

A VERY HERITAGE CHRISTMAS

Belfast

ULSTER
ARCHITECTURAL
HERITAGE

*Explore Christmas traditions,
fun facts & learn about Christmas
in Belfast in times past!*

#VeryHeritageChristmas

CHRISTMAS

is celebrated in different ways all over the world, and traditions vary widely across nations, regions and even individual families.



Christmas for many may be centred around the nativity; whilst for others it might be purely a time to celebrate family, friends, or to eat, drink and be merry!

The Victorians are often credited with having ‘invented Christmas’ but whilst many traditions were popularised by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, many more reach hundreds, if not thousands of years further back in time.

Through a Very Heritage Christmas, we will explore historic Christmas traditions across the island of Ireland and rediscover Christmas as it would have been in Victorian Belfast.

HOYFM.WAG.3361
Donegall Place, Belfast 1874
W.A. Green
© National Museums NI
Ulster Folk Museum Collection



Every year, it seems that Christmas is getting earlier! But the traditional winter festival calendar extends far beyond Christmas day, with many

festivals and traditions taking place from November running right through January.

Different countries celebrate different festival days; however Samhain is the traditional Celtic winter festival, which marks the change in seasons to the darker winter months. It begins on Hallowe'en and ends on 1st February. Many of these dates also carry religious significance in the Christian calendar.

Traditional Irish Winter Calendar



October 31st - Hallowe'en

November 1st - All Saints Day

November 2nd - All Souls Day

November 11th - St Martin's Day

December 1st - Beginning of Advent

December 24th - Christmas Eve

December 25th - Christmas Day

December 26th - St Stephen's Day

December 31st - New Year's Eve

January 6th - Feast of the Epiphany

First Monday in January - Handsel Monday

25th January - St Paul's Day



Christmas Greeting Card c. 1870 by Marcus Ward and Co. Image credit: Amoret Tanner / Alamy Stock Photo

A short history of Christmas

It is said that the celebration of Christmas began c. 350AD when Julius I, Bishop of Rome decreed that Christ's birth was to be marked on the 25th December. Based on the calendar used by the Romans at that time, this would have coincided with the Winter Solstice, which was already a time for festivities. Celebration of the nativity on 25th December slowly spread across Europe, and the holiday also then grew to include the days between Christmas and Epiphany, the twelve days of Christmas.

From the first Christmas festival, through to the present day, food and drink have remained

a large part of Christmas celebrations. Carols became popular in the 1500s, and by the end of the 1600s, popular songs such as 'Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly', 'The First Noel' and 'We Wish You a Merry Christmas' were all in circulation. Greenery, such as holly and ivy, has been used in the UK and Ireland since at least the late middle ages to decorate homes, churches and even streets. The first known indoor decorated Christmas tree was recorded in Strasbourg in 1605; but in the UK and Ireland, trees weren't popularised until the 19th Century.

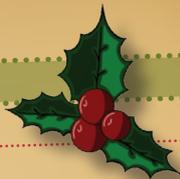
The Victorian era really helped to cement traditions that many of us still enjoy today, from Christmas puddings and Christmas cards to wrapping paper, as well as harking back to earlier traditions and reinventing them as part of Christmas celebrations (or just inventing them, pretending they were old!).



CHRISTMAS

Timeline

YEAR	EVENT
0	Birth of Jesus
c. 350AD	Julius I declares 25th December as Jesus' birth
c. 431AD	Christianity comes to Ireland
877AD	Alfred the Great declares the 12 days of Christmas a general holiday
1171	King Henry II of England spends Christmas in Ireland
1223	St Francis of Assisi produces the first replica of the Christmas stable
1519	The turkey arrives in Europe
1605	First decorated indoor Christmas tree in Germany
1647-1660	Christmas banned in Britain and Ireland during the Reformation
1747	First specifically Christmas recipe published - Plumb Porridge for Christmas
1837	Beginning of Queen Victoria's reign
1843	<i>A Christmas Carol</i> published The first commercial Christmas card designed
1847	Christmas Crackers invented by Tom Smith
1848	Victoria & Albert pictured with their Christmas tree at Windsor in Illustrated London News
1901	End of Queen Victoria's reign
1908	First commercial advent calendar produced in Germany by Gerhard Lang



Historical Period England / Ireland

Roman	Iron Age
Early Medieval	Early Christian
Early Medieval	Viking
Medieval	Norman
Medieval	Norman
Tudor	Norman
Stuart	
Commonwealth	
Georgian Era	
Victorian Era	
Victorian Era	
Victorian Era	
Victorian Era	
Edwardian Era	
Edwardian Era	



Irish Christmas Traditions

The island of Ireland has a number of different Christmas customs, one being St Stephen's Day which would have seen Wrenboys paying a visit to local houses.

The Wrenboys are a particularly Irish tradition, and they would travel around the local area in disguises, playing music and singing for money and drinks. They were called Wrenboys, as traditionally they might carry a dead wren, as well as a lump of coal or a branch decorated with holly, and they would sing 'The wren, the wren, the king of all birds, On St Stephen's day was caught in the furze...'. The origins of the tradition are unknown, with multiple theories suggesting variously that it was related to Cromwell's invasion of Ireland, or may go back to an ancient ritual of a sacrifice at the winter solstice.

Mumming was also popular in northerly counties, particularly in Ulster. Like the Wrenboys, mummers, or rhymers, would wear costumes, might blacken their faces or wear



St Stephen's Day,
Wren Boys, 1947.
*The Photographic Collection,
H055.21.00061 by Dúchas
© National Folklore Collection.*

masks, and visit local houses. However, rather than making music, mummers would perform plays based on the medieval miracle plays. There are still local groups who practice mumming or who would follow the Wrenboy tradition.



The 6th January is Epiphany, and can also be known as 'Little Christmas', or 'Women's Christmas'.

The date marks the end of the 12 days of Christmas, and traditionally this was a day off for women. Men would take over the 'women's work', such as housework and childcare. The leftovers from Christmas celebrations were used for a meal, which also often included sweet

treats. Tradition also has it that at midnight on Little Christmas, water will turn into wine, but if you stay up to check, you will meet with bad luck, or even death!





Castle Place, Belfast.
Courtesy of The National
Library of Ireland.

Victorian Belfast



In the 19th Century, Belfast was a rapidly expanding city and the population grew from just 25,000 in 1808, to 349,000 at the end of Queen Victoria's reign. In 1888, Queen Victoria granted Belfast city status by Royal Charter, in the 1880s, Royal Avenue was laid out, and in 1896 the construction of Belfast City Hall began.

In the Victorian period, there was a huge divide between rich and poor. Working classes lived in lower quality cramped housing surrounding the city



centre, with limited sanitary facilities; whilst the wealthier population began to move to the fresh air of the suburbs. The Victorians did not have the labour laws we have today, and child labour was common. Whilst an act was passed in 1833 limiting the amount of work a child could do, this still meant a child could work up to nine hours per day from the age of nine, or up to twelve hours per day from the age of thirteen.

However, a number of improvements were made to Belfast in the Victorian era, including the expansion of the port, improved access to clean drinking water, the introduction of electricity and the railway. Education also became more widely available due to free schools.

Victorians also pioneered a number of innovations, including photography, the light bulb and the telephone; although it would be a while before these were available to and affordable for the masses.



Victorian Christmas



‘Christmas has come and gone with very little difference between it and former festive seasons of a like character. In the homes of the comfortably rich, there was as usual the fat goose, roast beef and plum pudding, with the afterpiece of fun and frolic round the social hearth; in the abodes of the poor there was the customary cessation from labour, with such recognition of the event as limited means would permit.’

The Belfast News-Letter, Saturday, December 27, 1884

The ways in which people celebrated Christmas not only depended on local customs and traditions, but also on means and economic status.

Victorian Christmas 1858.

Illustrated London News.

Image credit: Antiqua Print Gallery /
Alamy Stock Photo.

Richer families could afford to buy decorations, lavish dinners and gifts, whilst poorer households would hold a simpler celebration. Those in domestic service (which numbered 8,000 women and girls in Belfast in 1901) would likely not receive Christmas day off; and would have to work extra hard to deliver the Christmas that the family expected upstairs.



A maid-of-all work in London, Hannah Cullwick, described her Christmas in 1863:
23 December 1863

*I got up early & lighted the kitchen fire...
Very busy indeed all day & worried too with
the breakfast & the bells ringing so & such
a deal to think about as well as work to do...
We got the supper by a ¼ to ten... I took
the ham & pudding up at 12 o'clock, made
the fire up & put another on & then to bed.
Came down again at 4...*

For the majority of people, however, Christmas did offer an opportunity for a holiday and to see friends and family. In Belfast, shops would close for Christmas day, and often the following day, to allow employees time to travel to see relatives.

Victorian Christmas

Belfast was a bustling trading centre, and all the shops would compete for Christmas trade. Many shops seemed to add 'for Christmas presents' to their list of stock to try and entice buyers. How about giving a table cloth for a Christmas present? Or getting someone's umbrella recovered as a gift? Whilst you could buy someone a smoking cap or a jacket made from otter fur, you could also get more regular Christmas gifts such as books, jewellery, games, toys and dolls.

People would travel up to Belfast from the country a few days before Christmas, to pick up gifts and food for Christmas dinner. The Northern Whig in 1889 described the coming of traders to the Christmas markets in Belfast from four o'clock in the morning, waking up the townspeople. When the market opened, people of 'all ranks and classes' from within the city and from further afield arrived to get the 'principal constituents of the Christmas feast', and 'by three o'clock in the afternoon, there was scarcely a fowl to be obtained... of the several thousand which were offered for sale at an early hour in the morning.'



Leadenhall Market, London, on Christmas Eve, 1845.
Illustrated London News, 1845.



“

Today, we associate Belfast Christmas markets with fun, twinkling lights, decorations and food and gift stalls, but you could get a similar atmosphere to the Victorians by doing a grocery shop running up to Christmas!

”



Beginning of Advent



In rural Ireland, the beginning of advent would not only have been significant in the religious calendar, but tradition also saw that it was a time for intensive cleaning of the home, as well as a time for preparing for Christmas day. Preparations could include decorating the home, smoking a ham in the chimney, or making the all-important Christmas pudding!

Plum pudding became associated with Christmas in the Victorian era, although it was a popular pudding prior to this, with it appearing in George I's Christmas meal in 1714.

Christmas puddings were traditionally boiled in a cloth, tied tightly at the top.



Mother making Christmas plum-pudding, 1850.

Image credit: Chronicle / Alamy Stock Photo

You can have a go at making your own traditional Christmas pudding with Mrs Beeton's recipe from 1861!

CHRISTMAS PUDDING (RICH)

1/2 lb beef suet, 2oz flour, 1/2 lb raisins, 1/4 lb mixed peel, 1/2 a grated nutmeg, 1/2oz mixed spice, 1/2oz ground cinnamon, 1 gill of milk*, 1 wineglassful of rum or brandy, 1/2lb breadcrumbs, 1/2lb sultanas, 1/4lb currants, 1 lemon, 2oz desiccated coconut or shredded almonds, a pinch of salt, 4 eggs.

Skin the suet and chop it finely. Clean the fruit, stone the raisins, finely shred the mixed peel; peel and chop the lemon rind. Put all the dry ingredients in a basin and mix well. Add the milk, stir in the eggs one at a time, add the rum or the brandy and the strained juice of the lemon. Work the whole thoroughly for some minutes so the ingredients are well blended. Put the mixture in a well buttered pudding basin or pudding cloth; if the latter is used it should be buttered or floured. Boil for about 4 hours or steam for at least five hours.

Average cost- 1s 10d. Sufficient for 8 or 9 persons. **

*A gill is an old measure equal to 1/4 pint or 142ml

**The average weekly wage for a London common labourer working a 10-hour day, six-days per week was 3s 9d, so this pudding would be almost half a week's wages. Mrs Beeton did offer an alternative inexpensive pudding recipe, although this would have still been one third of a week's wages for a labourer.

Christmas Decorations

The decorated Christmas tree had been first known in Germany during the 1600s, however it took some time for this to spread across Germany and the rest of Europe. Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, was born in Germany; and Victoria & Albert celebrated Christmas with some German traditions which included a decorated indoor Christmas tree. This was made famous in an illustration of the royal couple celebrating Christmas at Windsor in 1848.

Like today, there were no rules about what you put on the Christmas tree, but commonly gilded fruits, apples and nuts were hung as decorations, and bonbons, gingerbread, toys and dolls, as well as ribbons and beads. Other traditional hanging decorations included paper fans, rosettes, or paper cones which were filled with treats like dried fruit.

Candles or tapers were used to illuminate the tree and tinsel and glass baubles also became popular during the Victorian era. Around the



Victoria, Albert & the Royal Family gathering around the Christmas Tree at Windsor Castle in 1848.

Illustrated London News. Image credit: Historical Images Archive / Alamy Stock Photo.

bottom of the tree would be placed little houses, toys or a nativity scene.

In rural Ireland, greenery such as holly and ivy remained a popular decoration, or a single branch of an evergreen was put in a pot, rather than a tree. Paper chains were also popular, and a Christmas candle would be lit in the window which signified different things in different parts of Ireland. In some areas, it was to light the way for the Virgin Mary, whilst for others it was to show that charity was available at that household.



Make a paper decoration

Have a go at making some Victorian style paper decorations! Remember, you can recycle things such as newspapers or old wrapping paper, and give them a new lease of life.

You will need: paper, a ruler, some glue or glue dots, sticky tape and some thread for hanging the decoration.

INSTRUCTIONS



To begin, you will need a piece of paper that is roughly 2.5 times longer than it is wide. We used 10cm x 25cm, but you can make it bigger or smaller as you like.



Fold the short edge of the paper over by 1cm, then flip the paper and fold again by the same amount. Keep folding until you reach the edge of your paper, making sure to keep your folds the same size.

When you reach the edge of your paper, you will want all folds to be facing the same way. If your last fold shows the wrong side of the paper, cut it off.



Cut a long piece of thread for hanging the decoration. Double the thread over to make a loop and tie at the end. Pinch the folded paper in the centre to make a bow tie shape. Wrap the thread around the centre and tie tightly.



Put some glue or some glue dots on the edge of your bow tie. Fan the paper out and stick the sides together.



Repeat for the other side, so that you have now created a fanned circle. Turn over the rosette and secure your hanging loop to the top edge of the circle with a piece of tape. This will stop the decoration falling forwards on your tree.



Well done! You have now created an authentic Victorian style decoration! You can use these to decorate your tree, or just hang them on your wall for an extra festive flourish.



Christmas Food

From the first Christmas festival, through to the present day, food and drink have remained a large part of Christmas celebrations. Very early on, the Archbishop of Constantinople warned Romans against dancing and 'feasting to excess' on Christmas day!

Christmas feasts have been known to be held in courts in Ireland from around the 11th Century, and drinking to toast the holy day appeared in Ireland in a set of rules for monks from c.7th Century. In these rules, it states "If a monk vomits because of drunkenness... after drinking the joy of Christmas ... [and] takes no more than what has been decreed by the seniors, it does not matter."

In the 16th Century, Thomas Tusser described traditional Christmas food in England in his poem, Christmas Husbandly Fare:

"...Good bread and good drink, a good fire in the hall,
Brawn pudding and souse, and good mustard withal.

Beef, mutton, and pork, shred pies of the best,
Pig, veal, goose, and capon, and turkey well dressed;
Cheese, apples, and nuts, jolly carols to hear,
As then in the country is counted good cheer..."

Josias Bodely, an army officer serving Queen Elizabeth I described a similar (and even more elaborate) spread in Ireland in 1602!

Beef, turkey and goose stood the test of time as festive favourites, and they remained popular into the Victorian era - and of course to the present day!

One dish we have gladly forgotten is Plum-Porridge for Christmas, which was actually a beef stew with fruit and alcohol.



Christmas Entertainment

“ Did you know...?

In Belfast in 1847, a Mr Grant took it upon himself to make an enormous Christmas cake which weighed 4480lbs (2 tonnes, or 2032Kg)!

It was “studded throughout” with 100 gold rings manufactured by a respectable local jeweller.”

1828

Victorian Joke
What shoes are best for wet weather?

Pumps

1828 - Victorian Joke
Why is a lean monarch constantly worrying himself?

Because He is always a thin king!

Did you know...?

In the Middle Ages Christmas became a traditional time for gambling, with some countries only permitting gambling on Christmas Day and Boxing Day!



Victorian Game - The elements

The group should sit in a circle. One person throws a handkerchief at another and calls out the name of an element (air, earth or water). The receiver must name an animal that lives in that element before the thrower counts to ten, otherwise they must do a forfeit. No animal can be used more than once!

Did you know...?

Until 1751 the legal New Year in Ireland was 25th March, and 31st December was not widely celebrated. St Brigid's day traditionally marked the beginning of the new farming year and was more widely celebrated.

Did you know...? Belfast's first public Christmas Tree was displayed at City Hall in 1936. A tree was dug up from the grounds of Belfast Castle, planted in the grounds of Belfast City Hall and then returned to Belfast Castle grounds on Boxing Day night. It was decorated with balloons, glass bells, fairy lights and streamers. When the tree was being removed, the decorations were thrown to waiting children, who broke more than they got!

1848

Victorian
Conundrum

*My first makes clothes,
my second is without
clothes, my whole
is clothes worn out?*

Threadbare

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