

The true spirit of Christmas

It's traditional at this time of the year to hear talk of 'the true spirit of Christmas'. Usually, that means a plea to return to religion and its proprieties. But actually the true spirit of Christmas had very little to do with the proprieties, or Christianity either.

Long long ago somebody calculated that there was a puzzling discrepancy between the lengths of the solar and the lunar year. One - I forget which - was reckoned to be 12 days longer than the other. So it was clear that this period at the end of the year was unusual and didn't follow the usual patterns.

What made this discrepancy all the more mysterious and, it was felt, compelling was that it happened during the darkest days of the year, when it had become usual to light ceremonial fires and sing and make merry to try and entice back the sun from wherever it had gone.

So the idea grew up that the 12 days of what we know as Christmas represented an excellent excuse to turn the world on its head and do all those things which were forbidden during the long and weary trudge through the rest of the year.

The 'lord of misrule' became popular - in fact it became de rigeur in many small societies. The abbot or the lord of the manor would be replaced as the boss for those 12 days by somebody else. Usually the new incumbent was somebody deliberately and wholly unsuited, like the village idiot. No doubt this release from responsibility also meant that the abbot and his lordship could likewise behave in ways which would have been frowned upon at any other time.

Eating and drinking to excess during this festival was the norm, as was excess in other fleshly matters. Whatever happened during those 12 days stayed within those 12 days, with no repercussions. (Or at least, that was the theory.)

Christianity was only too pleased to absorb the old ways and many of the practices of the old religion, superimposing over the old rituals the new celebration of what became known as Christmas. Nobody minded, as long as they could go on doing what they had always done.

We may not keep the old tradition of the lord of misrule these days - except in our choice of government - but many of the old habits are still with us, albeit in much changed form. Christmas is still a time of merriment and gaiety, of eating and drinking far more than usual. And the office party seems to have fulfilled the role of providing opportunities for the more lascivious practices.

The yule log didn't used to be something you eat, but a huge tree that it took two horses to drag into the hall. The log had to be kept burning throughout the 12 days, and before being lit it would be smeared with honey. The lighting would have been with 'need fire' - rubbing sticks together.

Evergreens are still vibrant even during the coldest winter and so represent undying life. So they have always been brought into the house to bring good luck and used in magical rites to ensure the return of spring.

After the Christmas festival is over, the greenery should never be simply discarded, or it will bring bad luck. Instead it should be ceremonially burnt on the 12th night. (Which incidentally was originally the time when gifts were exchanged, not the first day as we do now.)

Mistletoe was Sir James Fraser's famous 'golden bough', the most sacred plant known to the ancients. It was accorded magical properties because it brought forth virginal white berries just at this most propitious time when the old year was about to give birth to the new, and it also had the peculiarity of only growing on another host plant, a tree. This parasitic habit of living off another clearly meant it had to be female, and so only females could benefit directly from its powers. Men could only do so indirectly, through women. There seemed one obvious and rather enjoyable way therefore in which this might be accomplished. The rather chaste habit of kissing under the mistletoe was a Victorian invention. Before that, the activity which took place beneath its sacred berries was rather less inhibited.

It's interesting that also I believe by tradition, mistletoe is never allowed into a church - presumably because of its pre-Christian connotations and the power the old beliefs saw in it.

Gradually though, Christianity imposed itself on the old ways. For once though, most of the new ways weren't bad. Generosity to others at Christmas seems to be largely a Christian introduction. Carols weren't though - they pre-date the religious festival by hundreds or thousands of years, though of course Christianity claims them as its own.

Christmas cards are a fairly new invention, as is the Christmas tree which probably originated in Germany (like many such traditions) and was reputedly brought here by Prince Albert in 1841. They set it up in Windsor castle and it was naturally widely reported, and so set a trend. The first recorded mention is from 1605 in Strasbourg, where citizens '*set up fir trees in the parlour and hang thereon roses cut out of many-coloured paper, apples, wafers, gold foil, sweets etc*'.

So Christmas trees have always veered towards the tacky, thus unfortunately settling a dispute in the Thurlow household in which the master of the house demands that the tree should be tasteful and chic, whereas the memsahib is determined to chuck on it every bit of glitter she can find.

But then that's Christmas. However roistering, boozy, tasteless, noisy and sexually incontinent it seems, that's what it was meant to be. Enjoy.