn't attract positive coverage, vegetarian activists attempted to craft their own, hoping that tracts sent to self-improving organisations such as mechanics' institutes, which promoted adult education, would encourage wider interest.

In addition, high-profile vegetarians such as the playwright and Fabian socialist George Bernard Shaw, and Isaac Pitman of shorthand fame – who addressed the Vegetarian Society's second annual meeting, and proudly announced that he hadn't eaten meat for 11 years – gave the movement some much-needed celebrity endorsement.

Health considerations

Vegetarians gave up eating flesh for all kinds of reasons. Some did so because they believed it conferred health benefits. In 1858, the *Vegetarian Messenger* optimistically declared that: "No vegetarian in this country has ever been attacked with cholera." Others claimed that vegetarianism offered protection from tuberculosis. Vegetarian Victorians opened several hospitals, including institutions for cancer patients. Some of Britain's most prominent anti-vaccinationists – who opposed the state-inflicted 'pollution' of their families – were vegetarians in the Victorian era.

Others rejected meat out of compassion, shocked by the cruelty in cities, where animals were brought to market, and where slaughterhouses and butchers' displays of carcasses were unavoidable. Early vegetarians tried, unsuccessfully, to get the RSPCA's support.

"Flinging maudlin sentimentality to the winds," they acknowledged that "killing must be done", was how one essayist in the magazine *All the Year Round* described the RSPCA's attitude in 1876.

Later in the century, vegetarians opposed vivisection, and the slaughter of birds and seals for fashionable clothing. They also campaigned against cruelty to people: the Humanitarian League's first general meeting was in a vegetarian restaurant in London.

For some, vegetarianism wasn't a choice, it was a religious calling. This was certainly the case for the Bible Christians, whose leader, William Cowherd, had advocated rejecting meat on health and humanitarian grounds as far back as 1809. They remained influential within the vegetarian movement for much of the century. In fact, one of their number, the industrialist James Simpson, was elected the Vegetarian Society's first president in 1847.

Others were attracted to the diet by political considerations, rather than spiritual ones. There was significant crossover between the social reform movement and meat avoidance throughout the 19th century and beyond – from the followers of the Welsh socialist Robert Owen right through to the suffragettes who congregated in vegetarian restaurants following their release from prison. George Orwell liked to characterise the vegetarian socialist as nudist, be-sandalled, fruit-juice drinking and sexually unorthodox. It was a stereotype with a long and colourful history.

Another important factor driving the uptake of vegetarianism was cost. "How is it possible that an agricultural labourer, earning nine shillings a week, can pay rent, clothe a family, and feed them upon flesh?", wrote one correspondent to the *Hereford Times* in 1863, verbalising the belief that vegetarianism offered a path out

Vegetarians opposed fashion featuring slaughtered animals, like this outfit worn by the actress Amy Roselle in 1887

GETTY IMAGES

A 19th-century butcher's shop. Many Victorians – especially the poorest, who could barely afford pork, beef and mutton – sought to eat more meat, not less

ALAMY

of poverty. Throughout the late 19th century, vegetarian propagandists lectured working people on the economic benefits of going meat-free. They also offered cheap or free meals through bodies such as the National Food Reform Society and, as was the wont of Victorian moralists, they linked thrift to self-improvement.

The forge labourer George Perkin of Bramley exemplified this attitude, writing in the *Vegetarian Advocate* in June 1850: "I now devote the money heretofore spent on those pernicious things, to the purchase of books and otherwise, towards the cultivation of my mind, until very recently much neglected."

But the economic argument could prove dangerous territory for advocates of vegetarianism. Critics argued that wage levels were determined by the standard of living, and if that standard was 'cheapened' by a fall in household expenditure on products such as meat, then wages would fall too. They also associated the vegetarian movement's asceticism with the punitively spare diets offered in institutions such as prisons and workhouses.

A merciful diet

Vegetarians also ran into resistance from defenders of empire and military adventure, who warned that a meat-free diet robbed people of stamina and force. They linked meat to virility and racial strength, and were suspicious of a 'merciful' diet.

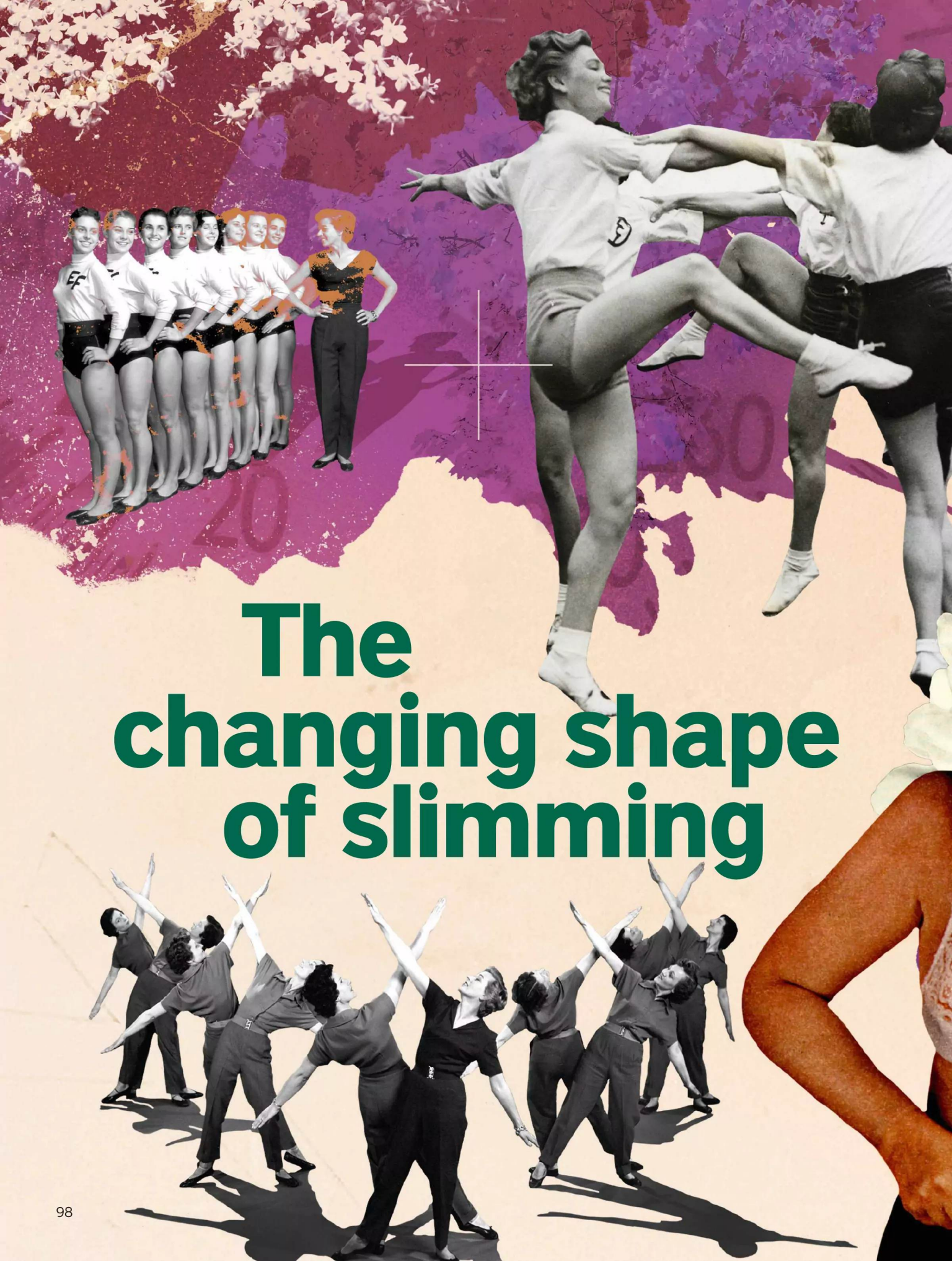
Manufactured substitutes such as 'nut' meats were now on sale in the growing number of vegetarian restaurants and cafes

The "labourer who toiled in the field, or on the railroad wanted something better than cabbages to keep up his strength", suggested one correspondent to the *Brighton Gazette* in 1849.

Such resistance provides one of the many reasons why we need to be careful about characterising the Victorian era as a golden age for vegetarianism. The numbers of people eating meat-free diets rose from the low hundreds at the start of Victoria's reign, to a total, by 1899, of almost 7,000 members and associates of the Vegetarian Society and its London-based rival. However, vast swathes of the population remained entirely unmoved by the phenomenon – no more inclined to give up beef, pork and lamb than they were to give up alcohol. Compared with today's widespread, high-profile lifestyle choice, Victorian vegetarianism was distinctly marginal.

For all that, by the end of the 19th century, vegetarianism was making serious waves. Members of the intelligentsia such as philanthropist John Passmore Edwards and Annie Besant, a famous supporter of Indian nationalism, threw their weight behind the movement. Manufactured substitutes such as 'nut' meats were on sale in the growing number of vegetarian restaurants and cafes. Advice on how to reduce meat consumption and entertain your meat-avoiding friends was now available in a glut of vegetarian journals and books – and more mainstream works.

But perhaps the ultimate endorsement came with the fact that the 1880 edition of *Beeton's Household Management* dedicated an entire chapter to "vegetarian recipes". No one flicking through the pages of the bible of culinary guidebooks – and reading the recipes for fried bananas and curried beans contained within – could have been in any doubt that vegetarianism was here to stay.



The changing shape of slimming

Losing weight is one of the most common New Year's resolutions, with many pledging to shed the pounds in January. But since the 1940s, slimming clubs have provided emotional succour, drawn criticism and even reinvented themselves – proving there's a lot more to the history of dieting than weight loss

BY **KATRINA MOSELEY**

ILLUSTRATION BY **ELEANOR SHAKESPEARE**

Clockwise from top left: Eileen Fowler with a troupe of assistants, 1955; Factory workers keeping fit, 1943; Weight Watchers slimmers, 1972; Women's sportswear; A detail from a Weight Watchers advert, 1980s; Women keeping fit on the BBC show *Mainly for Women*, 1957

On 16 September 1967, a local paper in Surrey ran a weight-loss story about a woman named Stephanie Vaughan. Having struggled with her body weight as a child and adolescent, Stephanie had grown "fatter and more hopeless about her weight problem until, at 21, she reached 14½ stone". She had tried everything in her willpower to diet. She had even taken a course of slimming pills, which left her feeling "terrible". But recently, reported the newspaper, something dramatic had happened. Stephanie had discovered a new slimming method called Weight Watchers: "an organisation, recently introduced to this country from America, which helps fatties through group therapy – a kind of 'eaters anonymous'."

The article in the *Surrey Comet* went on to record Stephanie's remarkable success with Weight Watchers. She had started going once a week to a meeting in a small village hall in Datchet, where a new branch of the company had just been formed. Although she had already slimmed down to 13 stone, she hoped to stay for five further months to lose more weight. The journalist concluded that Stephanie felt better in herself and found it easier to resist sweet temptations. Where once she had been a "fat girl", "too big to go out and buy pretty, off-the-peg clothing", she had started "taking an interest in fashions, now there is a chance of finding something to fit".

This newspaper story captures an important moment in the late 1960s, when new dieting methods were emerging in Britain. And although today we are very familiar with the idea of slimming clubs, their history is largely overlooked. How did the idea of "group-supported" weight loss first catch on?

Clubbing together

Slimming clubs have a long social history dating back to postwar America. The first of these groups, the non-profit organisation "Taking Off Pounds Sensibly", was established in Milwaukee in 1948, and similar companies followed in the 1950s. In 1963, a savvy businesswoman named Jean Nidetch established Weight Watchers Inc. in New York, charging members a weekly attendance fee for the guidance that she provided. This model proved wildly successful, and four years later, an American woman named Bernice Weston bought an exclusive franchise to operate Weight Watchers in Britain.

Weston's story is recorded colourfully in her autobiography, *A Weight Off My Mind*. Aged 27 in 1966, she stumbled upon a session of Weight Watchers while on holiday in Miami with her English husband. Having yo-yo dieted throughout her life, she vowed to give the group method a go. Although her first encounter was an unpromising one ("[We] actually arrived… clutching hamburgers dripping with ketchup and relish and drinking triple thick milk shakes"), her dedication soon melted away the unwanted pounds. She returned to England several months later to spread the word about Weight Watchers from her home in Surrey.

Nevertheless, success was not immediate. Weston struggled to drum up business at first, attracting just three women to her initial UK meeting in March 1967. In the autumn of that year, she organised a "fashion show" for former Weight Watchers at a department store in Kingston-upon-Thames. The models had all slimmed down with the support of the organisation, and Weston arranged to have "huge blow ups done of their 'before' pictures" for the purposes of promotion.

During this early phase, Weston trained each new "lecturer" herself. "Lecturers" were former members of Weight Watchers: women who had successfully lost weight on the programme and wanted to set up a new class in a nearby area. Once training was complete, these women called on friends to take part in their classes. Like other American imports such as Avon and Tupperware, Weight Watchers drew on established networks of female sociability and provided new, income-generating opportunities for women.

Like Avon and Tupperware, Weight Watchers drew on established networks of female sociability

Over time, the success of Weight Watchers paved the way for the emergence of home-grown groups in Britain. Silhouette Slimming was established in Northamptonshire in 1968. And a year later, a woman named Margaret Bramwell established J&M Slimming World in a church hall in Derbyshire. By 1975 there were around 570 branches of Weight Watchers across the UK and more than a thousand different classes of Silhouette Slimming Club Ltd.

Pulling them in

By the early 1980s, the strength of the slimming-club industry was plain to see. Talking to researchers in that decade, one woman commented: "I recently had a market research job to find off the streets of Nottingham 10 women who had ever been members of a well-known slimming club and interview them. Impossible task? On the face of it, yes, to get 10 at random like that. It took me just three hours – I was amazed. At that rate I could have gone on pulling them in all day!"

The success of these clubs helped their female founders rise to prominence, too. Rosemary Conley, who left school at the age of 15 and entered secretarial work, found huge success with a chain of slimming clubs in Leicestershire in the early 1970s. By the late 1980s, she was living in an 18-room mansion in the countryside. By 1991,

Bernice Weston in 1991. The founder of the British arm of Weight Watchers realised that slimming clubs were as much about emotional support as dieting

SHUTTERSTOCK

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY
Weight Watchers founder Jean Nidetch. Her model of charging slimmers a weekly attendance fee proved wildly successful

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SOCIAL CLUB
Members of the Southampton "Fat Ladies Club" gather for their weekly meeting, c1965. After the weigh-in, the girls would chat, play the one arm bandit and have the odd game of darts

with book contracts and television deals, she was earning more than £1m a year.

We can add Conley to a long line of enterprising women – Helena Rubenstein, Madam CJ Walker, Elizabeth Arden and Anita Roddick – who harnessed the power of female consumption patterns across the 20th century to make large fortunes for themselves. Identifying a gap in the market for innovation, these women helped to transform the masculine face of entrepreneurial leadership.

One of the reasons why slimming clubs were so successful in this period is that they meant more to women than weight loss. Instead, they were spaces of female "homosociality", where friendships were formed and women could share their problems and secrets – rather like the pubs that men gathered in to drink and socialise across the early 20th century. In the early days, eager to protect these female-only spaces, some slimming clubs even went as far as to exclude men. When I interviewed Rosemary Conley, she recalled that her own classes were targeted at "women, absolutely women. And if men had wanted to come, you'd have said no".

Keep Fit classes were another space that fostered female friendships in this period, and they shared many similarities with slimming clubs. Formed into an association in 1956 by the exercise guru Eileen Fowler, they grew to prominence in the late 1950s, gaining publicity from Fowler's motivational appearances on BBC radio and television.

A suggestion to insert "ladies" into the title of the Swindon Keep Fit branch was approved unanimously upon its founding in the mid-1960s.

Mate not plate

In the 1970s, all slimming clubs followed a simple business format. Each club generated revenue through monthly membership and weekly attendance fees. Classes took place in hired spaces, typically village halls, and in return for their money, members received a mixture of dieting resources: tailored food plans, calorie information guides, a weekly "weigh-in" and the emotional support of fellow slimmers.

This last factor – emotional support – was crucial. According to Bernice Weston, slimming clubs were places where private problems were shared and unpackaged as a group: "We would discuss why we ate, and frequently we found that we were unhappy at home… All kinds of problems were revealed when a member confessed to cheating: perhaps a woman would admit she was facing a divorce or that a parent was dying, and as usual food became her only solace."

The 1990s marked a new visual age for slimming, with the spread of fitness videos and the rise of online diet clubs

In the early days, Weston would even hand out fridge stickers saying things like "Who are you angry with?" explaining "when you are angry with someone, the first thing you do is go straight to the fridge". To protect against evening blowouts, another sign cautioned women to "reach for their mate, not their plate". Its tagline? "Make love, not midnight snacks."

Talking therapies

Though these examples may seem comical, the unique culture of slimming clubs could serve an important function for women. The Slimnastics classes founded in Richmond in the 1960s combined fitness and healthy eating advice with talking therapy. As one of the group's founding members, Diana Lamplugh, later explained, Slimnastics paired together women with similar personal problems: "This has happened for instance with two mothers whose babies died in cot deaths, another where, sadly, two elderly mothers share the horror of having their sons commit suicide." By encouraging open communication, these clubs pre-empted later cultural concerns with stress management and emotional well-being.

The reasons for attending a slimming club were not always this profound. Many women maintained a light-hearted attitude to participation, viewing their weekly meeting as a welcome opportunity to meet with friends, or to escape domestic drudgery.

Interviewed for a study on food in the early 1980s, a housewife from the north of England admitted that her own slimming club journey had been a farcical one: "Me and my friend used to go to the slimming club on a Thursday night with about 90p. We used to come out of there, go to the pub and have some fish and chips on the way home and slim the rest of the week!" This, she explained, was her "night out". It was something that she looked forward to because her husband always insisted on staying in.

At the other extreme, some women found the experience of attending a slimming club stressful and anxiety-inducing. In 1985, at the age of 21, Jackie Long joined a weight-loss club with friends in her local town of Congleton in Cheshire. When interviewed later in life, she recalled that meetings could be "a bit cringeworthy". The class leader "would actually go around the room, and she would ask everybody what they'd lost or maintained or put on… To the point where I can remember feeling quite sort of sick, hoping that I'd lost."

Eileen Fowler led exercise classes for busy housewives in the 1950s. The postwar period saw a surge in interest in women's fitness – and weight loss

GETTY IMAGES

PAGEANT OF SHAME?
Activists attempt to disrupt the Miss World beauty contest, London, 1970. By now, a new wave of feminists were railing at the objectification of the female body

GETTY IMAGES

Although slimming clubs constructed weight loss as a positive process, aspects of the dieting experience could clearly be psychologically damaging. And the women's liberation movement provided a new framework for feminist women to express these concerns. Although the movement itself dated back to the late 1960s, critiques of the dieting industry found fuller expression towards the end of the 1970s, with the publication of Susie Orbach's book *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978).

This seminal book on dieting linked issues of disordered eating to patriarchal power structures. For Orbach, a British psychoanalyst, ideals of thinness were transmitted unconsciously to girls from an early age. Rather than reproducing such beauty ideals, it was the task of modern feminists to outroot them as part of a broader effort to combat the sexual objectification of the female body.

A recipe for outrage

By the early 1980s, these ideas had trickled down into the radical feminist press. *Trouble and Strife* magazine, launched in 1983, featured an article on the "politics of slimming" in its opening issue. "One thing sticks in my mind," observed the author. "[T]he description in *Slimmer* magazine of this year's Golden Slimmer of the Year who is transformed by her diet 'from a lump of lard in the corner into a winner'." The misogynistic tone of the article made her reel.

By the 1980s, the arguments of the American body positivity movement – which asserted that all people deserved to have a positive body image, regardless of societal expectation – were becoming evident in Britain.

Nancy Roberts' exercise classes were launched in London in 1982, "aimed not at weight loss but at encouraging big women to enjoy their bodies", according to an article in 1983. And later in the decade, the London Fat Women's Group took to BBC television to create a programme that would "challenge the slim ideal presented by the media".

Many of the women involved in such groups had themselves attended slimming clubs in the past. "After years of dieting," observed the *Radio Times* in 1989, "they are trying to come to terms with how they are and want to challenge the oppression they face." Through activities of this kind, larger women shaped a more cynical view of the dieting industry through the 1990s and into the 21st century.

This brings us up to the present day. What do slimming clubs look like now, in the 2020s? The messages expounded by dieting clubs have of course changed shape over time, in line with broader cultural shifts. In the 1960s, there was a lot of talk of beauty, clothes-sizing and appearance. But nowadays, there is much more of an emphasis on health. This was reflected clearly in 2018, when Weight Watchers re-branded itself "WW", adopting the new tagline "Wellness that Works". And rather than being the sole preserve of women, men are now welcomed into slimming clubs – with more attending than ever before.

The techniques adopted by dieting clubs have also evolved in recent decades. The 1990s marked a new visual age for slimming, with the spread of fitness videos and television features. Then came the rise of the online diet club, allowing members to meet virtually and track their weight-loss journey through mobile apps. And now the boom in effective weight-loss drugs, such as Ozempic, have ushered in a new chapter in the history of slimming, forcing many to ask – will slimming clubs become defunct all together?

Slimming clubs offer us a rich history of contradictions. Whether we side more with the arguments of the women's liberation movement, or more with the notion that "beauty is power" is perhaps a moot point. For all of these themes – patriarchy, misogyny, female agency and female expression – figure somewhere along the way.


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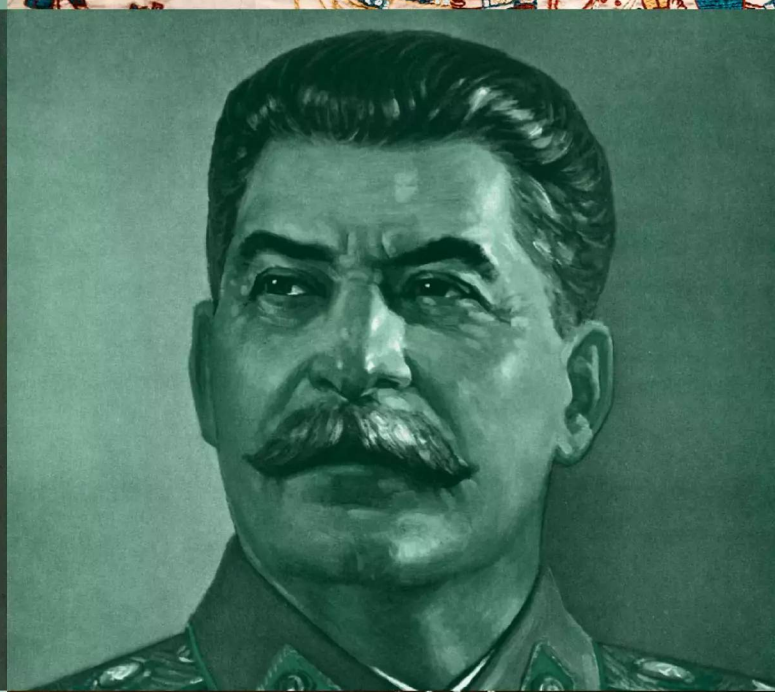

The New Year's resolutions they should have made...

Leading historians reveal how pivotal years in the lives of six major figures – from Anne Boleyn to Josef Stalin – could have turned out better, if only they'd have resolved to change their ways

BY **MATT ELTON**

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1946

Josef Stalin

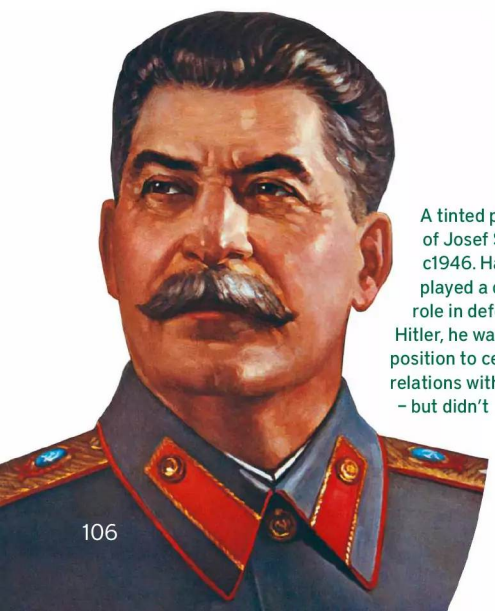
"I'll work with my allies"

In the year following the end of the Second World War, Stalin should have resolved to work more closely with his erstwhile allies. Aged 67 in 1946, he was set in his ways but, like Lenin, capable of shrewd calculation. In the 1930s he had attempted detente with the western democracies. He could have done so again.

Seven months had passed since the defeat of Germany. Much goodwill towards the Soviet Union remained in the west, where the Red Army's soldiers were seen as liberators. The security of the USSR was greater than in 1941, with a powerful Red Army. The Soviet Union, as Stalin himself put it, had passed a crucial "examination". Victory built a stronger base of popular support at home than ever before.

Instead, Stalin wasted the opportunity. The USSR tightened its grip on eastern Europe, creating a permanent friction in its relations with the west. An arms race, meanwhile, swallowed massive amounts of money, while living standards stayed low. The over-emphasis on heavy industry continued – an economic model that would lead to repeated crises and, in the end, to the collapse of Stalin's system.

Evan Mawdsley has written widely on Soviet history, and his works include *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War, 1941-1945* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015)



A tinted photograph of Josef Stalin from c1946. Having played a decisive role in defeating Hitler, he was in a position to cement relations with the west – but didn't

General Sir Douglas Haig (right) meets King George V (left) and French General Ferdinand Foch in August 1916. Haig's resolution to recognise ability above status was crucial

1916

Douglas Haig

"I'll transform the Tommies"

In January 1916 Douglas Haig – who had been commander-in-chief of the British Expeditionary Force for less than a month – should have resolved to devote more time to sorting out the BEF's training.

As 1915 turned into 1916, there was no centralised body devoted to examining the lessons of the fighting, using them to inform doctrine, and then training the army accordingly. Unfortunately, Haig did not prioritise training, and it was not properly reformed until early 1917.

However, we know from his diary that Haig did make one resolution, and that was to promote the best talent – regardless of whether he got on with them or not. "I had no 'friends' when it came to military promotion, and I would not tolerate a 'job' being done."

In 1916, Haig largely stuck by this resolution. He had an uneasy relationship with General Sir Henry Rawlinson, whom Haig thought was devious and lacking in integrity. Yet Haig recognised 'Rawly's' skill as a soldier, and gave him the lead role on the Somme in July 1916.

Rawlinson's record at the Somme was patchy, but he grew into the job and proved a highly effective commander in the victorious 1918 campaigns.

Gary Sheffield's biography of Haig is titled *Douglas Haig: From the Somme to Victory* (Aurum Press, 2019)

GETTY IMAGES

1586

Elizabeth I

"I'll name James VI as my heir"

The question of who would succeed Elizabeth I was a thorny one – and her new year's resolution of 1586 should have been to settle the issue by naming James VI of Scotland as her heir. The two monarchs had endured a fraught relationship over the previous six years, but by then they were negotiating a treaty of alliance, and James desperately wanted a guarantee that he was next in line for the English throne to be included among its terms.

Though there was a danger that the king might engage in plots against Elizabeth to hasten his accession, it was more likely that he would wait patiently for her death, secure in the knowledge that his right was formally recognised in England. But Elizabeth resisted the pressure. As a result, Anglo-Scottish conflicts and tensions continued after the Treaty of Berwick was signed in July 1586, and political and religious uncertainty marked the final decade of Elizabeth's reign.

Elizabeth's refusal to make provision for the succession also harmed her reputation both at the time and since. For a queen who purported to care deeply for her subjects, it showed a remarkable insensitivity to their fears and concerns.

Susan Doran is a senior research fellow in history at Jesus College, Oxford, specialising in the reign of Elizabeth I

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

A portrait of Queen Elizabeth I, painted by Federico Zuccari around 1586 when she was 53 – too old to produce an heir. Instead, she should have confirmed the succession of James VI of Scotland, seen left in a 1621 portrait by Daniel Mytens. Eizabeth's refusal meant the final decade of her reign was marked with political and religious uncertainty

1536

Anne Boleyn

"I'll make friends with Cromwell"

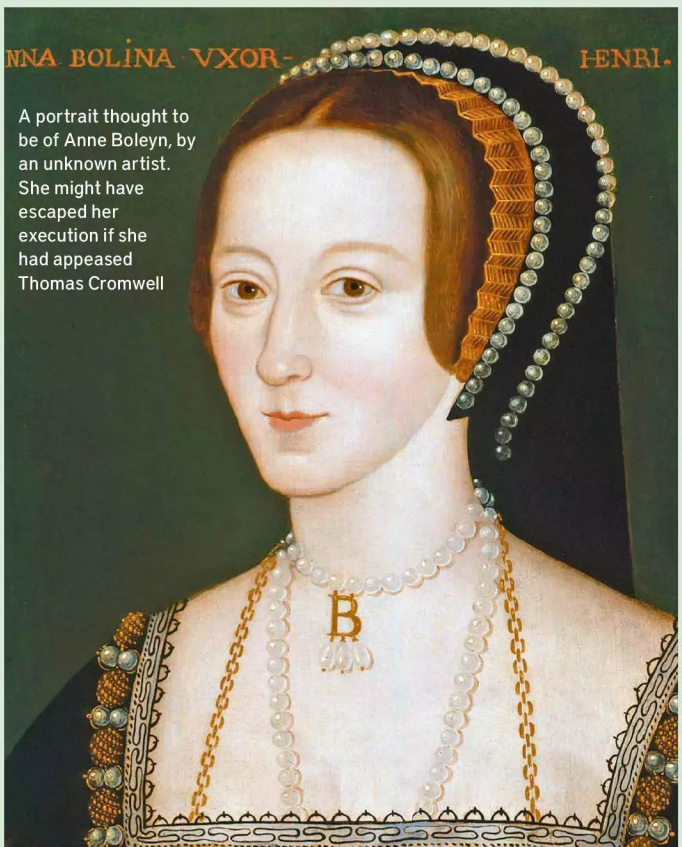
Anne Boleyn would have been glad to see the back of 1535, which had been something of an annus horribilis for Henry VIII's second queen. There is evidence to suggest that she had suffered a second miscarriage in early summer; her marriage was rapidly deteriorating; and she was increasingly at loggerheads with the king's chief minister, Thomas Cromwell.

Though Cromwell had helped Anne secure Henry's hand and shared her reformist tendencies, they had fallen out badly over the Dissolution. Anne had argued that funds from the monasteries should be diverted to charitable causes rather than to the royal coffers, as Cromwell had arranged. She had made no secret of the fact that she "would like to see his head off his shoulders".

By the end of 1535, though, Cromwell was by far the most powerful man at court and, crucially, had the king's ear. When Henry instructed his chief minister to get him out of the marriage after Anne's miscarriage early the following year, Cromwell used this as an opportunity to get rid of her for good. He concocted a case of adultery – involving not just one but five men, including her own brother – and she was condemned to death.

If Anne had made it her new year's resolution to forge an alliance with Cromwell in 1536, it might have saved her life. The ever-resourceful minister could have applied his brilliant legal mind to having her marriage to the king annulled. He might even have persuaded Henry to give Anne a second chance.

Tracy Borman is a historian and author of *The Private Lives of the Tudors* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2017)



A portrait thought to be of Anne Boleyn, by an unknown artist. She might have escaped her execution if she had appeased Thomas Cromwell

A silver penny from the reign of England's Viking king, Cnut

1016

Cnut

"I'll roll the dice and head for London"

At the start of 1016, Cnut was a landless Viking prince with the English kingdom in his sights. By the end of 1016 he was established in London as ruler, and his rival, King Edmund Ironside, was dead – but getting there had involved a hard fight. Cnut could have saved himself a great deal of trouble if he'd made a dash for England's principal city sooner.

Edmund's father, King Æthelred ('the Unready'), had begun the year in London, where the English army was calling vainly for him to lead it. Cnut had received supplies from the royal heartland of Wessex in 1015, so was in a good position to strike. However, during the spring of 1016 his attention was taken by affairs in the north of England.

It seems that Æthelred was ill. If Cnut had known that, and headed straight for London, he might have invoked his legitimacy as the son and heir of the Anglo-Danish king Sweyn Forkbeard (who ruled 1013–14), and applied pressure on Æthelred.

As it happened, Æthelred died in April before Cnut arrived to claim London, but the delay allowed Æthelred's son to declare himself king. That meant that Cnut had to fight, before making peace with Edmund. It was only thanks to Edmund's sudden death at the end of 1016 that Cnut avoided the complications of a kingdom ruled by rival kings.

Ryan Lavelle is a professor in early medieval history at the University of Winchester

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

The Bayeux Tapestry shows Harold's defeat at Hastings, which he might have avoided had he sat back and watched William struggle to feed his army

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

1066

Harold Godwinson

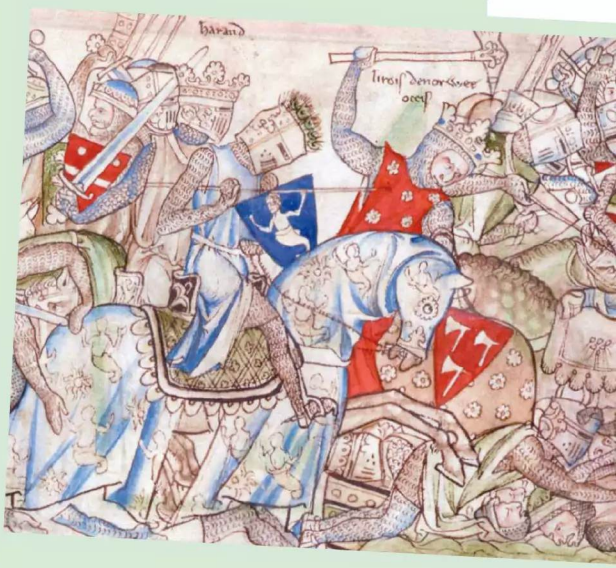
"I won't be so hasty"

During the first nine months of 1066, Harold did well – and his success was in large part because he'd stolen a march on his rivals. When Edward the Confessor died on 5 January, Harold immediately had himself proclaimed king, and was crowned the very next day. When his troublesome younger brother Tostig invaded in May, Harold hurried down to Sandwich to see him off, and when Tostig returned in September with the Norwegian king Harald Hardrada, Harold rushed north to surprise them at Stamford Bridge, winning a famous victory.

Naturally, therefore, when Harold heard soon afterwards that Duke William of Normandy had landed in Sussex, he thought that speed would be his friend, and sought to repeat his earlier success, hoping to catch William off-guard. But a swift engagement was precisely what his rival wanted. As invaders, the Normans had poor supply lines, and no local support of the kind that Tostig and Harald had enjoyed in the north.

Had Harold waited just a little longer, he could have assembled a larger army and watched as the Normans struggled to keep their army fed by foraging. Instead, he rushed into battle at Hastings – and looked up at precisely the wrong moment. ●

Marc Morris is a historian and author of numerous books including *The Norman Conquest* (Windmill, 2013)



A 13th-century illustration of the battle of Stamford Bridge, which saw a swift victory for Harold over his younger brother Tostig – and which gave him the confidence to quickly attack William

ILLUSTRATION BY KATE HAZELL

How history can teach us to live happier

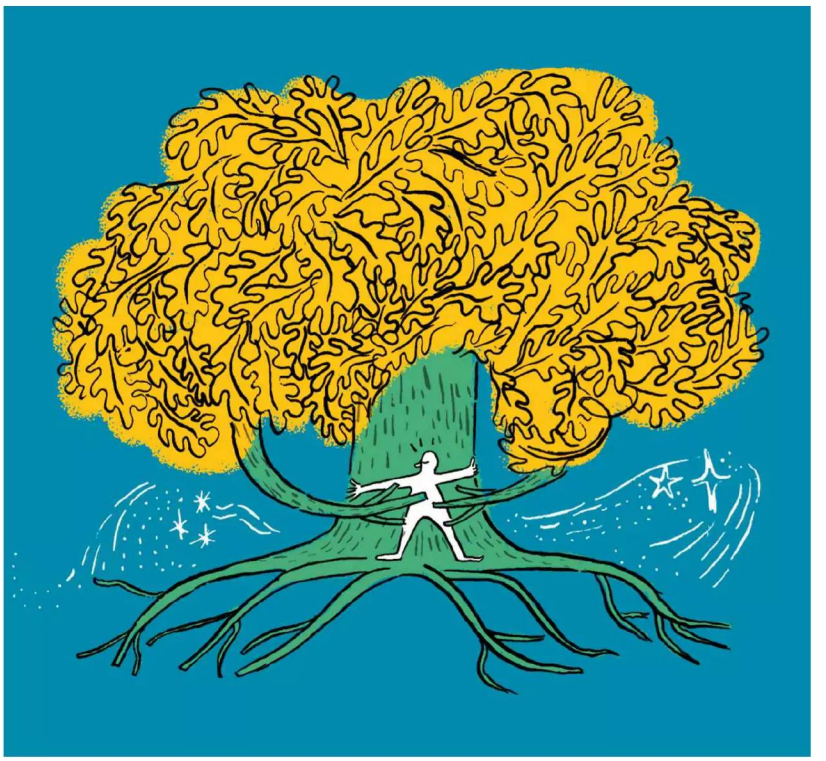
DR DAVE MUSGROVE and a host of leading historians look to the past to provide practical advice for a more fulfilling, sustainable and stress-free life in the 21st century

ILLUSTRATION BY KATE HAZELL

For more historical advice on living better, happier and healthier, don't miss the Life Lessons from History newsletter: ***historyextralifelessons.substack.com***

Hug a tree like a pagan

DR FRANCIS YOUNG explains to Dave Musgrove why we should engage in creative spirituality in the same way that the non-Christian people of the Baltic and far north did for centuries



I used to be able to say, unequivocally and without hesitation, that I'd never hugged a tree. I can't do that any more, and it's all Dr Francis Young's fault. He told me to be creative with my spirituality, and I took him at his word. Francis is a historian and folklorist specialising in the history of religion and belief, and also a particular expert on the Baltics.

With my inaugural arboreal embrace, I was following in the footsteps of the people that Francis has been studying in his most recent book, *Silence of the Gods: The Untold History of Europe's Last Pagan Peoples*. It's a cracking read, and a revelation if, like me, you could do with being much better informed about the historical and religious story of the peoples living in the geographical northern and eastern margins of Europe.

In *Silence of the Gods*, Francis outlines how in the Baltic region, parts of the far north towards the Arctic, and area of what's now Russia today, non-Christian practices persisted for centuries after the church had become established across the rest of the continent. It wasn't until 1387, as he explains, that Lithuania, the last officially pagan country in Europe, became officially Christian.

Even after this, non-Christian practices persisted for centuries in the region, certainly into the 18th century, and in some places, to the present day. Given the wide spread of space and time we're talking about, you won't be surprised to hear that the actual nature of these pagan practices was varied, from shamanism in the far north, to polytheistic veneration of pantheons of multiple gods and spirits, to animism, and to worship of sacred places

On that latter point, these sacred places often involved woodland: forests, groves and clearings, or particular trees. Indeed, Francis explained to me that in Lithuania, the celebration of trees continues to be a national obsession to this day. Seeing wonder in woods is not something unique to the Baltic though – it's a broader human condition.

"There is something about an ancient tree, a living being that is so much older than us, and has seen all the generations pass. Somehow that is in and of itself a focus of the sacred. I think you see these patterns again and again in Europe's indigenous religions," explains Francis. "Many of the concerns that people have now about the environment, they actually can be connected to much older and more primal anxieties about deforestation, which are not just to do with climate change, but are to do with a sense in which deforestation or the felling of trees or the transformation of your environment is somehow depriving you of an ancient place of the sacred."

Back to the Baltic, the question is 'why did these places and people not succumb to the temptation of Christianity like the rest of Europe?'. Francis's answer is that it's partly a language barrier, and partly a factor of geographical remoteness and sparsity of population. But also, it's because many of the people in these areas lived a less settled way of life, a form of nomadic agriculture, which meant that a religion born of settled city-states didn't hold much appeal.

Refreshing perspective

That all meant that for centuries across Europe, there were people who were able to engage with their spirituality in a much more individual and creative way than generally was the case elsewhere on the continent. Where the Christian rules of religious observance were written down, it was harder for people to be inventive in their approach to worship.

Now, that's very interesting, but what can we learn from this? Does this offer any insights into ways that we might live happier, or maybe more meaningful lives today? You can guess the answer is yes, because otherwise this article would end in a disappointingly abrupt way around about now.

"When we delve into the history of spirituality in this marginalised area of Europe. we find something which I think

ILLUSTRATION BY KATE HAZELL

is a lot more interesting than these prepackaged spiritualities. And that is people who have effectively found themselves cut off from other religious traditions and therefore they've forged their own, largely in a response to the environment in which they live," says Francis. "I find that a rather refreshing perspective on religion, and on spirituality, from which perhaps we can draw some life lessons for today."

Before we carry on, it's probably worth clarifying the difference between spirituality and religion. There are many answers to that, but in Francis's view, it's this: "spirituality tends to refer to an awareness and connection with the numinous that does not necessarily have to have any link to organised religion, and religion in the way that we tend to talk about it in everyday speech in Britain at least tends to be to do with some kind of organised worship of a deity".

So when we're talking about these non-Christian people in northern Europe, spirituality seems a more appropriate word. How that spirituality was actually manifested is hard to get at, because in the absence of a literate tradition, we are relying on second-hand accounts of their practices from Christian writers. Clearly we should be mindful that we're looking through that lens. The fact that literacy wasn't embedded in their cultures is a key element in the story though, according to Francis: "The creativity does come from the absence of a literate tradition because clearly that pins down things like rituals and beliefs and stories in a way that an oral culture tends not to. But I think the creativity also arises from the challenges that they faced in that their traditions were constantly being disrupted by attempts to convert them to Christianity, none of which really worked until quite late on in the story. If you are constantly enduring this kind of cultural attrition, you have a choice: you can capitulate, or you can devise your own way. What I find really interesting about these people is that they chose to find their own ways of being spiritual."

This straw construction represents mythology gods in the Baltic region, where people had a more individual approach to religion for centuries

There is something about an ancient tree, a living being that is so much older than us, and has seen all the generations pass

Sacred trees

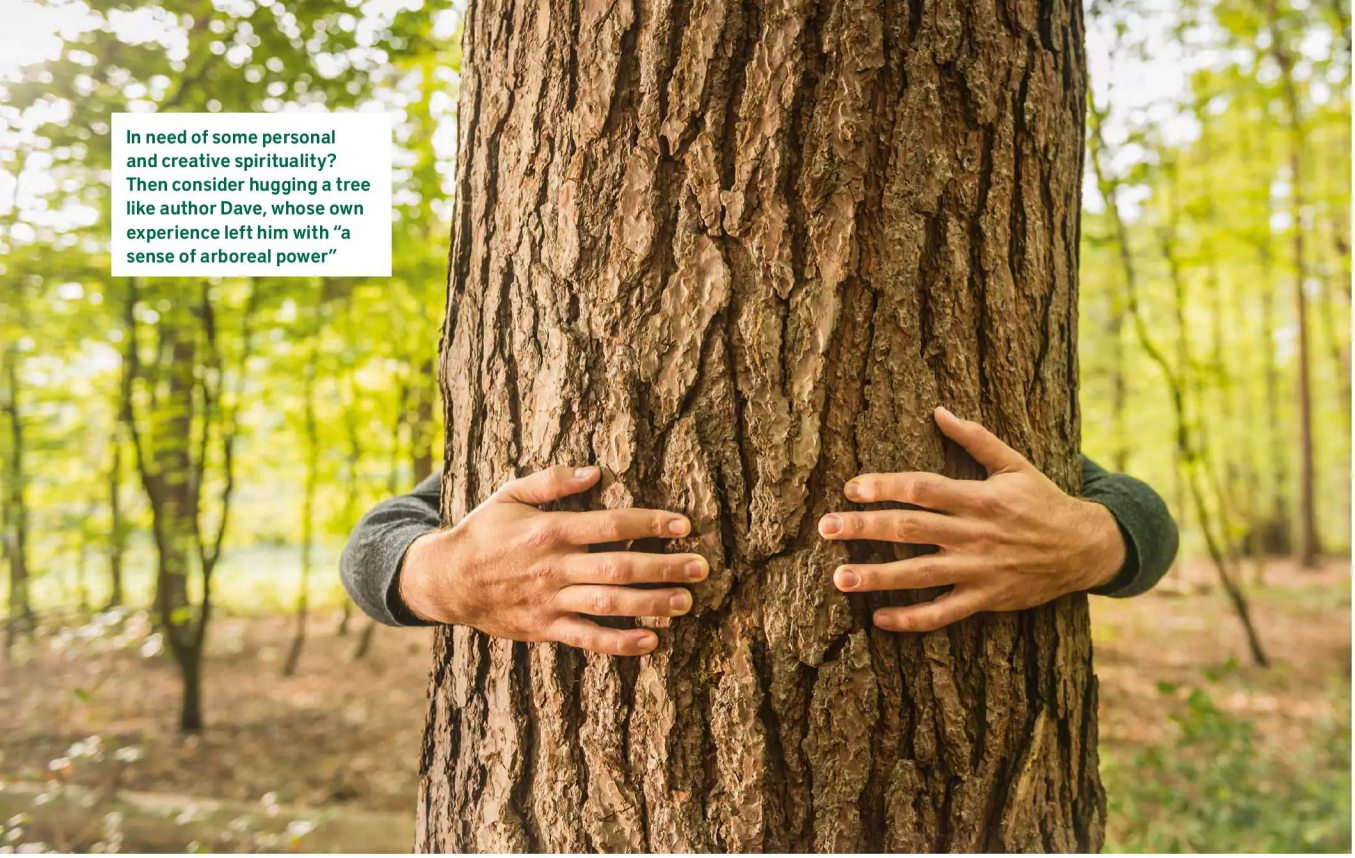
It seems that the spirituality of these non-Christian people was malleable and reactive, able to flex under pressure from external sources. Let's go back to these sacred trees. From the late 15th century onwards, Christian missionaries recognized that there were still people worshipping trees in the Baltics, and so chopped them down to put a stop to it. That didn't work.

"There's one remarkable source that describes how these people developed a ritual for making new sacred trees. Now, it seems highly unlikely that this was part of their original tradition because the whole point of a tree being sacred is that it's very, very old. It's sacred because it's always been there, and goes way, way back to your ancestors who also worship it. But if your sacred trees are constantly being cut down, you need a way of making new ones," explains Francis. "So, according to this account, people in Latvia would go to a sacred tree that had been cut down. They would recover a branch or some part of the tree, and ask the permission of the tree that had been cut down to make a new sacred tree. It had to be of the same species as the original tree. They would ask the permission of that tree if it would become a new sacred tree, and then touch it with the branch of the tree that was originally sacred. That would make the new tree into a sacred one. And that, to me is extraordinary."

Clearly a big part of the story is the persistent importance of the veneration of the natural world to these people. That's

ALAMY/TOPFOTO

A 15th-century German woodcut of the earlier Saint Alto chopping down trees, which Christian missionaries did during this period in the Baltics



In need of some personal and creative spirituality? Then consider hugging a tree like author Dave, whose own experience left him with "a sense of arboreal power"

something that has been lost, or at least denuded, in the Christian west, for want of a better way of describing it. I'm not a practising Christian, but I've read Tom Holland's *Dominion*, and I buy into the idea that Western morality and values are the inescapable product of Christianity. If I want to break free of that and find a bit of personal, creative spirituality, it feels like trees are the way to go.

Imbued with the sacred

And thus, I went and hugged a tree. It wasn't a great tree or an ancient tree. And it wasn't even my favourite tree, the Scots Pine, which I've always found to have a particularly satisfying shape. It was an oak tree, in a little woodland down the road from my house. I talked to it a bit and asked it if minded me hugging it. It didn't reply. It's a tree after all. But it didn't drop any acorns on my head so I think we were in accord. I quite enjoyed hugging it. It was a warm day, and the experience was somewhat cooling. It was pleasantly scratchy on my face. I lingered for a minute or two in a woody embrace, and thought about stuff that was on my mind. I pondered on the strength of the trunk and the roots that no doubt extended some distance beneath my feet.

"Most people will have memories of a particular place that's very significant to them, or perhaps a particular kind of tree which they find particularly beautiful or have a personal connection to: places which have some kind of numinous power," suggests Francis. "And what if you didn't just leave that in the realm of a happy and pleasant memory. What if you actually imbued that with the sacred? What if you went that extra step of fashioning your own way of thinking about what is sacred?"

I lingered for a minute or two in a woody embrace, and thought about stuff that was on my mind

I didn't get as far as imbuing my hugging tree with sacrality, but I think it was a nice ritual. I felt a little bit of a sense of arboreal power, which just made me reflect on myself a little more deeply than I ordinarily might. If that's creative spirituality, I think it's quite helpful. It certainly wasn't a bad thing. This builds on something that Professor Ronald Hutton told me in an earlier *Life Lesson from History*, when he opined that now is the perfect time for us to DIY our own religions, and that's the benefit we get from living in a modern disenchanted world. I got a similar sense from Francis Young: "You can think about spirituality in a more personally creative way than simply going through a kind of shopping list and deciding 'which of these spiritualities that I found online should I go with?'. I would encourage people to be creative and to explore the potential of spirituality as something which they fashion themselves as well as something which you might inherit from a tradition."

So the tradition I'm fashioning is to hug a tree. It's not a new idea I know. I'm not the first tree-hugger. But it gave me something a bit different, and maybe I'll refine the ritual as time goes on. I salute the historical peoples of the pagan north and east of Europe, and Dr Francis Young, for reminding me that spirituality is in our gift to explore and fashion as we wish. Now, more than ever, we need to find connection with the natural world around us, so hug a tree, if you like, or do something else, but be spiritually creative and curious, and see where it takes you.

DR FRANCIS YOUNG is a historian and folklorist specialising in the history of religion and belief, and an authority on the religious history of the Baltic region.

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Live locally, live sustainably, live medieval

If you want to live a sustainable life today, you need to think local. For that, you can channel the experience of the Middle Ages, as **DR IAN MORTIMER** tells Dave Musgrove

When I have a spare moment, I dabble in making hazel hurdle fence panels. It's gloriously therapeutic. You get yourself a fat bundle of 6ft long straight hazel rods, ram a few of them vertically into the ground at regular intervals and then cajole the rest of your rods through them on the horizontal, weaving them in and out of the uprights. The trick is to robustly bend the rods so that you can feel the fibres creaking and twisting through your palms, but you can't be so hard on the wood that it cracks and snaps. It's bad if that happens.

I am a rank amateur at this, and the results of my labours are woefully rustic, but I like the process of getting there. If you're doing it properly, you're supposed to split the hazel rods in half, but I've yet to conquer that art. To see it done masterfully, there are loads of informative videos online of competent, serious, chaps in forests teasing the wood into beautiful hurdle panels.

People have been making hazel hurdle panels for millennia. In the Somerset Levels, archaeologists have excavated them in situ where they were laid down in the Neolithic period as trackways to help people get across the boggy ground. They survive, amazingly, because peat grew up over them and protected them.

The trickiest bit of making a hazel hurdle is procuring the rods. You have to coppice trees (ie cut them down to the base) in order to encourage the hazel to shoot up in straight stems. If you're managing a woodland, you would crop the coppiced hazel on a regular rotation every 5-7 years. It's a very sustainable building material because the wood grows back fast and parallel, and we know that in the Middle Ages, they were definitely managing their local woodlands to supply this.

It's just one of many examples of sustainable living that our medieval forebears were engaged in, according to the historian and author Dr Ian Mortimer.

ILLUSTRATION BY KATE HAZELL

"They managed their resources in a way that they knew they could get continuing crops off – if you pollard or coppice a tree, it'll grow back stronger. They knew about all that sort of thing."

Locally sourced

For Mortimer, there's a lesson there for us – we should look back to the Middle Ages for inspiration for living sustainably today. Now I know what you're thinking: those medieval folks weren't living sustainably because they wanted to, but simply because they had to.

It's certainly true, according to Ian Mortimer, that life in the 11th century in England was very precarious for many. He notes that there was a regular cycle of famine at the time, so much so that some parents were willing to sell their children into slavery, "because that was a child's best chance of survival".

There wasn't much surplus around, and for most people, there wasn't ready access to markets to transfer the surplus anyway, so most communities were pretty much self-sufficient, and heavily dependent on their own productivity and ingenuity.

By the time we get to the 13th century, however, things are different. England was much more of a market economy and a lot of goods were moving around. Surpluses could be transferred from places with plentiful supplies to areas in need. The precariousness of a subsistence economy was thus overcome. Nevertheless, communities continued to source most of their food and raw materials from their locality. The less distance it had to travel, the less vulnerable the society.

"Local production combined with a market economy is a very positive way of maximising sustainability. Whether the Middle Ages had a concept of

→

environmental protection or not, they certainly knew how to marshal their local resources and wider networks. And that included working together, collectively and collaboratively."

To avoid the spectre of food shortages, medieval farmers had to manage their risks across the community, share good and bad land equitably among one another, and accept communal rules about what was gathered when, where, and by whom.

"Look through the manorial customs of medieval manors, and they'll be saying when the peasants can go take their pigs into the woods to get the beech mast from the ground, and when they're allowed to pick up the fallen sticks for their firewood, how much timber they're allowed to take for their houses," observes Mortimer. "When you think about an open field system, which is what we had across most of central England, you can see how they divide all the strips of land into areas where no one's going to have all their land blighted by a frost pocket because it's all divided up and scattered, so there's an average sort of production level across all the fields".

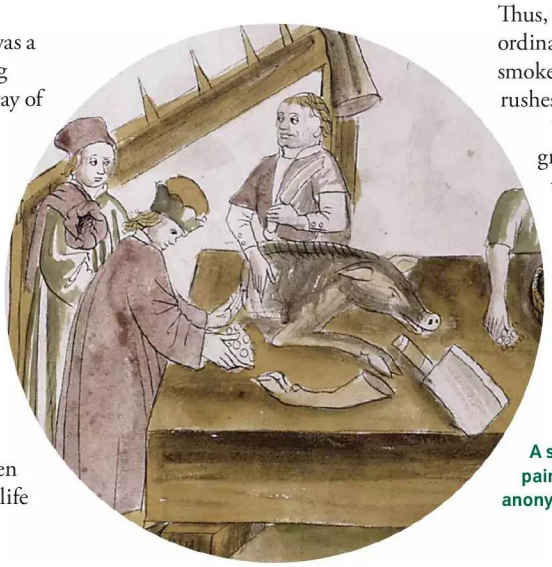
Community values

What Ian Mortimer is describing there is a way of living communally where resources were shared in a way that was seen as equitable. It had to be managed and rules observed of course, and that's where the customs of the manor, and the writ of the lord's local representative, the reeve, came into play. This wasn't some utopian land of harmony – some people didn't conform, sometimes there were disputes and disagreements, and sometimes the lords of the manors pressed hard with their demands on the peasants. But there was a strong element of co-operation among these communities to allow for this way of living. Living sustainably was only sustainable if they worked together.

People in the Middle Ages would not have understood the concept of sustainable living – to them, it was just living. So you might take the view that this interpretation is simply historians today mirroring 21st-century concerns and projecting them onto the past. Of course, that's true to an extent – history is always a reflection of the present. However, academics have been writing about this aspect of medieval life for quite a while. There is a very interesting paper written back in 1990 by Jules Pretty, who is now Emeritus Professor of Environment and Society at the University of Essex, and a noted voice in sustainable living. His paper, published in the *Agricultural History Review*, and called 'Sustainable Agriculture in the Middle Ages: The English Manor' makes the argument that the medieval peasantry highly valued the goals of stability, sustainability and equitability. Like Ian Mortimer, Pretty stresses the importance of neighbourly co-operation:

"Villagers traded ale, cereals, hay, livestock, and wood, and hired out livestock, ploughs, harrows, and carts. Secondly, they provided support and mutual help for each other, particularly through crop and plough-team sharing arrangements. Peasants lent grain, livestock, tools and household utensils to needy neighbours, though these arrangements were more common between small and middle landowners. Thirdly, communal decisions were taken against individuals who had attempted to overconsume or underinvest in the communal resources – in particular those who had encroached onto the common wastes, had over-used the commons, over-gleaned the fields, or had neglected their obligations to maintain roads, ditches, hedges and gate".

In the Middle Ages, communities sourced most of their food and raw materials from their locality



A scene from the butchers at a market, painted between 1414 and 1418 by an anonymous artist

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Of course, they were also very mindful of not wasting what they did produce – all parts of the animals they kept were eaten, and they consumed the old animals rather than the young so that they could be sure of getting all the resources (milk, wool, that sort of thing) from them in life. They made sure that they returned what they could to the land they worked as well. The use of animal, and human, excrement for manure was a major concern. And when it came to building materials, they were very happy to reuse stone and timbers from old structures wherever they could – you only have to look at the Roman bricks in the great Norman tower of St Albans cathedral to see that.

In his new book, *Mortimer's A-Z of English History*, Mortimer succinctly explains this, and he's let me quote a few paragraphs here: "Today, few of us keep vats of urine stored around the house. But up until the 19th century it is collected and put to use in fulling wool and scouring cloth, as well as being employed in various dyeing processes. It is in demand because it's a natural and cheap source of ammonia, which is an alkali. People also use spots of it when removing stains from clothing. It becomes more efficacious when it is old, so people really do store vats of it for long periods of time. Thus, when you imagine the smells in an ordinary medieval home, along with the smoke and the traces of rotting offal in the rushes, add the smell of stale piss.

The point here is not to laugh at how gross life was in the past. It is rather that people in the pre-industrial age look at things that we think of as undesirable in different ways. In the 1960s the sociologist Mary Douglas famously observed that there is objectively no such thing as 'dirt' but rather what we call

Two peasants gather sticks and twigs, turning them into bundles. This traditional wintertime activity is shown here in a *Book of Hours* c1550

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'dirt' is simply 'matter out of place'. A good example is manure: in the garden, it is definitely in the right place; in the middle of your living room carpet, it is dirt. This is why medieval people keep hold of things that neither you nor I would want lingering around the house. In a world created by God, everything has its 'right place'.

"Usefulness is the key. Or sustainability, as we might call it today. Medieval people keep old ashes from the hearth to make potash, which is used for scouring pots and pans with handfuls of straw. They also use potash for making lye (in which you wash your hair, even though it is strongly alkaline). It is also a key ingredient of liquid soap (in which you clean your clothes). Likewise, medieval people will eat all manner of offal that we would throw away. Apples are kept carefully for a full year; if they turn rotten, they are pressed to make cider. Nothing is wasted. Bones are boiled for their marrow. Fat is stored in dripping pans. Skins from all sorts of animals, including goats, dogs and cats, are made into gloves. Fallen boughs and sticks are put aside for firewood. The heat that remains in an oven after the bread has been baked is used to make small cakes. 'Waste not, want not' is the motto by which everyone lives unless they are rich enough to be a 'waster', and even the wasters let their castoffs and rubbish be used by other people. Almost nothing is thrown away except broken pottery and the cloth used to wipe your 'nether end'. "

In our interview, I didn't chat to Ian about the repair culture in the Middle Ages very much, but we did run a fascinating interview on the HistoryExtra podcast a little while ago with the German medievalist Professor Annette Kehnel, author of *The Green Ages: medieval innovations in sustainability*, and she explained how the repair business was a thriving one in European medieval cities, with people making their livelihoods by repairing clothes, shoe and household goods.

Community decline

So, if you think of the three Rs of sustainability – reduce, reuse, recycle – the people of the Middle Ages were absolutely living the second and third values in that list, but not so much the first. Reducing consumption wasn't really in the gift of most people, with the limited resources available to them, though Ian Mortimer does note that the strictures of the church in terms of not eating meat does play into that: "You could take the view that the restriction on eating meat across Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays in the Catholic church was not just a spiritual thing, but also about eking out protein because you don't need to eat meat every single day. Eating fish as opposed to meat then naturally balances things out".

To conclude then, Mortimer's message, drawing on his knowledge of the Middle Ages, is that, if we want to live sustainably today,"Necessities all need to be local and all need to be transported within the locality, in a way that's reliable and energy-efficient and low cost".

There are problems with that. It's much more difficult to buy locally if you happen to live in a modern conurbation, and as is regularly reported, it's often much more expensive to buy locally-produced foods than it is to get imported products in a supermarket. But there are urban co-operative movements springing up across the UK that are trying to address those problems.

It's been argued, and counter-argued, that the decline of neighbourliness occurred in the post-medieval period as the ethical code of the old village community unwound in the face of more individualistic behaviour in the 16th and 17th centuries. That debate has been going on among social historians of early modern England for decades, and it carries on still. I'm not going to get into that here, but perhaps the message is that locality, community and sustainability fit together. That certainly was the case in the Middle Ages, and maybe that's something we should think about today. If we want to live sustainably, we need to think about how we live as local communities and co-operate harmoniously. ●

DR IAN MORTIMER is an author and historian, whose many works include *The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England* (The Bodley Head, 2009).

Give away your worries like an ancient Mesopotamian

What can we learn about managing worry from the people of Assyria and Babylonia? **DR SELENA WISNOM** shares some ancient wisdom with Dave Musgrove

Do you worry about things? Do you wake up in the middle of the night, sweating about what might happen to you, to your family, to the world in general? I do. If you do too, rest assured you're not alone. It's a natural human trait, and it's something people have been doing for millennia. In evolutionary terms, I imagine it's something to do with forcing our minds to think about the things we ought to be doing next to keep ourselves alive, and keep us out of dangerous situations. It's counterproductive, of course, to worry yourself into a state of paralysis – that's when worrying goes wrong. So are there any lessons we can take from history that can help us worry productively?

I went to the Assyria Galleries in the British Museum late one Friday afternoon to reflect on this. They are well worth a visit, whether you're a worrier or not. Turn left at the main entrance and you're straight into them. I wanted to go there because Dr Selena Wisnom, an expert on the history and heritage of ancient Mesopotamia and author of the excellent *The Library of Ancient Wisdom* had told me these people were worriers of renown: "They worry so much that they invent an entire branch of scholarship devoted to it. This is worrying on a kind of national cosmic scale".

This organised worrying was called Lamentation. It wasn't just a private matter – it was ritualised, institutionalised, and shared across the whole society.

We know they worried and lamented because they wrote about it. I wanted to get up close and personal with some ancient Mesopotamian cuneiform script. I can't read it – and there aren't many people who can - but I figured it would be instructive just to look at it.

Cuneiform is the writing system that they used in Mesopotamia. It was invented in the mid fourth millennium BC and used for millennia afterwards, although it evolved on the way. It was basically a system of signs inscribed on clay tablets, produced by pressing a wedge into a piece of clay to makes a three-dimensional impression.

By studying those cuneiform writings, Assyriologists like Dr Wisnom have been able to understand a great deal about life in ancient Mesopotamia, and research how these people saw their world. It was a world, as Dr Wisnom explained to me, that was full of worry and worriers.

Tense relations

Let's take a moment for a quick recap on where and when we're talking about. Mesopotamia is a geographical term – it means between the rivers, and the rivers in question are the Tigris and Euphrates, so broadly where modern Iraq is today. Mesopotamia was a focus for ancient civilisations from the fourth millennium BC onwards and Assyria and Babylonia were two of those civilisations, Assyria to the north and Babylonia to the south. Relations between these two kingdoms in the First Millennium BC were, in Dr Wisnom's words 'tense'. Her book focusses on the time of the last great Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, who reigned in the mid-century 7th century BC from his splendid capital at Nineveh. His brother was King of Babylonia, and as is so often the way, the siblings fell out and went to war. The upshot was an Assyrian victory over Babylon. However, a few decades after Ashurbanipal's death, revenge was served when the Babylonians and their allies descended on Nineveh and reduced this mighty city to rubble in 612BC. Its remains are now to be found on the outskirts of Mosul.

The destruction of Nineveh included the burning of the great library of Ashurbanipal – the library of ancient wisdom in Dr Wisnom's book title. You

ILLUSTRATION BY KATE HAZELL

might imagine that a raging fire in a great library would be a Very Bad Thing for later historians. However, because the ancient Mesopotamians used clay tablets, the conflagration acted like a giant kiln and fired the tablets, making them more likely to survive for posterity. Crushed and forgotten though these tablets were, their subsequent rediscovery in the 19th century provides a huge source of material for us to understand how these people saw the world around them. Quite a lot of the writings in Ashurbanipal's library have found their way to the British Museum, along with reliefs, sculptures and statues.

And that's how we know what the Babylonians and the Assyrians worried about. To understand the central role of worry in ancient Mesopotamia, you've got to appreciate the scale and sophistication of these civilisations. Assyria was one of the great powers of the ancient world, known for its military strength, monumental architecture, and extensive bureaucracy.

Professional lamenters

The Babylonians were renowned for their scholarship and cosmopolitan culture. Babylon became a centre of religious ritual, law, and intellectual life. Assyrian and Babylonian fortunes rose and fell turn-by-turn over the centuries. As Dr Wisnom notes in her book, "Assyrian culture owes so much to the Babylonians that the two can be difficult to disentangle". She likes to use the term Mesopotamian to refer to aspects of their culture that are shared, as well as relating to earlier Sumerian texts. "They were guardians of knowledge stretching back a thousand years before them," she says, inheriting and preserving earlier Sumerian and Akkadian traditions.

This long historical memory brought with it an equally enduring awareness of the risk of natural disaster. Flood, fire and famine were things they knew and feared. They also knew that the way to avoid catastrophe was to keep their gods happy. Mesopotamian gods, says Dr Wisnom, "behave much like human beings do… they have strong personalities, they can be persuaded, they can be tricked. They do things, they care, they intervene, and people are really trying to get their attention and call them over to their side".

In a society where fear of the gods was interwoven with daily life, ritualised expressions of worry were not eccentric – they were essential. These were advanced societies, but their cultural sophistication did not free them from fear. Quite the opposite. They believed the world was sustained by divine order, and that disorder – famine, floods, illness, invasion – meant that something had gone wrong in the human relationship with the gods. Misfortune wasn't random: it was a message.

And so they acted, regularly and ritually, to express their anxieties and try to restore divine favour. "They lament to the gods in the temples every single day," says Dr Wisnom. "They have people whose job it is to sing in front of the gods four times a day, these very, very long litanies, bewailing all of the potential things that could go wrong to the city."

These professional lamenters were essentially state-appointed national worriers. Their job was to imagine worst-case scenarios in elaborate poetic form, and recite them in public ceremonies, even when no immediate crisis was at hand. "If you make it clear to the gods that you know they could do all these terrible things to you," says Dr Wisnom, "then they won't feel the need to do it."

It was an act of pre-emptive humility – ritualised worrying in the hope of divine mercy. In order to know what you need the Gods to do on your behalf in the future, you need to know what's coming your way. One of the ways the Assyrians and Babylonians dealt with their worries about the future was by attempting to predict it. They developed highly sophisticated systems of divination, which were treated not as superstition but as a vital form of scholarship. Their premise was simple but profound: if misfortune is a message from the gods, it must be possible to read the signs in advance.

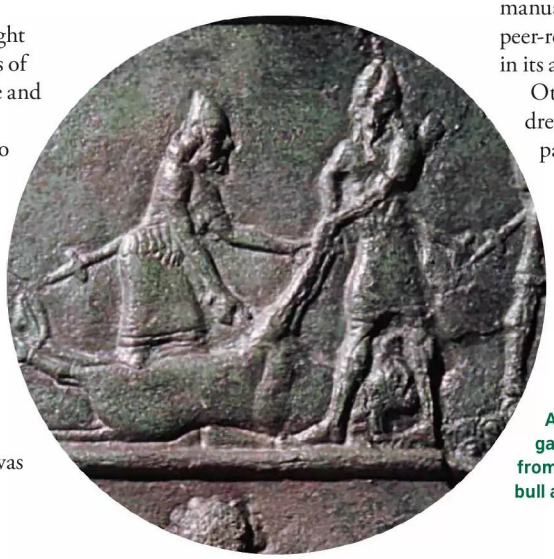
This approach took many forms. Celestial omens were especially important. The movement of stars and planets, eclipses, and unusual celestial events were meticulously recorded and interpreted. The Assyrians and Babylonians were very proficient at studying the stars. Dr Wisnom notes that Mesopotamian astronomers could "predict the movements of any star or planet to an accuracy of four minutes on any day, past or future," using only naked-eye observations and mathematical ingenuity.

But divination didn't stop at the sky. The Assyrians also practised extispicy – the reading of sheep entrails – as a means of answering specific questions posed to the gods. "It was one of the most important ways for kings to receive divine guidance," says Dr Wisnom. Priests would sacrifice a sheep, examine its liver and other organs, and interpret the shape, texture, and marks according to detailed manuals. The process was collaborative, peer-reviewed, and surprisingly scientific in its approach.

Other forms of divination included dream interpretation, reading smoke patterns, and interpreting odd occurrences in the natural world – like a pig dancing in a town square or a goat giving birth to a two-headed kid. Any anomaly might hold a message.

The people in Nineveh and other cities across the Mesopotami-

These were advanced societies, but their cultural sophistication did not free them from fear



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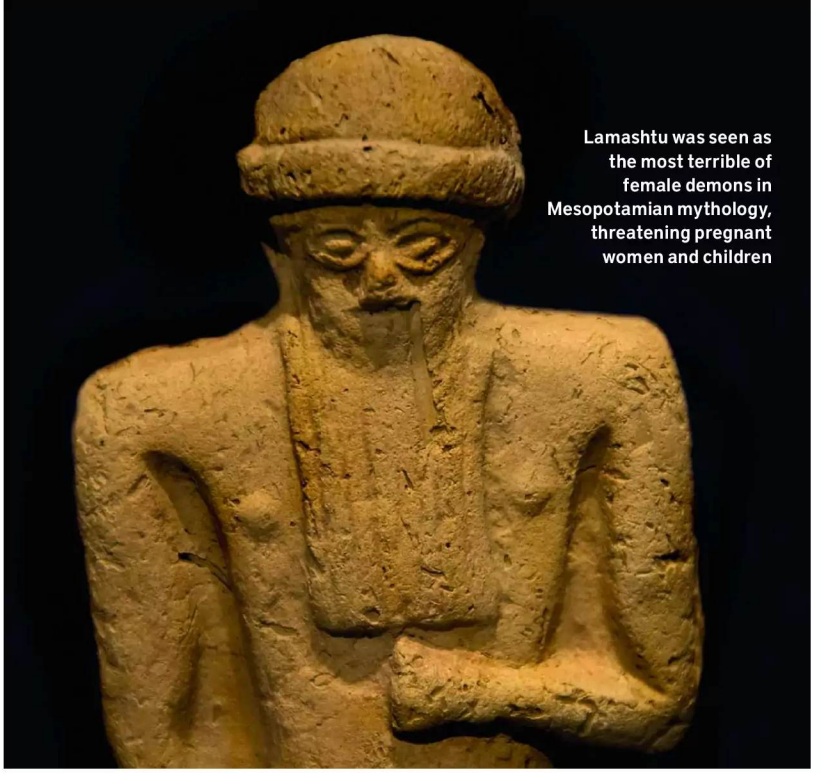
An Assyrian bronze relief from the gates of Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC) from Balawat, depicting a sacrificial bull and ram



Lamashtu was seen as the most terrible of female demons in Mesopotamian mythology, threatening pregnant women and children

an world had a lot to worry about. Their world was full of unseen dangers. They had demons, witches, and ghosts to contend with. Malevolent forces could afflict individuals or communities, and their symptoms –physical, mental, or social – had to be interpreted and treated.

Demons were blamed for sleeplessness and depression. Others threatened pregnant women and infants. Even King Ashurbanipal's grandfather Sennacherib was said to have been afflicted by a demon that left him "so miserable his advisors were afraid to speak to him."

Witchcraft, too, was taken seriously. If someone suffered from unexplained weight loss, dizziness, or persistent anxiety, a diagnosis of witchcraft might follow. Treatment came through rituals. Figurines were made and destroyed; incantations were recited; offerings were made to the gods. Exorcists were highly trained specialists who used a combination of ritual, medical knowledge, and divine petition to help patients.

These people worried very publicly, loudly, and regularly. Anxiety was given a voice, a schedule, and often, a proxy. "They assigned worrying to professionals and fixed times of day," Dr Wisnom notes. "It's not actually that different from what the NHS suggests that we do."

Ritualising anxiety

The NHS's Every Mind Matters platform offers guidance on how to manage persistent worry using self-help CBT techniques. These include identifying whether a worry is hypothetical or practical, writing worries down to gain distance from them, and allocating a set time each day to process them – techniques that echo the Assyrian practice of ritualising anxiety through structured lamentation.

But if the scale and solemnity of Mesopotamian lamentation sounds distant and weird, hang on for a second to consider how we've reacted to disaster and threat in Britain in recent times – since 1535, there have been over 500 national days of prayer in England and Wales alone. These were not mere religious observances – they were formal, state-sanctioned rituals in response to national anxiety.

In 1548, during the English Reformation, the government commissioned bishops to write special prayers and readings to be used across parishes. Congregants were instructed to fast, wear modest clothing, study scripture, give alms, and refrain from entertainment.

Charles II, in 1666, ordered a "day of solemn fasting and humiliation" after the Great Fire devastated the capital. But there were also days of thanksgiving when the nation had been delivered from disaster, such as after Trafalgar and Waterloo in the early 19th century.

More recently, in May 1940, just days after becoming Prime Minister, Winston Churchill approved a national day of prayer in response to the crisis unfolding in France. When news broke of the Dunkirk evacuation's success five days later, many saw it as divine deliverance.

Would it even be going too far to suggest that the banging of pots and pans outside during Covid was the latest iteration of lamentation and thanksgiving in a more secular Britain? Were we trying to hammer away our worries about the pandemic, as much as say thanks to the NHS and first responders?

Naming our fears, and seeking support from others are timeless strategies for resilience

The Assyrian and Babylonian response to anxiety was, in many ways, deeply pragmatic. It acknowledged fear as part of life, and sought to engage with it openly and communally. There were specialists to diagnose it, rituals to manage it, and no expectation that individuals should bear it alone. They show us that naming our fears, expressing them in structured ways, and seeking support from others are timeless strategies for resilience. As Dr Wisnom reflects: "Even the king of Assyria was admitting to feeling rubbish. Something we can all relate to."

The problem with this is in the practical application today – we can't instruct a temple of professional lamenters to take our worries off our shoulders. But maybe there is something basic here, in terms of personal delegation of worrying.

"One night I was very worried about something," Dr Wisnom. "Nobody was awake so I called a friend in America. He said to me 'Don't worry. I will hold your worries until morning' and it actually worked. I got back to sleep."

So if perhaps the method of delegation is a little alien when we compare ourselves to the ancient Mesopotamians, the underlying concept works. Delegate your worries to someone else, or something else, and you might find the demon within more manageable to deal with. ●

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ALAMY

CHRISTMAS QUIZ ANSWERS

It's time to find out how well you know your festive history...

Christmas Quiz Part 1, p36

It happened at Christmas

1. Removed the Stone of Scone in order to take it back to Scotland **2.** Jamaica **3.** The crew of Captain Cook's ship *Endeavour* **4.** The Byzantine emperor Leo V **5.** Samuel Pepys **6.** Samuel de Champlain

Reindeer and other beasts

7. *A Visit from Saint Nicholas* or *'Twas the Night Before Christmas* by Clement Clarke Moore **8.** The wren **9. b.** A giant goat made of straw **10.** That animals kneel in their stalls on Christmas Eve to celebrate Christ's birth **11.** Louisiana **12. c.** Hum the 100th Psalm – although only the pure in heart can hear them

Christmas music

13. Ralph Vaughan Williams **14.** *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* **15.** Hector Berlioz **16. b.** The tune to which it is most often sung was first recorded near Horsham, Sussex **17.** *Up on the Housetop* by Benjamin Hanby **18.** *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing* – music taken from Mendelssohn's *Festgesang*

Twelve days of Christmas

19. Bernard Partridge (1861-1945) **20.** Edmund Spenser **21. c.** A craze for acquiring and breeding exotic breeds of poultry **22.** Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* **23.** The right of certain individuals to wear gold rings **24.** *Contes de ma mère l'Oye* (Mother Goose Tales) **25. b.** Ring a bell for their food **26.** Johannes Vermeer **27.** Elizabeth I 28. David, Lord Burghley **29.** 'The Piper at the Gates of Dawn' (title of chapter; title of album) **30. b.** A drummer boy in the Union army during the American Civil War

Food and drink

31. c. Gingerbread **32. a.** George Orwell **33.** Eggnog – the so-called Eggnog Riot of 1826 **34.** Frumenty (or Furmity) **35.** Babycham **36.** *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle*

A section on Santas

37. EE Cummings **38. c.** He was disguising himself to lead a bank robbery in the town of Cisco **39.** the Martians **40.** Thomas Nast **41.** William Henry Fry **42.** L Frank Baum

Christmas Quiz Part 2, p80

Born on Christmas Day

1. The composer, Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges **2. b.** She believed it to be the reincarnation of the king **3.** William Collins **4.** Helena Rubinstein **5.** 'When Johnny Comes Marching Home' by Patrick Gilmore (1829-1892) **6.** Charlotte von Stein (the famous writer was Goethe) **7. c.** Charles Pathé

Proof of the pudding

8. Ladysmith, South Africa. The Boers fired a shell containing it into the besieged town during the Second Boer War. **9.** Yorkshire Pudding **10.** Alice in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* **11.** Harvard's Hasty Pudding Club, founded in 1795 **12. c.** EM Forster **13.** In a caricature by James Gillray entitled 'The Plumb-Pudding in danger'

Party time

14. a. Cesare Borgia **15.** Stravinsky, after the performance of *Les Noces* **16.** Syd Barrett of Pink Floyd in what was his last major gig with the band **17.** All three **18.** A giant, 1400-pound cheese **19. b.** Walt Whitman

Bah! Humbug

20. e. William Prynne **21. d.** Roald Dahl **22. f.** Robertson Davies **23. a.** HL Mencken **24. b.** Victor Borge **25. c.** Benjamin Franklin

The holly and the ivy

26. Thalia **27.** Christmas Day in the Workhouse **28.** Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs **29.** Horace Holly in *She* by H Rider Haggard; **30.** Ivy Compton-Burnett

Oh, yes, it is!

31. Widow Twankey **32.** Dan Leno **33.** Princess Elizabeth, later Queen Elizabeth II **34.** Slapstick **35.** Jean-Antoine Watteau

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