

'tis the season to be jolly



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Christmas is an annual Christian festival which commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ. It is a celebration which has, over the centuries, accumulated a number of traditions, one of which is a special Christmas family meal. In the UK, Christmas pudding has become its traditional dessert. Most families will have their own recipe, but it will include a mixture of flour, eggs, sugar, mixed fruit, apples, oranges, mixed spice and almonds. It does need some forward planning as it has to be prepared four to six weeks in advance to allow the flavours to intensify and the colour to deepen. This pudding has its origins in medieval times when it was more like a pie of flour paste containing beef, mutton, grains, prunes, raisins, wines and spices. However, by the 1830s, the pudding had become exclusively sweet and also very much the centrepiece of the Christmas feast as it had to be set alight before being served. This is beautifully described by Charles Dickens in *A Christmas Carol*: "Mrs. Cratchit entered – flushed, but smiling proudly – with the pudding, like a speckled cannon-ball, so hard and firm, blazing in half of half-a-quarter of ignited brandy, and bedight with Christmas holly stuck into the top."

Having organised dessert, thoughts naturally turn to decorating the house, and nothing says Christmas like a Christmas tree. It was the Germans who first had a tree in their house at Christmas. It probably originated with a popular medieval play about Adam and Eve where a paradise tree (usually a fir tree hung with apples) represented the Garden of Eden. Then, the paradise tree made its way into

German homes where it would be set up on the 24th December which was the religious feast day of Adam and Eve. The tree was hung with cookies of various shapes and lit up with candles, symbolic of Christ.

Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's German-born consort is generally credited with introducing the Christmas tree to Britain but it was probably Queen Charlotte (also German-born), Victoria's grandmother who brought the custom with her. However, the tradition of the tree did not go beyond the royal and aristocratic circles, until, that is, the press became very interested in the young Queen and her consort reporting every detail of the couple's life including how they celebrated Christmas. Pictures such as the one in the *Illustrated London News* showing Victoria, Albert and their children around a lavishly decorated spruce tree with presents underneath made everyone want to emulate them and once the tradition of decorating trees at Christmas took hold it never went away.

While decorating your Christmas tree you may be listening to Christmas songs such as Nat King Cole singing: "Everybody knows a turkey and some mistletoe help to make the season bright." Now, mistletoe has no real connection to Christmas but it was considered a sacred plant with miraculous properties by the ancient Druids. The chief druid would cut mistletoe from oak trees on the day of the winter solstice, the cuttings would then be divided and given to the community to hang above the doors to ward off thunder, lightning and evil spirits. Mistletoe is a hemiparasitic plant that lives high up on its host tree. It has evergreen leaves which stand out against its host's bare branches in



winter and it is probably this contrast that rendered it symbolic of fertility and life. Nobody really knows why it became popular to kiss under the mistletoe but, it is thought to have started in the 1700s in England. The Victorians seemed to have really enjoyed this tradition. Charles Dickens (again) in *The Pickwick Papers* writes that women finding themselves under the mistletoe "found it useless to resist any longer, and submitted to being kissed with a good grace." Today we all feel the need to hang a bunch of mistletoe in our house and, of course, conform to tradition.

Having prepared your dessert and decorated your house all that remains is to hang a Christmas wreath on your front door. Wreaths are a decorative arrangement of foliage in a circular shape that were originally used as festive headgear. In Ancient Greece they crowned victorious athletes of the Olympic Games. In ancient Rome they were given as rewards for military success and as a mark of honour. It is likely that these wreaths were kept as souvenirs and hung on a wall. Later on, throughout Europe, evergreen boughs were fashioned into wreaths and brought inside to be hung over doorways and hearths during the Yule celebrations of the winter solstice to symbolise the undying power of nature and the promise that spring would return after winter. Christians decided that evergreen

wreaths were a perfect symbol of the new faith and the wreath became a symbol of Christ's victory over death. The Victorians embraced the tradition of the wreath and made very elaborate ones with all types of evergreen foliage such as holly and ivy which would be embellished further with fruit and pine cones; not unlike the ones we still use today. Merry Christmas to you all!



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