

# English Christmas



Christmas is celebrated on the **25th of December** in England, with a Christmas dinner for the whole family on the Christmas eve or Christmas day.

The night of the 24th is just a quiet time which is usually spent with the family and very close friends, talking and drinking mulled wine and eating far too many sweets. The most important day is the 25th. This is when it gets to the fun part - opening presents! Unfortunately we don't get to see Santa Claus (we prefer calling him Father Christmas), because he comes when everyone's asleep. But in return for his generosity, some people leave out some biscuits and milk, or something stronger to keep the merry rosy-cheeked chap nice and warm on his travels around the world.

A typical **Christmas dinner** is dominated by the huge turkey. The turkey is roasted and served with a lot of vegetables, like potatoes, turnips, cauliflower and broccoli, with the choice of gravy, or mint or cranberry sauce. It takes a lot of hours to prepare all of this, and even longer to eat it. We are still eating turkey sandwiches two weeks after the Christmas dinner... The dessert is, of course, the **Christmas pudding**. It is a sweet that has no expiry date, and becomes better with age, like cheese. You eat it hot, with a lot of sweet sauce - custard.

Christmas dinners in England HAVE to come with **Christmas crackers** - they are tubes of cardboard that look like sweets. Inside there is a crown-shaped hat, a little souvenir, and a silly joke. To open them you need to pull the two ends apart and that's when they should open with a little bang! Exciting.

After Christmas day comes **Boxing Day**. Don't worry, it is not related to the sport; it is completely impossible to be aggressive after all that turkey and mulled wine. Boxing day comes from the word "box". In the old days, people went around to other people's houses on the day after Christmas day, asking for leftover food, or money etc.

During the weeks before Christmas Day, we send cards, watch nativity plays and go to carol services. We also decorate our homes and churches with green leaves, paper decorations and colourful electric lights. It is traditional to send a lot of cards to all your possible friends, family, colleagues and even people you don't really know very well. Because of the fact that there are so many cards to write, very few people add personal messages, so a standard card would read: "Dear X, Merry Christmas. Love, Y." Writing cards is so important that I know some people who write all of theirs the week after Christmas, ready for next year! I think that is a bit much, myself.

**Nativity plays** are another big thing. They are performances, usually by infant school kids, portraying the life of Jesus. Children spend weeks learning their lines and terrorizing their parents to make them their costumes. Christmas time is also time for **pantomimes**; plays like Cinderella. The pantomimes are very dramatic and there is a lot of interaction with the audience. I don't like that because I'm shy. Other people have a lot of fun going to these performances.

I prefer staying at home and decorating my house. This is when some people go over the top and become quite fanatical and competitive. There are lights, reindeer, Santas, snowmen all displayed on and around the house. People try to make a better display than their neighbour. I know two houses that have around four thousand pounds worth of decorations on them every year. But this is not as stupid as you might think, because they do it for charity. We go there every year to look what's new.

Many of our Christmas customs began long before Jesus was born. They came from earlier festivals which had nothing to do with the Christian church. Long time ago people had mid-winter festivals when the days were shortest and the sunlight weakest. They believed that their ceremonies would give the sun back its power. The Romans, for example, held the festival of Saturnia around 25 December. They decorated their homes with evergreens to remind them of Saturn, their harvest god, to return the following spring. Some of these customs and traditions were adopted by early Christians as part of their celebrations of Jesus' birthday. In Victorian times some new ideas such as Father Christmas, Christmas cards and crackers were added to the celebrations.



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