THE BOOK OF CHRISTMAS

EVERYTHING WE ONCE KNEW AND LOVED ABOUT CHRISTMASTIME

JANE STRUTHERS

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About the Book

– What is the significance of holly at Christmas?
– When should you make your figgy pudding?
– Why was the Old Lad's Passing Bell rung on Christmas Eve?
– And who was Good King Wenceslas?

Did you know that, long before turkey arrived on our shores, it was traditional to serve a roasted wild boar's head at Christmas? Or that our Christmases were once so cold that Frost Fairs were held on the River Thames?

Christmas Day was first celebrated on 25 December in the fourth century CE. But when should our Christmas decorations come down – Twelfth Day, Twelfth Night…or Candlemas? And why?

Packed with fascinating facts about ancient religious customs and traditional feasts, instructions for Victorian parlour games and the stories behind our favourite carols, *The Book of Christmas* is a captivating volume about our Christmas past.

About the Author

Jane Struthers is the author of over twenty books, including *Red Sky at Night: The Book of Lost Countryside Wisdom*, *Beside the Seaside* and *Literary Britain and Ireland*. She shares her 17th-century cotttage and garden in East Sussex with her husband and two cats.

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JANE STRUTHERS

In fond memory of my grandparents,
Maud and Leonard Struthers,
who did so much to put the magic
into my childhood Christmases

FOREWORD

Heap on more wood! – the wind is chill;
But let it whistle as it will,
We'll keep our Christmas merry still.

'MARMION', SIR WALTER SCOTT

EVERYONE HAS THEIR own idea of the perfect merry Christmas. It might be snowy or sunny, steeped in religious meaning or completely secular, an opportunity for total relaxation or some frenetic socialising, a time when old enmities are forgotten or new ones are created. No matter how we choose to spend our Christmas, it gives us another memory that we can look back on in years to come, just as our parents had, and their parents before them, and all the other countless generations going right back to the time when Christmas was first celebrated. And some of our collective memories go back even further than this.

In our artificially illuminated, non-stop world, it is easy to become cut off from the natural course of each season. In mid-December, especially for those of us living in southern Britain, we may not notice that the hours of daylight have shrunk so much that they have reached the darkest point of the winter solstice. Our ancestors, reliant on candles, lanterns and fires, felt gratitude and relief at the knowledge that the days would begin to lengthen again and the sun's strength would return. Their lives depended on it, and they celebrated the start of another year with

feasting and games long before the birth of Christ. Some of these age-old midwinter festivals still influence the way we celebrate the Twelve Days of Christmas, even if we aren't aware of the fact.

The Book of Christmas explores many of these old traditions and activities, from the Roman Saturnalia to medieval mumming, from the antics of the Lord of Misrule to the strictures of the Puritans, from royal excesses to the trials of keeping Christmas when there's a war on. The book tells of angelic visitations, wise men from the east, the star and the stable. There are crackers and trees, candles and gifts, carols and entertainments, feasts and treats, joys and tribulations. And, just like finding those final presents hidden in the toe of a Christmas stocking, there is a lot more besides – ancient superstitions, cherished customs, favourite Christmas stories, not to mention folklore, ghosts, sprites and strange legends. A blend of the comforting and the curious.

All the ingredients, in fact, for a delightfully merry Christmas and a happy New Year.

Jane Struthers
East Sussex

Echoes From the Past

The fairest season of the passing year –
The merry, merry Christmas time is here.

'The Merry Christmas Time', George Arnold

Midwinter revels

LATE DECEMBER, WHEN the hours of daylight are short and much of nature appears to have gone to sleep, is one of the most important turning points of the year in the northern hemisphere. It is the time of the winter solstice, when the sun appears to be stationary in the sky (and, in the higher latitudes, almost completely disappears) before the days gradually begin to lengthen and the natural world wakes up once more. It's the perfect opportunity to cheer ourselves up with a monumental party and, for those of us with a sense of the spiritual in the middle of the mundane, to honour something greater than ourselves. This celebration has been enjoyed for millennia, in one guise or another.

Saturnalia

Anyone who complains about the riotous nature of office Christmas parties, or who looks askance at the bottles of alcohol in other people's supermarket trolleys, might like to reflect that there is nothing new about having a wild time during the winter solstice. The ancient Romans were

particularly good at it, as they were with so many other things, and really threw themselves into their own midwinter celebrations, which they called Saturnalia. When they invaded Britain (the first successful invasion was in 54 BC), they brought their practices with them, and these included Saturnalia.

The festival of Saturnalia was dedicated to the Roman god Saturn, who ruled over agriculture. At the darkest time of the year, when many crops and plants had disappeared underground or died off completely, the Romans wanted to honour their god so he would be pleased with them and bring them good harvests in the coming year. They also had a sense of nostalgia, and Saturnalia was an echo of how they thought life was lived in the time of Saturn.

The festival began each year on 17 December, which was a day devoted to religious rites. Everyone went to the temple, where the woollen bands that normally secured the feet of the statue of Saturn were loosened so he could join in the celebrations, and the priests performed sacrifices. After this, there was a public banquet. Everything – from schools to businesses and law courts – closed down during Saturnalia, and no work was done. Instead, the Romans occupied themselves with the serious business of drinking, eating, dancing, celebrating and cavorting in as uninhibited a fashion as humanly possible. Each social group also elected a man who was the master of ceremonies during Saturnalia, issuing dares and overseeing all the jollity. He was possibly a forerunner of the medieval Lord of Misrule, who was elected to preside over the celebrations at Christmas.

Something else that marked out Saturnalia from the rest of the year was that the social order was turned on its head. Slaves, who were usually respectful and obeyed orders, became the masters. All sorts of activities that were normally forbidden, such as drinking and gambling, were open to them. The masters, whose word was usually law,

took the subservient role, serving food to their slaves and carrying out their wishes.

The Romans also exchanged gifts during Saturnalia but often specifically on 23 December, which was known as Sigillaria. Their gifts were more usually tokens of friendship, such as wax or pottery figures, and candles, rather than lavish displays of wealth which would have run contrary to the topsy-turvy nature of the season.

Everyone had so much fun that it's no wonder Saturnalia was gradually extended from a single day to a three-day festival, and finally to one that ran until 23 December. Unofficially, it often lasted longer than that, rather in the way that the Christmas holidays are frequently extended today.

The unconquered sun

The Romans of the third century celebrated 25 December as *Dies natalis Solis Invicti* – the birthday of the unconquered sun. In 274, the Roman emperor Aurelian declared it to be a major holy day in honour of Sol, the sun god. Opinion is divided on whether this was the start of a new Roman cult or whether it was a revival of an older Syrian cult. Either way, it didn't last long and the figure of Sol disappeared from the face of Roman coinage in 324, during the reign of Constantine, the first Christian Roman emperor.

Before long, both Saturnalia and *Dies natalis Solis Invicti* belonged to the past, and Romans once again had something new to celebrate each 25 December – the birth of the son of God, rather than the birthday of the unconquered sun.

Yule

Did Britons once celebrate a midwinter festival called Yule before Christianity became established? No one is quite sure. Some authorities claim it was a pre-Christian midwinter festival that originated in Scandinavia and came over to Britain with the Vikings.

Others believe it is simply an early name for Christmas. (The first recorded use of the word ‘Christmas’ occurred in the twelfth century.) The etymology of ‘Yule’ is complicated and obscure, but we do know that in Old English it was *geol* (plus many variations), and it may be linked with the Danish *juul*, thereby having some connection with the Danish rule of England in the eleventh century.

The name ‘Yule’ stuck in northern England and Scotland, where it is still more likely to be used than in the rest of Britain. Yule is also remembered in the Yule log – once the special log that was chosen to burn on Christmas Day, and now more commonly the chocolate roulade that is often eaten as an alternative to Christmas pudding.

Sometimes, extracting the truths about ancient festivals from the popular myths surrounding them is rather like trying to separate the individual ingredients in an overcooked Christmas pudding. They get stuck together, making it difficult to analyse them, and some have lost their original identity altogether and become something else. That seems to be true of Yule.

Making a date

WE'VE ALWAYS CELEBRATED Christmas on 25 December, haven't we? Well, no, we haven't. During the very early days of Christianity, no date was set for the birth of Christ and the Bible certainly didn't give any clues. In fact, many bishops and other Church elders disagreed wholeheartedly with the notion of celebrating the birthdays of Christian martyrs. That was pagan nonsense! The day to be celebrated was the anniversary of the saint's martyrdom. This is why the date for Easter (even though it's a moveable feast) was settled long before the date for Christmas.

Over the following centuries, various possible dates for Christ's birth were discussed by religious scholars, with many believing that it took place in the spring: 21 March, 15 April, 20 or 21 April and 20 May were all contenders. The conundrum slowly started to resolve itself, and by the fourth century only two possible dates were considered for Christ's birth, even though neither had been mooted in the previous discussions. Christians in the western Roman Empire celebrated Christ's birth on 25 December, while Christians in the eastern Roman Empire preferred 6 January. This period spans what are now known as the Twelve Days of Christmas, beginning with what is considered to be Christmas Day in most areas of the Christian world and ending with Epiphany on 6 January.

The burning question is why Christian scholars eventually settled on 25 December in the first place. There are two possible reasons. The first is that the Christian Church wanted to make a connection between the new

feast day and the Roman feast of *Dies natalis Solis Invicti* (‘the birthday of the unconquered sun’). Presumably, it was thought that people would be more receptive to Christianity if they were still allowed to have a riotous time at the darkest point of the year.

The other possibility is connected to the Jewish festival of Passover. It was once believed that Jesus died on the anniversary of his conception, in common with all the other saints. The date set for Passover was 25 March and therefore, reasoned the theologists as they counted nine months ahead, Jesus was born on 25 December.

Ultimately, of course, we don’t know for certain why Christmas now falls on 25 December. Neither do we know which day of the year was Jesus’s real birthday. It will probably remain a mystery for ever.

The Christmas calendar

ANYONE WHO COMPLAINS today that the Christmas holiday is too long might be surprised to know that it has always been a protracted affair. Our ancestors began thinking and planning for the festival weeks in advance, and made various preparations for it on set days, all of which were given special names.

The dates of the Twelve Days of Christmas were fixed during the Council of Tours (a meeting of officials of the Roman Catholic Church, held in Tours in France) in 567. Although the twelve-day period was one of merriment, only three days were designated as official feast days: Christmas Day, New Year's Day and Epiphany.

All Hallows Eve – 31 October

This was when the Lord of Misrule was chosen for the forthcoming Christmas festivities.

Martinmas Day – 11 November

A day of feasting and jollity, which coincided with the annual slaughtering of livestock in preparation for the winter months of hardship. Between the sixth and ninth centuries this feast day preceded the strict forty-day Advent fast that began the following day. The feast day of Martinmas continued after the ninth century, but the forty-day fast did not and was dropped in favour of the shorter Advent season that we have today.

Stir-up Sunday – Last Sunday before Advent

The Sunday in late November on which every self-respecting cook and housewife once prepared their Christmas puddings. Its name comes from the first words of that Sunday's Collect in the Book of Common Prayer.

Advent Sunday

This is the first Sunday in the Advent season that we observe today. Depending on the date on which Easter falls, Advent Sunday can be as early as 27 November and as late as 3 December.

St Nicholas's Day – 6 December

Not only is this the traditional day for children to post their requests to Father Christmas (preferably by putting them up the chimney), in medieval times it was the day when English choirboys elected one of their fellow choristers as a boy bishop.

St Thomas's Day – 21 December

This was once the day when the adult members of each parish would give small amounts of money to their poorer

elderly neighbours. This was known as ‘Thomasing’ or ‘mumping’. If the money wasn’t forthcoming, the elderly people were allowed to ask for it. The same rule applied to children, who were entitled to ask for corn or apples.

Christmas Eve – 24 December

In previous centuries, this was the final day of the Christmas fast – and it still is for those who regard Advent as a period of abstinence. It was also the day when people decorated their houses in readiness for Christmas by bringing in evergreens and the Yule log.

Christmas Day – 25 December

This is the first of the Twelve Days of Christmas. It has long been a feast day, and was once the day when people were allowed to eat meat and fish again after their long and severe Advent fast.

St Stephen’s Day – 26 December

St Stephen was the first Christian martyr to die following Christ’s crucifixion. His day is now more commonly known in the United Kingdom as Boxing Day.

Holy Innocents’ Day – 28 December

Also known as Childermas, this commemorates Herod’s slaughter of all children in Bethlehem aged two or under, in his attempt to kill the young Jesus. It was once considered a solemn and unlucky day within the general Christmas jollities. It was also the day on which the boy bishops, who had been appointed on St Nicholas’s Day, reigned supreme in some religious institutions.

New Year’s Eve – 31 December

Known as Hogmanay in Scotland, this celebration sees out the old year and greets the new one. The passing of the old year is often marked by the tolling of church bells and also by many traditions, including opening all the windows of the house at the stroke of midnight to let out the old year.

New Year's Day – 1 January

Traditionally, this was the second feast day during the Christmas period. Until the early seventeenth century, it was also the day on which people exchanged gifts.

Epiphany – 6 January

This was the third and final Christmas feast day. It commemorates the arrival of the Magi, or Three Wise Men, at the stable where the infant Jesus lay. The sacred festival of Epiphany was gradually overshadowed by the more secular celebration of Twelfth Night, which once involved much revelry and feasting to mark the end of the Christmas season. Twelfth Night was originally celebrated on 5 January but the date has slipped and Twelfth Night now takes place on what was once Twelfth Day.

Plough Monday – First Monday after Epiphany

As far as agricultural workers were concerned, this was the beginning of the new working year. From the fifteenth century onwards, candles were burnt in churches on this day to ask for God's blessing on all who worked on the land. Not that they did much work on Plough Monday,

because they were much too busy with a variety of enjoyable and traditional celebrations. The hard work resumed the following day.

St Distaff’s Day – First Tuesday after Epiphany

The men had their fun on Plough Monday, and it was the women’s turn the next day, which is St Distaff’s Day. This was traditionally the day when women took up their spinning duties after the Christmas celebrations although, as with Plough Monday, they were having so much fun that their spinning took a very poor second place.

Candlemas – 2 February

Until Victorian times, this was the day on which everyone took down their Christmas decorations. Candlemas commemorates the Purification of the Virgin Mary after Christ’s birth.

The Lord of Misrule

IN MEDIEVAL AND Tudor times, the Christmas activities at court, universities and in the great houses of the nobility were organised by the Lord of Misrule. He was elected specially for the purpose and he had a host of helpers. The general idea was for the Lord of Misrule to create as much merriment as possible, and often to whip up some enjoyable festive chaos at the same time. It was yet another example of the tradition, which stemmed from the Roman Saturnalia, of reversing the natural order of things at Christmas.

The Tudor kings were particular fans of the Lord of Misrule. From 1489 until the end of his reign, Henry VII's Christmases were overseen by not only a Lord of Misrule but also an Abbot of Unreason. When he succeeded to the throne in 1509, Henry VIII kept up the tradition of having a Lord of Misrule. His son, Edward VI, appointed the last royal Lord of Misrule, who was George Ferrers. Ferrers had his own lavish retinue, which included an astronomer, and one Christmas he 'materialised' out of a moon.

The custom of appointing a royal Lord of Misrule fizzled out when Edward VI died in 1553. Mary, his half-sister and successor, abandoned the practice but kept a Master of Revels to preside over her own Christmases. The demise of the Lord of Misrule at court encouraged the fashionable aristocracy to abandon the practice as well, although some well-heeled members of the gentry still enjoyed it. It also continued to flourish in the Inns of Court in London, leading to some very rowdy scenes. However, even these were quenched by the deluge of cold water that the Puritans poured over Christmas in the 1640s. Although Christmas was reinstated in 1660, no one had any interest in reviving a tradition that turned everything on its head. Perhaps they had experienced too much of inverted reality for that.

From Julian to Gregory

THERE ARE SOME strange anomalies concerning Christmas, such as why Twelfth Night was once celebrated on 5 January by some people and on 6 January by others. And what do people mean when they talk about Old Christmas Day?

The Julian calendar

All these mysteries are solved when we consider what happened in Britain in September 1752. Until then, the year was organised according to the Julian calendar, which was so-named after Julius Caesar who had instigated it in 45 BC. It was a solar calendar, consisting of 365¼ days divided into twelve months of roughly thirty days each, and with an extra day every four years. This was a vast improvement on the previous Roman system of a lunar-based calendar, with each year lasting for 355 days, but it still wasn't perfect.

The Gregorian calendar

Despite its flaws, the Julian calendar worked well enough to be getting on with. However, what had originally been tiny inaccuracies by a few minutes each year gradually accumulated over the centuries into a major slippage of time. In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII, who led the Roman Catholic world, announced a way to rectify all these problems. His plan included cutting ten days out of October that year, with the result that the date jumped from 4

October to 15 October. Why October? Because it has few holy days, so there was no danger of omitting any.

The Roman Catholic countries obediently switched to the new Gregorian calendar, as it was called, on the appointed date or soon afterwards, but Protestant countries refused to abide by what they considered to be a Popish plot. This meant that Europe was divided by two completely different calendars, which caused much confusion. For over a century, Britain held out against the apparently crazy edict of the man deemed the ‘Roman Antichrist’ before it finally had to bow to the inevitable. This came in 1752, by which time it was necessary to lose eleven days rather than the ten that had been proposed two centuries before, because the Gregorian calendar had ignored the leap year of 1700 while the Julian calendar had observed it. So, in Britain and her colonies, the early days of September 1752 duly ran from 2 September to 14 September. What is more, the official start of each year changed from 25 March to 1 January, in line with the new Gregorian calendar.

Old versus New Style

Dates from the Julian calendar were referred to as ‘Old Style’, while dates from the Gregorian calendar were known as ‘New Style’. In Britain, we still have an annual reminder of this switch from the Julian calendar. The beginning of the British tax year falls on 6 April (which seems such an arbitrary date), because that is the Old Style official start of the year when translated into the New Style of the Gregorian calendar.

Christmas and the new calendar

Despite its accuracy, the switch to the Gregorian calendar still produced a muddle in Britain because some people

embraced the new system while others clung stubbornly to the old one. This led to many disgruntled mutterings.

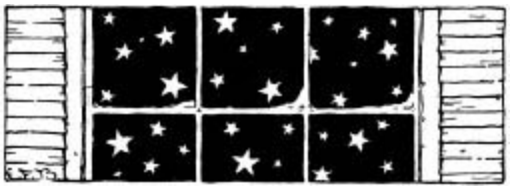
Traditionalists were particularly wary about changing the day on which they celebrated festivals. This meant that Christmas Day was still celebrated on 25 December, but some people observed it on what would have been the Julian date (6 January in the new calendar, which they called ‘Old Christmas Day’ because it was 25 December in the old calendar) while others preferred to forget the past and follow the new Gregorian date.

Even the Glastonbury thorn, which is associated with Joseph of Arimathea and traditionally flowers on Christmas Eve, was brought into the argument. Much to the satisfaction of a man called John Latimer living in Bristol, the thorn ‘contemptuously ignored the new style’ by flowering on 5 January, ‘thus indicating that Old Christmas Day should alone be observed, in spite of an irreligious legislature’. Yet, elsewhere in the country, cuttings of the original thorn were apparently flowering merrily on the new Christmas Day. It seems that the thorn was as confused as everyone else.

The Twelve Days of Christmas

The fact that the number of missing days was similar to the Twelve Days of Christmas only added to the chaos over the Old and New Style Christmas feasts. In time, Old Christmas Day (Old Style 6 January) became caught up with Twelfth Day (New Style 6 January), which gradually changed its name to Twelfth Night (originally celebrated on New Style 5 January). No wonder so many people regarded Twelfth Night as an opportunity to make as merry as possible – they could blame the mix-up on strong drink and too much dancing.

THE WINTER SOLSTICE



WE HAVE BEEN enjoying celebrations of the winter solstice, in one form or another, for millennia. It is clearly a very good time of year for a party. But the winter solstice also has important astronomical significance and is one of the turning points during the solar calendar.

The sun stands still

The word ‘solstice’ comes from the French, which in turn is derived from the Latin *solstitium*. *Sol* means ‘the sun’, and *stistere* means ‘to stop’ or ‘to stand’. So its literal meaning is that the sun stands still.

In order to understand the winter solstice, we first have to comprehend the relationship between the sun and the earth.

The annual path of the sun

From our perspective on earth, the sun appears to travel around our planet. The reality, of course, is that the sun is at the centre of our solar system and all the planets, including the earth, rotate around it – a discovery that landed Galileo, among other astronomers, in an awful lot of trouble with the Church in the early seventeenth century.