The History of Christmas Traditions

Christmas is a time for traditions, whether they be food-related, about giving gifts and presents, or playing games. It is a time for socialising with family and friends and showing compassion, peace and goodwill towards others. It is a time of giving and sending cards. But it was not always like this.

Christmas Cards

In 1843, Sir Henry Cole was a civil servant in the Public Record Office, which is now known as the Post Office. He started to think about how the office could be used more by the ordinary person.

Glossary
- Civil servant - someone who works for the government.

Together with his artist friend, John Horsley, he designed and produced the first Christmas card. They sold it for one shilling, which is the same as 5p today. This was a lot of money in the 1800s and unfortunately no more than a thousand cards were sold.

Mince Pies

The fruit-filled mince pie is a firm favourite on the Christmas dinner table, but they were originally filled with meat, like lamb, hence the word 'mince' in their name. The pastry of the mince pie was oval-shaped to represent the manger in which the baby Jesus was laid. The pastry top represented the cloths the baby was wrapped in. During the Stuart and Georgian eras, people used mince pies to show off their wealth at their dinner parties by serving mince pies in unusual shapes, such as hearts and stars. This proved that they could afford the very best pastry chefs.

Carol Singing

Carols were originally pagan songs sung during the winter solstice celebrations. Pagans would sing and dance during the celebrations, and in fact the word 'carol' means a dance or a song of praise or joy.

In England in 1426, a Shropshire chaplain named John Awdley listed five carols of Christmas written in English. These songs were likely to be sung by wassailers. These were groups of people who would travel from house to house, singing seasonal songs in exchange for gifts. These later became known as carol singers, who often collect money for charity.

The Time of No Christmas

In 1649, after King Charles I was executed, Oliver Cromwell led Britain as Lord Protector. Parliament did not approve of the merrymaking which occurred at Christmastime so Cromwell supported Parliament banning carol singing, Christmas puddings, Yule logs and nativity scenes. In 1660, King Charles II was on the English throne and Christmas was returned to Britain once more.

Questions

1. Give three examples of what the author says happens at Christmas.

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. When was the first Christmas card made? Tick one.

   1840 ☐

   1843 ☐

   1834 ☐

3. Why was John Horsley a suitable person for Cole to work with on the first Christmas card?

   _____

   _____

4. Why were so few Christmas cards sold when they were first produced?

   _____

   _____

5. How were the fillings of mince pies different to the ones sold today?

   _____

   _____

6. Match these sentences.

The pastry case of a mince pie	were a sign of wealth.
The pastry top	represented the manger.
Mince pies	represented the cloths wrapped around the baby Jesus.

7. Look at the section about carol singing. What are the main impressions you have about early carols?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

8. Which King of England allowed Christmas celebrations to return in 1660?

_____

Answers

1. Give three examples of what the author says happens at Christmas.

   Accept any three from the following:

   Christmas is a time for traditions whether they be food-related, gifts and present giving or games. It is a time for socialising with family and friends, showing compassion, peace and goodwill towards others. It is a time of giving and sending cards.

2. When was the first Christmas card made? Tick one.

   1840 ☐

   1843 ☑

   1834 ☐

3. Why was John Horsley a suitable person for Cole to work with on the first Christmas card?

   John Horsley was a suitable person for Cole to work with on the first Christmas card because he was an artist and Christmas cards have pictures on them.

4. Why were so few Christmas cards sold when they were first produced?

   Not many Christmas cards were sold, the first time one was produced because they were expensive for the 1800s at 1 shilling per card.

5. How were the fillings of mince pies different to the ones sold today?

   The fillings of mince pies used to be lamb but now they are filled with fruit.

6. Match these sentences.

The pastry case of a mince pie	were a sign of wealth.
The pastry top	represented the manger.
Mince pies	represented the cloths wrapped around the baby Jesus.

(The pastry case of a mince pie → represented the manger. The pastry top → represented the cloths wrapped around the baby Jesus. Mince pies → were a sign of wealth.)

7. Look at the section about carol singing. What are the main impressions you have about early carols?

Children's own responses, such as: The impressions I get about the early carols is that they were not for Christmas in the first place but used for pagan celebrations of the winter solstice. They became popular again in 1426 when wassailers went from house to house singing seasonal songs in exchange for gifts.

8. Which King of England allowed Christmas celebrations to return in 1660?

Charles II allowed Christmas celebrations to return in 1660.

The History of Christmas Traditions

Christmas is a time for traditions: many people socialise with family and friends, enjoy food and drink and show compassion, peace and goodwill towards others. It is a time for sending and receiving cards. However, each of these traditions has a fascinating history.

Christmas Cards

In 1843, Sir Henry Cole, a civil servant in the newly established Public Record Office, now known as the Post Office, wondered how this department could be used more by ordinary people. Cole, together with his artist friend, John Horsley, designed and produced the first Christmas card. Cards could be purchased for a shilling, which is equal to 5p today. This was a lot of money in the nineteenth century and unfortunately the cards were not popular and no more than a thousand cards were sold. Due to the railway network becoming larger in the 1860s, a cheaper postal service could be offered, and together with improved printing methods, the amount of Christmas cards produced increased dramatically. In addition, in the 1870s, the cost of sending cards dropped to half a penny making it much more affordable.

Mince Pie

The fruit-filled mince pie is a traditional treat on the Christmas table, but they were originally filled with meat, like lamb. The pastry casing of the mince pie was oval-shaped because it represented the manger in which the baby Jesus was laid in Bethlehem. The pastry top was a symbol of the strips of cloth the baby was wrapped in.

During the Stuart and Georgian period, the humble mince pie was a sign of status. People used mince pies to demonstrate their wealth at their elaborate parties by offering heart-shaped and star-shaped mince pies to impress their guests. This proved that the host could afford the very best pastry chefs.

Carol Singing

Pagan celebrations during the winter solstice would involve singing and dancing. The word 'carol' means a dance or a song of praise or joy. With the birth of Christianity, recognition of Jesus' birth led to carols being written with a religious theme. Christmas carols can be traced back to the fourth century in Rome, where Latin hymns were sung at Christmas. As Latin was only spoken by a select group of people, carol singing did not become popular. In the 13th century, carol singing became popular when Saint Francis of Assisi began promoting Christmas songs in a range of European languages so everyone could understand them.

In England in 1426, a Shropshire chaplain named John Awdley listed five carols of Christmas written in English. These songs were likely to be sung by wassailers. These groups of people would travel between houses, singing festive songs in exchange for gifts. They would later become known as carol singers and today, they often collect money for charity.

The Time of No Christmas

In 1649, after King Charles I was executed, Oliver Cromwell led Britain as Lord Protector. Puritan members of parliament did not like the way people celebrated because they believed it was sinful. This resulted in Parliament proposing that Christmas should be banned. Cromwell supported Parliament, so as a result singing carols, eating Christmas puddings, having Yule logs and displaying nativity scenes were forbidden. Instead, people were ordered to reflect solemnly on the true meaning of Christmas. However, in 1660, King Charles II was restored to the English throne and Christmas was celebrated once more.

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Questions

1. What is the purpose of the first paragraph?

   _____

   _____

2. What impression do you get about the type of person who regularly used the Public Record Office? Explain how you know.

   _____

   _____

   _____

3. Complete these sentences.

   In 1843, _____

   _____ .

   In the 1860s, _____

   _____ .

   In the 1870s, _____

   _____ .

4. Why do you think mince pies have that name?

   _____

   _____

5. Tick true or false for the following statements. Rewrite the false statements below.

	True	False
The top of a mince pie represented the stable.		
The base of the mince pie represented the manger.		
Mince pies used to be filled with minced fruit.		
Rich people exhibited how much money they had with mince pies.		

_____

_____

_____

_____

6. What impact did St Francis of Assisi have on the popularity of Christmas carols?

_____

_____

_____

7. What was a wassailer and do we still have them?

_____

_____

8. Look at this section:

    Puritan members of parliament did not like the way people celebrated because they believed it was sinful. This resulted in Parliament proposing that Christmas should be banned.

    Write two impressions this gives you about Britain during the 1600s.

    a) _____

    _____

    b) _____

    _____

9. Find and copy one word which suggests things returned to normal in 1660.

    _____

10. Explain which traditions surprise you regarding their origins.

    _____

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Answers

1. What is the purpose of the first paragraph?

   The purpose of the first paragraph is to act as an introduction to the rest of the text; it informs the reader with what the text is going to be about.

2. What impression do you get about the type of person who regularly used the Public Record Office? Explain how you know.

   The impression I get about the type of person who regularly used the Public Record Office is that they were wealthy. This is because the author has used the word 'ordinary' to describe the type of person Cole wanted to use the office.

3. Complete these sentences.

   In 1843, **Sir Henry Cole created the first Christmas card with his friend John Horsley.**
   In the 1860s, **the railway network became larger and improved printing methods meant that not just the wealthy could afford to send Christmas cards.**
   In the 1870s, **the cost of sending cards dropped to half a penny making it much more affordable.**

4. Why do you think mince pies have that name?

   Mince pies have that name because, originally, they had minced lamb inside them but now they have fruit.

5. Tick true or false for the following statements. Rewrite the false statements below.

	True	False
The top of a mince pie represented the stable.		✓
The base of the mince pie represented the manger.	✓	
Mince pies used to be filled with minced fruit.		✓
Rich people exhibited how much money they had with mince pies.	✓	

The top of a mince pie represented the manger the baby Jesus lay in.

Mince pies used to be filled with minced lamb.

6. What impact did St Francis of Assisi have on the popularity of Christmas carols?

    Saint Francis helped make Christmas carols more popular because he had them translated into people's native languages, whereas before they had been written in Latin and not many people could read Latin.

7. What was a wassailer and do we still have them?

    Wassailers were groups of people who would travel between houses, singing festive songs in exchange for gifts. We still have them except now they are called carol singers and often collect money for charity.

8. Look at this section:

    Puritan members of parliament did not like the way people celebrated because they believed it was sinful. This resulted in Parliament proposing that Christmas should be banned.

    Write two impressions this gives you about Britain during the 1600s.

    a) **That Parliament did not like how people celebrated Christmas.**

    b) **That Parliament thought that the way people celebrated Christmas was wrong and immoral.**

9. Find and copy one word which suggests things returned to normal in 1660.

    restored

10. Explain which traditions surprise you regarding their origins.

    Pupil's own response.

The History of Christmas Traditions

Christmas is often associated with a number of traditions: socialising with family and friends, preparing and sharing meals, everyone showing compassion and peace and goodwill towards all. During Christmas, people show gratitude for one another through exchanging gifts, sending cards and being kind. But from where do these traditions originate?

Christmas Cards

In 1843, Sir Henry Cole was a civil servant working in the newly established Public Record Office, otherwise known as the Post Office. Cole began to realise that the office was mainly frequented by the higher end of society. He wondered how the office could be made more useful and more accessible to ordinary people. After contemplating this issue for some time, an idea emerged.

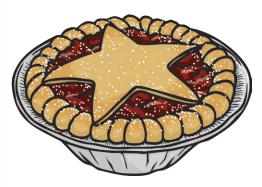Cole and his artist friend John Horsley designed and produced the first Christmas card. Each card could be purchased for a shilling, which equates to 5p today. This was a considerable amount of money during the Victorian era and, consequently, the cards were not popular and no more than a thousand cards were sold.

However, due to the expansion of the railway network throughout Britain in the 1860s, less affluent members of society had the opportunity to use a cheaper postal service which, together with improved printing methods, meant that Christmas cards became increasingly fashionable with larger numbers of cards being produced in the 1860s. Furthermore, the 1870s witnessed a dramatic reduction in the cost of sending cards as a stamp cost only half a penny.

Mince Pies

The sight of a fruit-filled mince pie is associated with the Christmas table. Traditionally, they were filled with meat, like lamb, as opposed to minced fruit. The oval-shaped outer casing of the mince pie was symbolic of the manger in which the baby Jesus was laid in Bethlehem; the pastry top was a symbol of the swaddling cloths in which he was wrapped.

During the Stuart and Georgian eras, it was popular for the upper and middle classes to demonstrate their wealth. The common mince pie was one way people could do this. The wealthy used mince pies to exhibit their affluence at elaborate parties by offering heart-shaped and star-shaped versions; the more inventive the shape, the more likely people were to impress their guests. Some were even known to fit together like a jigsaw. This flagrant exhibitionism proved the host could afford the very best pastry chefs.

Carol Singing

Carol singing has its origins in the pre-Christian era. Pagan celebrations during the winter solstice would involve singing and dancing. This is where the word 'carol', meaning a dance or a song of praise or joy, originated.

The development of Christianity gave rise to the composing of religious carols, which can be traced back to the fourth century in Rome where Latin hymns were sung at Christmas. Unfortunately, Latin was not spoken by many people, and carol singing did not become popular until the 13th century when Saint Francis of Assisi began promoting Christmas songs in people's native language.

In England in 1426, a Shropshire chaplain named John Awdley was the first person who listed five carols of Christmas written in English. These songs were likely to be sung by wassailers. Travelling groups of people would go through the streets singing festive songs in exchange for gifts. They would later become known as carol singers and more often collect money for charity.

When There Was No Christmas

In 1649, after the execution of Charles I, Oliver Cromwell led Britain as Lord Protector. Puritan members of parliament did not approve of the frivolity and disorder which was associated with the way people celebrated Christmas. Parliament disliked the whole manner of celebration, deciding it was ungodly, resulting in a proposal to ban Christmas. Cromwell supported Parliament's proposal and consequently carol singing, Christmas puddings, Yule logs and nativity scenes were abolished. Instead, the Puritans wanted Christmas Day to be a day of quiet and solemn reflection. Shortly after Cromwell's death, King Charles II was restored to the English throne. Charles was known as the 'Merrie Monarch' because he re-established many enjoyable traditions. As a result, Christmas was once again celebrated with joy and frivolity.

Questions

1. What sort of character do you think Sir Henry Cole had? Explain your thoughts.

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2. What does the author mean when they refer to "people from the higher end of society"?

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3. From when the first Christmas card was made until the 1870s, what made it possible for more people to send Christmas cards?

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4. It could be said that mince pies have a Christian basis for their design. Explain how this could be so.

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5. What is meant by the phrase "flagrant exhibitionism" in terms of the context of the sentence?

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6. Explain the influence which Christianity had on carols.

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_____

_____

7. Identify two things we are told in the paragraph beginning "In England, in 1426..."

    a) _____

    b) _____

8. During the 1650s, what do you think life would have been like in England? Explain your thoughts.

    _____

    _____

    _____

9. Using evidence in the text, what do you think a Puritan in the 1600s would have done on Christmas Day?

    _____

    _____

    _____

10. Identify two facts which most interest you and explain your reasons.

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

Answers

1. What sort of character do you think Sir Henry Cole had? Explain your thoughts.
Children's own responses, such as: I think Sir Henry Cole had a good character because he wanted more 'ordinary' people to find the Public Record Office useful to make it more accessible to all kinds of people.

2. What does the author mean when they refer to "people from the higher end of society"?
Children's own responses, such as: When the author refers to "people from the higher end of society", I think they mean the wealthy and upper class people who could afford to use the Public Record Office.

3. From when the first Christmas card was made until the 1870s, what made it possible for more people to send Christmas cards?
From when the first Christmas card was made until the 1870s, the railways were built which meant Christmas cards could be delivered more cheaply and the printing methods improved so more people could send cards, not just the wealthy. Also, it was only half a penny to send a card, which was cheaper than it had been before.

4. It could be said that mince pies have a Christian basis for their design. Explain how this could be so.
Mince pies have a very Christian design because the base is symbolic of the manger Jesus lay in and the top represents the swaddling cloths the baby was wrapped in.

5. What is meant by the phrase "flagrant exhibitionism" in terms of the context of the sentence?
Flagrant exhibitionism means that the hosts of parties could show off how much money they had by having unusual shaped mince pies. They were being exhibitionists with their wealth. Flagrant means they were being very obvious about showing off.

6. Explain the influence which Christianity had on carols.
Christianity influenced carols a great deal because where the pagan songs were sung at the winter solstice, Christian carols were sung for religious reasons and were originally not popular because few people spoke Latin.

7. Identify two things we are told in the paragraph beginning "In England, in 1426..."

   a) **That John Awdley was the first person who listed carols in English.**

   b) **That wassailers sang carols in exchange for gifts, going through the streets and they would later become known as carol singers.**

8. During the 1650s, what do you think life would have been like in England?
   Explain your thoughts.

   Children's own responses, such as: I think life would have been very difficult in England during the 1650s because there was no king and Parliament and Oliver Cromwell banned Christmas because they did not approve of people enjoying themselves. So many things were banned, including food, so it would have been very unpleasant.

9. Using evidence in the text, what do you think a Puritan in the 1600s would have done on Christmas Day?

   Children's own response, such as: I think a Puritan in the 1600s would have spent their day reading the Bible or learning about the birth of Jesus at home because they believed Christmas Day should be a day of quiet and solemn reflection.

10. Identify two facts which most interest you and explain your reasons.

    Children's own response.