

# AN A-Z OF CHRISTMAS COUNTRY CUSTOMS

**Cavan Scott** explores the origins of our festive traditions. Some are familiar, some forgotten, but many still take place throughout the countryside, bringing communities together at Christmas



**A** IS FOR ASHEN FAGGOT This West Country tradition, which still takes place in pubs across Somerset and Devon, is a localised version of the Yule log and has strong Pagan connotations. Originally a fertility rite, the faggot is a bundle of green ash sticks bound together with nine bands of hazel. On Christmas Eve it is burnt on a fire created by the last remnants of last year's faggot. When each band breaks in the homes, a toast goes up and cider is glugged. Over time, many of the traditions from old religions were Christianised, and this is no different; the use of the ash was sanctified to represent the wood Mary used to warm the infant Jesus.

**B** IS FOR BOAR'S HEAD For a medieval lord, no Christmas dinner was complete without the entrance of the boar's head, presented with an orange or apple in its mouth. The tradition came to Britain with the Viking invaders, where it was served in honour of the heroes of Valhalla and in praise of the Sun Boar. Today the tradition carries on at Queen's College Oxford, with the boar's head being presented on the same silver platter as it has been since 1668 and accompanied with a special rendition of the *Boar's Head Carol*. On completing the song, the soloist is presented with the fruit from the beast's mouth.





## IS FOR CHARITY

It was traditional on 21 December, or St Thomas's Day, for

the poor women of a village to move from door to door gooding, asking for doles of money or food to give their impoverished households a merry Christmas. The custom began to die out in the mid-19th century, although the act of other customs associated with the day survived longer. Unmarried maids used to peel an onion on the 21 December and leave it, wrapped in cloth, under their pillow. If lucky the divination would reveal their future husband in a special Christmas dream.



## IS FOR DEVIL'S KNELL

Since the 1400s, Dewsbury in West Yorkshire has

rung to the sound of the parish church's bells tolling once for every year since Christ was born, to remind Satan that Christmas symbolises the beginning of his end. In the last century the only times the knell hasn't been tolled is on the rare occasions when the bells were being cast or during the Second World War, when all church bells were silenced.



## IS FOR FARM ANIMALS

Many farmers believed that, for an hour over

midnight on Christmas Eve, cattle would turn to the east and kneel in honour of the Christ child, while bees would hum a carol of praise. In fact, so strong was that last belief that when the adoption of the Gregorian calendar moved every date back 11 days in 1752, the fact that bees weren't heard humming carols on the new Christmas Eve was seen as proof that the new calendar was Satan's work.



## IS FOR EPIPHANY EVE

The eve of Epiphany or Twelfth Night was the traditional

end of the festive season, and even as recently as the Victorian period was a time for one last party. The only real hangover from Twelfth Night is the modern superstition that you need to get your Christmas decorations down by 6 January. However, for the villagers of Haxey in Lincolnshire the revels still

continue in the form of the Haxey Hood. The men of the village battle it out with their neighbours from

Westwoodside to get or sway the hood – a piece of ribbon bound with leather – to either a pub in Haxey or Westwoodside. The custom comes from a story that 700 years ago a group of labourers competed to return the hood of the wife of the local landowner after it had blown from her head and begins with the ritual of the foot being smoked (above).



## IS FOR GLASTONBURY THORN

According to legend, Joseph of

Arimathea travelled to Glastonbury in AD63 to found the first Christian church on British soil. When his staff struck the earth a thorn sprung up, a cutting of which was planted in what is now the grounds of the ruined abbey. Ever since, there have been reports that the thorn blossoms at midnight on 6 January, Christmas Eve in the old Julian calendar. A cutting of the thorn adorns the Queen's Christmas table. ▲



**H** IS FOR HOLLY

The barbed leaves and red berries of the holly plant have long been identified with eternal life and protection in Great Britain. At first the Christian church took a disapproving stance to holly, forbidding it from appearing in churches, but the spiky leaves still appeared in people's houses, as the red of the berries was thought to ward off witches. In the face of such popularity, the custom was sanctified, the leaves taken to represent Christ's crown of thorns, and the berries His blood. Of course, special care had to be taken with such a powerful and lucky plant and so the old decorations, which were traditionally taken down on Candlemas (2 February), were never thrown away, but burnt.



**I** IS FOR IVY

Ivy was the female plant to the male holly, and another symbol of everlasting life and resurrection. Interestingly the plant, now seen in a somewhat friendly light, was originally mistrusted. Folklore claimed that the vine could bring on madness and intoxication. In many counties, such as Northamptonshire, it had to be countered with the beneficial holly; decorating your home with ivy alone brought bad luck in droves. Once again, you also had to be very careful about how you disposed of the ivy, but ever-pragmatic farmers used to feed the withered decorations to their cattle.

**J** IS FOR JOUGH-Y-NOLLI

The jough-y nollick (literally the 'drink of Christmas') was a special yuletide tippie on the Isle of Man. The drink would be brewed in a giant kettle that would be taken around the entire neighbourhood. Other traditional Christmas drinks include egg-hot from Devon, a mixture of egg yolks, cider and spices; a similar brandy and egg concoction from the Shetland Isles called whipcoll; and Yorkshire lambs' wool, a heady mix of ale, apples, sugar and cream. In Victorian times they drank smoking bishop, a steaming bowl of oranges, cloves, port and red wine that Ebenezer Scrooge raised as a toast to Jacob Marley's new position in the conclusion to Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*.



**K** IS FOR KISSING

Even to this day it is very rare to see a sprig of mistletoe inside a church thanks to its Pagan leanings. To the druids of the old religions it was a potent symbol of fertility, and the Greeks and the Romans regularly parleyed peace beneath its boughs. From the Middle Ages our ancestors hung it above the threshold to ward off evil spirits, although the Victorians helped give the plant its modern, lip-smacking tradition. In the UK, the main mistletoe event of the year is the Tenbury Wells Mistletoe Festival in Worcestershire, held this year on Saturday 5 December.



**L** IS FOR THE LORD OF MISRULE

This historic figure was central to British Christmas celebrations until the Puritans managed to ban the festive season in the 17th century. The Lord of Misrule was an elected individual who was charged with coordinating the seasonal revels of the Tudor court and in houses of nobility across the kingdom until Twelfth Night. At that time, the festive period saw servants and the poor given food boxes, and there was much drunkenness and celebrating. The concept of misrule celebrated this annual reversal of traditional social groups. In Scotland, the Abbot of Unreason played a similar role.



**M** IS FOR MUMMING

The tradition of performing folk plays on the streets over Christmas has been part of our country customs for more than 1,000 years. Since the Crusades a cast of stock characters has taken to the streets, including good old St George, who fights his arch-enemy the Turkish Knight. When one is killed, the Doctor appears in frock coat and top hat, to revive the slain. Taken very seriously in days of yore, the mummings have returned to popularity over the last 40 years, and you can watch mumming plays throughout the country, although the colourful, frenzied performers now often have their tongue firmly placed in their collective cheeks.

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## P IS FOR PLUM PUDDING

The familiar Christmas pudding descended from plum porridge, a mutton and beef broth thickened with currants, raisins, wine, spices and prunes and eaten with the main meat course on Christmas Day. By the early 19th century meat had vanished from the recipe and the dish had solidified into today's pudding. Traditionally the pudding is prepared on Stir-Up Sunday, the last Sunday before advent; the cook taking care to stir clockwise in honour of the Magi's journey from east to west to see Jesus.

## Q IS FOR THE QUEEN OF TWELFTH NIGHT

Up to the turn of the 20th century, every household in England tucked into Twelfth cake, which contained a dried pea in one half and a bean in the other. The men of the house, master and servant alike, were given a slice from the bean half and the ladies a slice from the pea side. If a chap found the bean he was king for the night and the girl who found the pea was queen. In houses of lesser fortune, finding the bean or pea was considered a symbol of luck for the year.



## R IS FOR ROBIN REDBREAST

The robin is surrounded by folklore. In some old country traditions, robins arrived in the stable soon after Jesus was born and, while Joseph was gathering wood, fanned the dying fire with their wings to keep it alight. The Virgin Mary awarded them with their fiery breast as a reward. In old British religions the Holly King of Winter – a wren – was killed by the Oak King of Summer – a robin – on the winter solstice. On the summer solstice the Holly King had his revenge. ▲

**N IS FOR SAINT NICHOLAS** St Nicholas, a 4th-century archbishop in what is now Turkey, is the patron saint of girls and boys thanks to various stories of his miracles raising children from the dead, saving girls from prostitution and giving presents. Over the years, in Britain he has become associated with the figure we now know as Father Christmas and, for the last 150 years, the Americanised Santa Claus. The figure of Father Christmas first appeared during the 1650s, when the Puritans banned the festive season. The wise old man appeared on pamphlets praising the revels of the past above the gloom of the present day. However, it was only during the Victorian period that this rather obscure figure from folklore took on the prominence that we know today and began being identified as a gift-giver. St Nicholas was added to the mix in 1822 when Clement C Moore drew in the legends of St Nick in his poem *'Twas The Night Before Christmas*, which led to the creation of the modern Santa Claus.

## T IS FOR OLD TUP

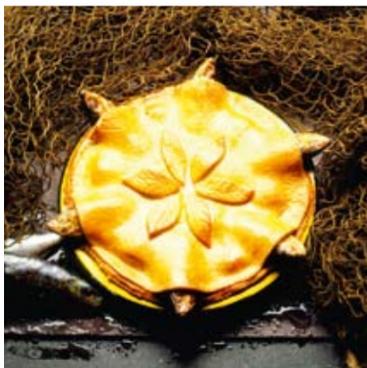
*Old Tup* is a folk song about a monumental ram. It's been sung throughout the country, but in the Sheffield area the ditty developed into a Christmas tradition where boys created a hobby horse and paraded through the streets. Other Christmas hobby horses include the hooden horse of east Kent and the macabre Mari Lwyd, a horse's skull bedecked with false eyes and decorated by ribbons that is carried around Llangynwyd, Glamorgan, to this day.





**I** IS FOR ST STEPHEN'S DAY

The feast of St Stephen is now known as Boxing Day thanks to the tradition of tradesmen calling on anyone who had employed them in the previous year to collect a monetary gift placed in special Christmas boxes. Today much of the countryside celebrates Boxing Day to the sound of huntsman's horns as, even in these post-ban times, the Boxing Day meet is a popular outing for hunters and spectators alike.



**I** IS FOR TOM BAWCOCK'S EVE

On 23 December in Mousehole, Cornwall, a brave fisherman by the name of Tom Bawcock took to the sea when the storms had prevented anyone going out to risk a catch. With no food for Christmas, the villagers cheered when Tom returned from the tempest with enough fishy fare for everyone. Today, the inhabitants of Mousehole eat stargazy pie, in which the pilchards' heads poke out of the pastry crust, in honour of his bravery.



**I** IS FOR UMBLE PIE The traditional Christmas feast certainly didn't include turkey, which was brought from the Americas in the late 1600s. Instead, goose and venison featured heavily in the festive fare of the rural-based ruling classes. Full of the spirit of human kindness, the lord would often let his servants and workers eat what was left of the deer, the umbles, such as the feet, ears, heart or tongue. These were often cooked up as umble pie for Christmas a dish that gives us our modern concept of eating humble pie.



**I** IS FOR THE VICTORIANS Much of our understanding of a merrie old English Christmas has more to do with the writings of Charles Dickens or Washington Irving than our real medieval ancestors. For the early Victorians, Christmas was an antiquated curiosity, but one that the English bourgeoisie were beginning to remember. Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* is more an idealised romance based on his own childhood memory rather than a chronicle of what was happening at the time. But when the Victorians did rediscover Christmas they couldn't stop themselves and soon we had Christmas cards, crackers and the sense that Christmas was a time for family. And, as Tiny Tim observed: "God bless us, every one."



**I** IS FOR WASSAILING One of the oldest festive traditions, the term wassail comes from the Anglo-Saxon *waes haeil*, meaning to be whole or healthy. Farm workers would visit the Apple Tree Man, the orchard's most prolific cropper, and pour cider over its roots while singing a toast to the tree. While this custom – which has seen somewhat of a revival in recent years – took place on Twelfth Night, there was also another wassailing festive tradition, which did not involve trees. This custom saw carol singers take with them a wassail cup, which they expected to be filled with drink in return for the song *Here we come a wassailing, Among the leaves so green*.



**I** IS FOR XMAS The first examples of the abbreviation Xmas being used can be found in 15th century ecclesiastical writings. The X originally represented the first letter of the Greek word *Χριστός*, meaning Christ. Of course, its prominence in the 20th century probably had more to do with the fact that Xmas has the same amount of letters as the word sale.



**I** IS FOR THE YULE LOG Every Christmas Eve, the men of the house would drag back the largest log they could find in the woods to burn in the hearth, lighting it, if at all possible, with a piece of last year's log. The idea was to keep it burning throughout Christmas Day and was probably a remnant from the Viking traditions of old, when a piece of wood was burnt in honour of *Yggdrasil*, the world tree, as a harbinger of good fortune. Goodness knows what the Norse warriors would think of today's chocolate equivalent.



**I** IS FOR ZODIAC If you're born on Christmas Day then you'll come under the sign of Capricorn.

However, according to many old English superstitions it is also incredibly lucky. If you shared Christ's birthday it was believed that, unlike Scrooge, you would never encounter a troublesome ghost and would also be protected from death by hanging or drowning.

Find out more about our **TWO** Christmas traditions with *The Victorian Farm Christmas Special* and festive plants with James Wong's *Grow your own Christmas* (For more info see page 88).



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