

CHRISTMAS NEWSLETTER 2020

Steeple Ashton WI

Happy Christmas to all our members



CHRISTMAS - How did it all begin?

We all have our own ways of celebrating Christmas, but how did it come to be on December 25th? Was it really the date of Jesus' birth?

It's hard to imagine now, but Christmas as we now know it was hardly celebrated at the beginning of the 19th Century. However, by the end of that century it had become the biggest annual celebration, in a transformation that happened quickly and came from all sectors.

Many attribute the change to Queen Victoria and it was her marriage to German born Prince Albert that introduced some of the most prominent aspects of Christmas, especially the tree and decorations and over time it became more and more popularised. Sadly, it could be said that now it seems to be a consumer-driven celebration.



BAUBLES

Baubles were invented in Lauscha, by Hans Greiner, who first manufactured them in 1840. Queen Victoria brought them to Britain in the mid to late 1800s



TINSEL

Tinsel originated in Germany as well, in the 1600s. It would be made from silver which was hammered until thin, then cut into strips.



LIGHTS

In Victorian times, the tree was decorated with real candles to represent stars. Necessity is the mother of invention and eventually, due to the fire hazard, electric tree lights were invented.

The English term Christmas - 'mass on Christ's day' is of fairly recent origin. Since the early 20th Century, Christmas has also been a secular family holiday, observed by Christians and non-Christians alike, devoid of Christian elements and marked by an increasingly elaborate exchange of gifts. In this secular Christmas celebration, a mythical figure named Santa Claus/Father Christmas/Saint Niklaus plays the pivotal role. But where and when did the religious celebration of Christ's birth begin?

The early Christian community differentiated between the identification of the date of Jesus' birth and the liturgical celebration of that event. The actual observance of the day of Jesus' birth was long in coming.

In particular, during the first two centuries of Christianity, there was strong opposition to recognising birthdays of martyrs or, for that matter, of Jesus. The first origin of assigning December 25th as the birth date of Jesus is unclear; the New Testament provides no clues and all potential explanations come from the Greco-Roman world.

In 221, a Christian traveller and historian called Sextus Julius Africanus was the first to suggest a date - more than 200 years after Jesus was said to have been born! He was the first Christian to create a Universal Chronology from the day of Creation to his own time. He believed that Jesus must have been conceived on March 25th, the day he believed the world was created. He then added 9 months which brought him to December 25th. However, the Roman Church didn't accept this date for another 100 years, in 336, during the reign of Emperor Constantine.

At the time of Africanus' date, the Romans celebrated the rebirth of the unconquered sun (or Sol Invictus) in December when the days began to lengthen, and had not yet adopted Christianity. However, once Emperor Constantine had made Christianity the religion of Rome, the Sol Invictus celebrations became mixed with the birth of God's son and as the date of Sol Invictus was December 25th, Constantine chose this date for Christmas celebrations. It also coincided with the time of Saturnalia, a time of gifts and feasting and maybe it was political prudence which made Constantine amalgamate the Christian celebrations with existing Pagan ones, thereby hoping to reduce resistance to the change. The date of December 25th remained controversial however, with the Eastern Empire choosing January 6th, the alleged date of Jesus' baptism as the date for celebration.

Will we ever know the truth? Maybe not. Christmas didn't become a major Christian celebration with its own liturgy until the 9th Century and by that time they were working with texts that were already ancient. But maybe the magic is the mystery of it all and regardless of its origins, Christmas in the West gives us a reason to look forward to the darkest days of the year and allows us to celebrate in whatever way is meaningful for each of us.

THE ROBIN - a few facts:

The European Robin, or Robin Redbreast as it is commonly known in the UK, is an Insectivorous Passerine bird - what does that mean? Apparently it means a perching bird that eats insects! Its latin name is *Erithacus rubecula*. *Erithacus* means they belong to a genus of “old World Thrushes” but they are now considered to be “Old World Flycatchers of the Chat subfamily.



“Robins appear when a loved one is near”

Robin
by Mary Flynn

In the spiritual world, Robins are viewed as a symbol of visits from our deceased loved ones and is a sign that they are near us. Whether you believe that or not, it's a lovely thought and a Robin singing by us when we work in the garden is a joyous thing!

The Robin's breast is actually orange, so why is it call 'Red'? Well, orange as a colour name was unknown until the 16th Century, by which time the fruit had been introduced. Juvenile Robins are born with mottled brown colouring and don't develop their full red breast feathers for up to 6 months.

The Robin is Diurnal, which means it hunts during daytime. It is relatively unafraid of humans and is drawn to activities such as when we are digging the soil, in order to look for earthworms. For various UK folklore reasons, the Robin would never be harmed, whereas in continental Europe, Robins were hunted along with most other small birds and are therefore more wary.

Due to high mortality in the first year of life, a Robin has an average life expectancy of 1.1 years. However, once past its first year, it can expect to live longer, with one Robin recorded as reaching 19 years of age!

The Robin's song is a fluting, warbling sound during the breeding season, when the male usually initiates his morning song an hour before civil sunrise and usually ends around 30 minutes after sunset. In winter, both sexes sing but the song has a more plaintive sound than the summer version.

Robins have the ability to sense the earth's magnetic field via the light that enters its eye. This is a sense which allows the bird to detect a magnetic field to perceive direction, altitude or location. It is used by a range of animals for orientation and navigation.

A Christmas Love Story

Alison Evans

It was Christmas 1965; I was 18 years old and having been to a private boarding school, was very naïve and knew nothing of men and love! I had 2 older brothers, but we were not a close family and with a gap of 4 and 8 years between us, not a lot in common.

I have always enjoyed singing. I remember once telling my Grandmother that I wanted to be an opera singer. Well no-one took me up on it, and it never happened. As it happens, I'm not actually fond of opera, but it seemed like a good idea at the time.

A lady in our local village in Berkshire started a group of carol singers. It was all very professional; we had black cloaks and the men wore top hats, and we sang under the light of a lovely antique lantern. The local paper, The Reading Chronicle, invited us to go for a photograph session in Reading. I don't know why they couldn't have come to us in the village. My eldest brother was one of the singers. I don't remember where he was that evening, but when we were making arrangements to get to Reading Tony Evans came up to me and asked if I would like a lift. "Yes please", I said. I didn't really know Tony; just that he was a local lad who came from the opposite end of our two villages. I discovered his Father had been in the RAF, so with my Father being ex-Army, we had something in common.

On the way back from Reading Tony invited me out to dinner with him as he was meeting up with some of his old school pals. We then began a 4-year courtship. Tony was in the Merchant Navy, so was away at sea for up to 6 months at a time. We corresponded regularly, and eventually, he decided to come ashore. We went for a holiday in Scotland together; to the Edinburgh Military Tattoo and some of the Edinburgh Festival events. I remember the journey home was mostly on the A1, and as we couldn't find anywhere to spend the night, we ended up sleeping in the car in a lay-by off the A1. Two months later he proposed, and we got married in January 1970.

As most people will know, we share a love of music, having both played in our local village Band for many years and also singing. 50 years' on, and we both love singing, so can't wait to get back to our choir evenings when life returns to normal. I often think back to that carol singing, and wonder what might have been if one of us hadn't been there at that time!

MEMBERS' CHRISTMAS STORIES AND MESSAGES



TRACY WILLIAMS:

I put out a post on facebook at the beginning of November, to see if anyone in the village was interested in producing a village advent calendar. I had a really good response. We've gone beyond advent but, who cares about tradition at the moment!!

My idea was to allocate numbers to everyone involved, who would reproduce the number in a lit up display, to be placed in either a front garden or window.

I hope the children (and adults) in the village will enjoy discovering the lights on their walks around the village.

The lights will be dotted around from Ashton Common to Southbrook Lane.

I'm sure there will be many variations and I'm looking forward to seeing them all.

There will be a spreadsheet in the village shop and in the Parish magazine for people to see where they are.

Can I also take this opportunity to wish all the ladies a very merry Christmas and a peaceful and safe new year.

Warmest regards

Tracy x

Ed: This will go on until 28th December, so why not walk with a friend to have a look!

SUE HODGES:

About 30 years ago we had what our two boys thought was a close encounter with a meteorite which had landed in our garden. In fact it was a Christmas pudding that I had tried to cook in the microwave and got the timing wrong which I realised when smoke was pouring from the microwave. So I opened the kitchen window and with oven gloves, throw out the very burnt pudding which was still smouldering when the boys found it. This story has been told many times at Christmas and we still have a good laugh!

Brent and I wish all WI members a very happy and safe Christmas and hopefully getting together again in 2021

VAL LATCH:

"We would like to wish all the lovely WI ladies and their families a very happy Christmas and hopefully a near normal 2021. Best wishes Val and Roger Latch"

MEMBERS' CHRISTMAS STORIES AND MESSAGES



MARIAN LITTLE:

When I was a child, my Dad's job was to cook the turkey and not having a big oven, but having 4 children, he cooked it overnight. He must have been tired because when he took it out of the oven on Christmas day, he had cooked it upside down! He turned it over and had a square shaped turkey breast to carve - at least we all had even slices!!

Another memory is of my 3 brothers and their Christmas stockings. By then I had discovered that Father Christmas was really Mum and Dad, but my brothers still believed in him. One Christmas Eve, in the early hours of the morning I awoke to the sound of whispers from across the landing and then a clatter and a giggle. I then heard Dad pad across to their room, a few stern whispers, then silence. Not long after, giggle giggle, clatter clatter! Dad padded off again. This continued for a few times until finally they were allowed to see what was inside their stockings. Foolishly Mum and Dad had given them all a Bagatelle game, where you pull back the handle and let go and all the balls shoot into different places, giving a score! The clattering had been all the balls moving around as the boys tried to investigate their stockings! A lesson was learnt for the future I think - only ever give quiet stocking presents!!

Wishing all our lovely WI ladies a very happy Christmas, however they spend it, and let's look forward to next year when we can have a Christmas party once again! x

PAULINE TILLER:

When I was a little girl, I'm not sure what age, I can remember waking on Christmas morning, looking across the bedroom and there, in a lovely pink cot, sat the most beautiful chubby faced doll, with pink cheeks and blue eyes. I can remember so clearly the absolute thrill and joy I felt - my head felt light and I just couldn't believe what I was seeing. I can still so clearly recall that feeling.

There was also a blue bed as well as the cot and when I was older, I learnt that one of my Uncles made the cot and another Uncle made the bed. All the bedding and the doll's clothes were made by my Aunts. I used to put the doll into bed with me every night.

When I outgrew her, I gave her to another child who didn't have any dolls so I hope someone else loved her as much as I did.

Maurice and I would like to wish all the WI ladies a very Happy Christmas and New Year.

ANNE LITTLE:

One time in America we were asked to a Thanksgiving Meal. I offered to take an English Christmas pudding for them to try. (Homemade by me). Anything, I thought would be better than their Godawful Pumpkin Pie. David got it to the table flaming beautifully, really spectacular. Went down like a lead balloon - they hated it. Takes all sorts!

Anne would like to wish everyone a Happy Christmas - 2021 MUST be a bit better!

ANN HUNT:

Keep cheerful, keep healthy and keep safe to all WI members and your families.
With very best wishes for a Happy Christmas from Ann Hunt.

KAY KING:

Our first Christmas as a married couple: My mother-in-law had insisted we go to her for Christmas lunch which always came before the Queen's speech, a tradition we looked forward to hearing. Now, we had made a promise to visit *my* parents - On arrival, my mother was very cross and asked "why are you so late coming? The meal will be spoiled". We had no alternative but to sit down and eat our second Christmas meal!!!

Happy Christmas to everyone from Kay and Malcolm.

BET HORROX:



Wishing all my WI friends a very Happy Christmas and a Healthy New Year and a chance to enjoy each other's company again.
Love Bet x

VAL WILLIAMS:

My Christmas has been spent in many places over the years, including Liverpool, Hong Kong, and of course wonderful Wiltshire! As children, my brothers and I were truly thrilled at the possibility of what might be in our stockings... the only gift my Mother could afford, with Dad away at war. We would spend much of the night awake, taking turns about to feel the stocking to see "if he had been!"

One of my funniest memories, was at a Christmas party that my parents were invited to after the war, when we were living in Germany. My brothers and I were upstairs with the other kids out of sight of the parents but we snuck down to look for something to eat... we discovered some lovely, sweet and juicy fruit at the bottom of large bowls.... our parents later discovered us feeling pretty unwell.... having consumed a lot of the bottom of the punch bowls!

Oh well, it was Christmas after all! Cheers to all my WI friends and I wish you a happy and peaceful 2021.

Val

Where art thou, Mother Christmas?



Where art thou Mother Christmas?
I really wish I knew
Why Father should get all the praise
And no one mentions you.

I'll bet you buy the presents
And wrap them large and small,
Then in the end our cunning friend
Pretends he's done it all.

So hail to Mother Christmas
The uncomplaining slave
And down with Father Christmas
That good-for-nothing knave.

By Roald Dahl, with illustration by Quentin Blake
(Created for Great Ormond Street Hospital's The Wishing Well Appeal in 1988)

(With thanks to Rosie!)

A SIMPLE QUIZ TO AMUSE OR EXASPERATE AT CHRISTMAS!

From Ann Hunt

1. How can a man go five days without sleep?
A. No problem, he doesn't need to sleep during the day!

2. Before Mt. Everest was discovered, what was the highest mountain in the world?
A. Mt. Everest - It just hadn't been discovered yet.

3. What two words, when combined, hold the most letters?
A. Post Office

4. If there are three apples and to take away two, how many do you have?
A. Two - you took them away!

5. A cowboy rode to an Inn on Friday. He stayed two nights and left on Friday. How could that be?
A. His horse was called Friday

6. How much soil is there in a hole that measures 2 ft by 3 ft by 4ft?
A. None, there is no soil in a hole

7. If it took 8 men to build a wall, how long would it take 4 men?
A. no time at all, it was already built.

8. What can you hold in your right hand but not in your left?
A. Your left elbow!

HAPPY CHRISTMAS EVERYONE!

A PANDEMIC CHRISTMAS

(Can you count how many songs are in the story? - Answer at the end of the Newsletter!)



Last Christmas, I thought it was the most wonderful time of the year, but this year it seems we'll be home for Christmas due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, my husband said, all I want for Christmas is you anyway, so it won't be so bad and at least we won't be driving home for Christmas, we'll already be here! He's always looking on the positive side!

Well, whatever the situation, Christmas time is here and we need to try and think about the twelve days of Christmas, the Christmas wrapping and maybe even a little rocking around the Christmas tree and at least for the children's sake, help them to have a happy holiday.

So, I bought the presents to put underneath the tree but my heart wasn't in it. Everywhere seemed a bit down and sad - do they *know* it's Christmas I wondered? - it's certainly going to be a bit of a blue Christmas at this rate!

The next day, we woke up to a winter wonderland and I thought how lovely it would be to have a sleigh ride - you could almost imagine the jingle bells as the sleigh came nearer and nearer... what a wonderful Christmas time it would be to be carried around Steeple Ashton in a sleigh pulled by Rudolph the red nosed reindeer!

So, like it or not, it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas one way or another and the children are getting excited and are hoping that Santa Claus is coming to town! That evening it turned into a very silent night as the snow continued to fall. Although a white Christmas would be lovely, I thought it would all turn slushy soon, but the children shouted No! Let it snow and we can build Frosty the snowman in the back garden!

While I can't say I wish it could be Christmas every day, I think it's time to step into Christmas and I'd like you all to have yourselves a merry little Christmas and remember - there's no place like home for the holidays, so let's embrace it, enjoy some mistletoe and wine and hope 2021 brings peace on earth to us all.

Merry Christmas everybody!!!

Marian





A LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Dear Members

Here we are again, another lockdown behind us, but still no chance of us getting together for our regular monthly meeting. Regrettably we are not able to have our Christmas Tea Parties after all. I would like to thank Sue Culverhouse, who had agreed to organise these. Perhaps we will get to do it in the New Year. We will, however be having a Christmas Raffle, and your names will all be put into a hat and the lucky winners will receive one of 4 prizes which we have put together. This will be drawn and details will be forwarded to you in due course.

Your Officers attended a Zoom training meeting this week to encourage us to be users of Office 365. This is a computer administration programme so that when we change our roles or leave the committee the new Officers will have a set of forms, information and records that they can refer to without having to find house space for loads of paper copies.

I have continued my projects during this last month, having created loose covers for the seats of our armchairs from an existing sofa throw, and used the rest of the fabric to make head and arm covers for the sofa. They are not of a very high standard, but it kept me busy and was one more thing off my 'to do/to be done by someone else' list! Now I am hoping to restring a footstool that Caroline Quartley put onto the Steeple Sells page of Facebook. I've never done either project before, but it's all in the name of education.

I wish you all a very Happy and Healthy Christmas and hope that 2021 is an awful lot better than 2020.

Alison

AND FINALLY.....looking back:

It's been a very strange year for all of us, the Covid-19 pandemic has thrown everything we knew up in the air and it is coming down in slightly different places. Care homes have struggled to cope and our doctors and nurses have had experiences they will never want to repeat. We have spent weeks or months away from our children, grandchildren, elderly parents and friends; birthdays have gone by unmarked, weddings cancelled and holidays just a dream. Our young children were suddenly at home with Mummy and Daddy being teachers and they didn't see their friends for months, very hard for those who had no siblings. And of course, our WI was unable to meet for the first time since 1949.

But our country and indeed the world has seen many disasters through the centuries and yet life has carried on, lessons have been learnt and people lift their heads and move forward. It is so important that amongst all the sadness and negativity we stop to recognise the positive things to come out of this very difficult time: a sense of community has come to the fore, with streets, towns and villages coming together to support each other and Steeple Ashton was no exception: two residents called a meeting in the pub in March to gather a list of names of those who could help vulnerable villagers; the Parish Council put together an information pack for every house in the village; the shop remained open, offering deliveries, the pub adapted to offering take away meals, SAGE the gardening group put virtual competitions on Facebook, the church welcomed people in for private prayer and arranged a socially distanced Remembrance Day service in the churchyard, the WI sent members quizzes and newsletters and when restrictions eased, held a socially distanced picnic in Acreshort Park. The village hall worked hard to become 'covid-19 secure' so it could reopen and friends and neighbours looked out for older or vulnerable residents. Halloween saw a pumpkin trail around the village but no trick or treats and this month we have a Christmas advent trail of numbers lit up in houses around the village. I think we can be proud of the community of Steeple Ashton!

Our High streets, already struggling, are going to have to change, so it is an opportunity for new ideas - maybe the loss of the large chainstores will mean a return to more individual and interesting shops, to make shopping a more interesting experience, rather than more of the same wherever you go - who knows?

The use of technology has become a vital tool to allow us not only to continue working, but to stay in touch and connect with family, friends and colleagues like never before. People of all ages have learnt new skills and found that yes - they can do it! Remember the beginning of the first lockdown? How artists and musicians from all over the world created amazing performances through video links, people seemed to want to help each other and to give something good in the face of this awful virus.

There was a great return to nature, with people finding comfort in walking out of doors, in woodland or just around their neighbourhood. Gardening became a major past-time for people who had never placed a plant in the ground - suddenly they were growing veg or flowers and creating beautiful spaces, as the need for a happy space became more necessary - and fortunately we were blessed with some lovely summer weather.

Children finally returned to school and they absolutely loved it! Many realised that actually school isn't such a bad place and that they loved being with friends and learning, certainly my young grandchildren said it was 'the best day ever' when they went back (so did their mummy!!).

As was bound to happen, things changed as the virus continued and our freedoms were curtailed for longer. People's patience began to wear thin and young adults found it particularly hard not to socialise and see their friends - after all, when you live with mum and dad and don't have your own home, your life is your social life, it is who you are and suddenly it was gone. No wonder then that as restrictions eased, there was a rush to get together and party a bit, it's human nature. But inevitably, restrictions have had to be re-introduced in order to control the spread of the virus and we need to remain patient for just a while longer.

However, As we move towards Christmas, there is light at the end of the tunnel - a vaccine. The light is still a small dot, but it's there and so hopefully we will be able to look forward to emerging from this dark period into the light next year. The committee will be relieved not to have to meet twice in one day in someone's garden (although we have now mastered zoom - hurrah!) And we will enjoy being able to go on visits and to talks again in company instead of alone in front of a screen.

As soon as we can, our WI will get together for a celebration and revel in the joy of just being together, chatting and catching up properly. I think food & beverages will have to be involved!

Until then, I wish you a very happy and peaceful Christmas and would like to thank all those of you who have contributed to this humble newsletter during this strange and difficult year. Thank you to Rosie for help with the quizzes and for all of you for doing them! Thanks to Kathy Fielding for helping to deliver to those without computers and thanks too to Alison who is always there with friendship, a steady hand - and a better memory!

Ed.

The end!



A Pandemic Christmas

Answer: 30 songs

LAST CHRISTMAS
THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR
HOME FOR CHRISTMAS
ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS IS YOU
DRIVING HOME
CHRISTMAS TIME IS HERE
TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS
CHRISTMAS WRAPPING
ROCKING AROUND THE CHRISTMAS TREE
HAPPY HOLIDAY
UNDERNEATH THE TREE
DO THEY KNOW ITS CHRISTMAS
BLUE CHRISTMAS
WINTER WONDERLAND
SLEIGH RIDE
JINGLE BELLS
WONDERFUL CHRISTMAS TIME
RUDOLPH THE RED NOSED REINDEER
BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS
SANTA CLAUS IS COMING TO TOWN
SILENT NIGHT
WHITE CHRISTMAS
LET IT SNOW
FROSTY THE SNOWMAN
I WISH IT COULD BE CHRISTMAS EVERY DAY
STEP INTO CHRISTMAS MERRY LITTLE CHRISTMAS
NO PLACE LIKE HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS
MISTLETOE AND WINE
PEACE ON EARTH
MERRY CHRISTMAS EVERYBODY