Victorian Christmas

Christmas was banned by the puritans and went out of favour for many years after the ban was lifted, people just did not celebrate Christmas. A Christmas Carol, written by Charles Dickens helped to re-invigorate Christmas in the Victorian era. Charles Dickens read passages from this book in the Cornmarket in Worcester. Some believe that Scrooge represents the feeling after the ban but by the end of the book Christmas is popular. In Victorian times Christmas was celebrated over quite a short period, not starting at the end of August as the big retailers would want us to do now!


Evergreen plants were brought into the houses as they showed there was life in deep winter when most people, especially in towns, only saw grey times with all the smoke around. Mistletoe was a fertility symbol; Holly had been seen as a sinister plant, but people saw it resembling Christ's crown of thorns, so it was included. The Victorians made lots of things for Christmas, decorations had started to appear in the early 1800s. Paper chains were one of the earliest decorations and they were made from whatever paper they could find, and flour and water was used as the glue for them. The Victorians started to make paper lanterns by folding paper in half and then cutting one side.

The early pagan Festival of Yule where a tree was cut down and burnt in the large Feasting Hall fireplace, lighting the new Yule log from the ashes of the old one. By Victorian times the fireplaces were very small, so they made a small Yule log and put a candle in it to represent the burning log and this was put on a table.

The tree was only put up on Christmas Eve. The Christmas tree goes back to the 15th or 16th Century in Europe, in England Queen Charlotte put up the first tree in 1800, long before the Victorians. A picture in Punch magazine showed Queen Victoria and Prince Albert with their children around a tree and that popularised the use of trees. Early trees only had small candles on the trees, it is thought that the tradition comes about because Germans walking through woods, such as the Black Forest, could see the stars through the trees, so the candles were used to represent the stars. By the end of the Victorian period, they were putting all sorts of things on the tree, like dried fruit, gingerbread, and cones of sweets for the children.
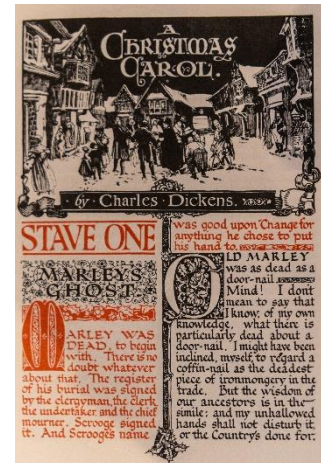
It is thought that stockings were hung by the fire from the late 18th Century. St Nicholas was often depicted riding across the sky on a white horse and he threw coins across the rooftops which went down the chimneys and people found the money in the morning. Unlike Father Christmas St Nicholas never entered a house, but Black Peter followed him, and he would hunt down the naughty children. He did enter the houses to track them down and beat them. Parents would leave a coin in the stocking for the children and that has come down the years to the gold chocolate coins that are given now. Fruit and nuts were also left in the stockings, and this meant that the children would enter the new year with money and food to sustain them.

After opening the stockings, the Victorians would usually walk to church, making a pilgrimage, like early Christians. After church it was the Christmas dinner, roast meat (normally goose as turkey was not popular at the time), roast potatoes, vegetables such as sprouts, stuffing and gravy. Dessert followed, the Christmas pudding, this could have come from plum pudding or figgy pudding. The Victorians started to put things in the pudding like silver coins or rings for good luck. The setting fire of the pudding goes back to the Yule log and the sun rising as the days lengthen.

After dinner they would play games like the Handkerchief game where a footstool was placed on the ground and a handkerchief placed on top of it. Each person then had to hold their right ear with their left hand and hold their left foot with their right hand. Then they had to try to pick up the handkerchief with their mouth. Another suggested game was Snapdragon. Here a bowl of alcohol had dried fruit, such as currants, put in it. The winner was the person to get the most currants out of the bowl. Oh, did I mention that they set fire to the alcohol before trying to get the fruit out!

Tom Smith invented crackers and Henry Cole invented the Christmas card in the 1840s. Henry Cole did so he could send a message to friends to wish them a Merry Christmas. The first card showed a family toasting the recipient of the card with alcohol, including young children. For some reason this was condemned by both the Temperance Society and the Salvation Army. The robin soon became the most popular illustration on the front of the card. The earliest cards were postcards not folded cards.

Some believe that the Victorians invented the Pantomime, which was based on a moral story with lots of fun, like Christmas story. Others believe that they could also have come from the medieval Mummers plays.

Christmas finished on Boxing Day and then they went back to work.