



Before reading:

- What do you know about Xmas in the UK?
- What do you know about Xmas in the USA?

Christmas in the United Kingdom

In the UK (or Great Britain), families often celebrate Christmas together, so they can watch each other open their presents!

Most families have a Christmas Tree (or maybe even two!) in their house for Christmas. The decorating of the tree is usually a family occasion, with everyone helping. Christmas Trees were first popularised in the UK by Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria. Prince Albert was German, and thought that it would be good to use one of his ways of celebrating Christmas in England.

Most villages, towns and cities are decorated with Christmas lights over Christmas. Often a famous person switches them on. The most famous Christmas lights in the UK are in Oxford Street in London. Every year they get bigger and better. Thousands of people go to watch the big 'switch on' around the beginning of November.

Like a lot of countries, Nativity Plays and Carol Services are also very popular at Christmas time. The Church usually has a Carols by Candlelight Service where the church is only lit up by candles.

Children believe that Father Christmas or Santa Claus leaves presents in stockings or pillow-cases. These are normally hung up by the fire or by the children's beds on Christmas Eve. Children sometimes leave out mince pies and brandy for Father Christmas to eat and drink when he visits them. Now, it's often a non-alcoholic drink that's left because Santa has to drive his sleigh.

Children write letters to Father Christmas/Santa listing their requests, but sometimes instead of putting them in the post, the letters are tossed into the fireplace. The draught carries the letters up the chimney and Father Christmas/Santa reads the smoke.

There are some customs that only take place, or were started, in the UK. Boxing Day is a very old custom that started in the UK and is now taken as a holiday in many countries around the world.

In the UK, the main Christmas Meal is usually eaten at lunchtime or early afternoon on Christmas Day. It's normally roast turkey, roast vegetables and 'all the trimmings' which means vegetables like carrots & peas, stuffing and sometimes bacon and sausages. Traditionally, and before turkey was available, roast beef or goose was the main Christmas meal. One vegetable that is often at Christmas in the UK are brussel sprouts.

Dessert is often Christmas Pudding. Mince pies and lots of chocolates are often eaten as well!

Trifle is also a popular dessert at Christmas. It's made in a large bowl and consists of a layer of sponge cake (or sponge fingers) at the bottom of the bowl (which is often soaked in sherry or brandy) then there's a layer of fruit (normally suspended in a fruit flavoured jelly) and it's topped with a layer of custard and then whipped cream. The dinner table is decorated with a Christmas Cracker for each person and sometimes flowers and candles.

The UK is also famous for Christmas Cake - some people love it and some people really don't like it! It's traditionally a rich fruit cake covered with marzipan and icing - and often top with Christmas themed cake decorations like a sprig of holly.

In North Derbyshire and South Yorkshire (in the north of England), some very special carol singing, called 'The Sheffield Carols', happens in some pubs during the weeks leading up to Christmas (the traditional day for sorting the carol singing is Armistice Sunday near the middle of November). The pubs are often rural and out on the hills in that part of England.

Statistics show that in the UK, they get an official White Christmas about every 4 or 5 years and have real snow at Christmas about 1 in 10 years (but often this is only normally in Scotland!).

Scotland

The 'ban' on Christmas also took place in Scotland as well as England but it lasted longer. Its ban started in 1640 when the Scottish Parliament made the celebration of "Yule vacations" illegal - this was before the laws were made in England! This law was repealed in 1686 but the Church in Scotland was still very opposed to any Christmas celebrations. Christmas was only made a public holiday in 1958 and Boxing Day only became a holiday in 1974! Because of this, for 400 years, Christmas was celebrated much more quietly in Scotland.

In Scotland, New Year's Eve (which is called Hogmanay) became much more important than Christmas and is still a very important celebration! The word Hogmanay comes from a kind of oat cake that was traditionally given to children on New Year's Eve.

All across the UK, in cities and towns, there are fireworks to celebrate the New Year. Two of the most famous fireworks displays are in London, along the River Thames, and in Edinburgh at the Hogmanay celebrations.

Also in Scotland, the first person to set foot in a house in a New Year is thought to have a big effect on the fortunes of the people that live there! This is known as 'first-footing'. Generally, strangers are thought to bring good luck. Traditionally dark-haired men are the most lucky - but this can depend on the area of the country you live in. In parts of northern England it is sometimes said that a stranger coming through the door carrying a lump of coal will bring good luck. Cleaning the house for to welcome the new year is an old Hogmanay tradition.

Wales

In parts of South Wales, there is the tradition of the 'Mari Lwyd' wassailing horse. The horse isn't a real one, but is a horse's skull that's decorated with ribbons and put on the top of a pole; the 'body' is a large cloth or blanket that someone hides under. The horse and its followers (the 'leader' who is dressed smartly and other men dressed up, sometimes as 'Punch and Judy') go from house to house, playing music and singing songs.

In some a few villages in North Wales there's a very old a special type of carol singing called Plygain singing which happens in Welsh chapels. Plygain services now normally take place during evening services leading up to Christmas. But Plygain started as an early morning service on Christmas day from about 3am to 6am. The word Plygain comes from a term meaning the cock crowing.

All the carols are based on Bible stories, not just the Christmas story, and all the carols sung in Welsh and are unaccompanied. Some are very old carols which have been passed down within one family for generations and they are only sung by people in that family.

People and groups take it in turn to go to the front of the chapel and sing their carol. There's normally no introductions or set order, it all happens spontaneously. When all the people/groups have taken a turn, the order starts again with different carols. Traditionally there was a short gap or silence between the songs so people could think about the Bible stories and words of the carols.

The last carol of the service is the 'supper carol' (Carol y Swper) and it's normally sung by all the men who have sung carols during the Plygain (traditionally only men sung carols but now anyone can).

Northern Ireland

In Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland, there's the tradition of the Black Santa. This started in 1976 when the Dean of Belfast Cathedral, Sammy Cooks, sat outside the Cathedral in the run up to Christmas and collected money for local charities. This 'sit out' has continued over the years and the current Dean still sits outside the Cathedral in his black church cassock (and some other warm clothes!) and collects money. You can now also donate online. The Black Santa collection in Belfast now raises thousands of pounds every year for charity.

Having a swim on Christmas Day is done by some people in Northern Ireland, including in Helen's Bay and Portrush Harbour. Some people will even swim in a Santa hat!

An old tradition, for some people in Northern Ireland, was to put a candle in a window on Christmas Eve. This was meant to be a sign of welcome to people and remembers that Mary and Joseph had to find somewhere to stay in the Christmas Story.

<https://www.whychristmas.com/cultures/uk.shtml>

1. Summarise the text
2. Do you like singing carols?
3. When I was a child, we used to sing Xmas carols at school. Children don't sing carols any more. They have Xmas festivals, but they are not religious. What other things have changed? Why do people who don't believe in God celebrate Christmas?

Christmas in the USA

Americans Celebrate Christmas with Many Traditions

Christmas, celebrated by most Christians on December 25, commemorates the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Americans, like many of the world's peoples, have developed their own Christmas traditions and observances, and these have changed greatly over time.

Today, most Americans blend religious and secular customs with their own family traditions, often incorporating food, decorations and rituals from places they or their ancestors once called home. Roast turkey and ham are popular for Christmas dinner throughout the country, but depending on the region, so are roast goose with red cabbage, roast pork or "seven fishes" seafood salad.

In the Southwest, luminarias — lanterns made from brown paper bags weighted down with sand and illuminated by a lit candle — are displayed on Christmas Eve. Many Mexican Americans celebrate *Las Posadas*, a procession that re-enacts Mary and Joseph's search for a place to bed down in Bethlehem. Swedish Americans hold *St. Lucia festivals*, and in Puerto Rico there are *parrandas*, where friends go from one house to the next singing traditional songs, "surprising" their friends and waking them with their music.

Even though Christmas is for many Americans a religious occasion, the federal courts have upheld its status as a legal holiday. As one court reasoned, "by giving federal employees a paid vacation day on Christmas, the government is doing no more than recognizing the cultural significance of the holiday."

Development of the American Christmas

The early New England Puritans frowned on boisterous Christmas celebrations. In 1659, the Massachusetts colonists briefly criminalized observance of the day, and Christmas remained a regular workday in much of New England and Pennsylvania. Other parts of British North America, however, celebrated with gusto, with costumed people going door to door and receiving small gifts of food and drink.

The modern, commercialized Christmas began to emerge in the 19th century with the new custom of purchasing gifts for young children. Seasonal “Christmas shopping” began to assume economic importance.

Other Christmas traditions similarly began during the 19th century. Santa Claus — derived from the Dutch *Sinter Klaas* and the German *Saint Nicholas* — assumed the persona of a jolly dispenser of gifts and pilot of a reindeer-drawn sleigh through such works as the 1823 poem “A Visit from Saint Nicholas.”

Germany is credited with starting the tradition of Christmas trees in the 16th century. According to legend, the Protestant reformer Martin Luther first added lighted candles to a tree to remind his children of the wonders of God’s creation. Christmas trees became popular in Britain and the United States in the 19th century. Today, many Americans purchase a fresh evergreen tree or a reusable aluminum and plastic model and decorate it with lights and ornaments. In some families, Christmas gifts appear under the tree on the morning of December 25, deposited there by family members — or, as small children believe, delivered by Santa Claus after he lands his reindeer and sleigh on the roof and comes down the chimney.

Mass-produced Christmas cards began to appear in the last quarter of the 19th century. Today, these might depict religious scenes or convey secular, often humorous, messages. On the Internet, electronically transmitted “e-cards” are increasingly popular; nonetheless, Americans will mail some 16.6 billion Christmas cards, letters and packages over the holidays.

Contemporary observances

With Christmas shopping vitally important to some retailers, Christmas has expanded into a “season” of its own. The day after Thanksgiving (the fourth Thursday in November) is now known as “Black Friday.” An important shopping day, it pushes some businesses into profitability, or “in the black,” and can account for a substantial proportion of annual profits.

But this extended Christmas season is about far more than shopping. For many Americans, it is a period of general goodwill and an occasion for charitable and volunteer work.

As for seasonal entertainment, there are countless productions of Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker ballet*, school holiday pageants, and carollers everywhere. On television, adults watch old favourites like *A Miracle on 34th Street* (1945) and *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), while children (and nostalgic parents) enjoy classic animated programs such as *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (1965). Many radio stations adjust their formats to feature Christmas music. The holiday movie season is often called the “Oscar season” because so many hopeful contenders for the Academy Awards (or “Oscars”) are released in December.

Still, the holiday’s original religious meaning remains for many its most important element. Some congregations create manger scenes — dioramas of the stable where Jesus is believed to have been born, with figurines representing the infant Jesus and those present at his birth. Many churches hold Christmas Eve candlelight or midnight services. Some include a Mass of the Nativity or a dramatization of the birth of Jesus.

<https://uk.usembassy.gov/americans-celebrate-christmas-with-many-traditions/>

1. **Summarise the text.**
2. **Do you send Xmas cards? Do you send the traditional ones or do you browse the Internet so as to find a beautiful one to send to someone via WhatsApp?**
3. **Which is your favourite day at Christmas?**
4. **Do you go out on New Year’s Eve?**
5. **Do you spend a lot of money on food, on clothes or on presents at Christmas?**

My Favourite Time of Year by *The Florin Street Band*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H10f2w7T5CU&ab_channel=TheFlorinStreetBand

[Verse 1]

Lanterns lighting up the town
When carol singers gather round
There's goodwill in the air tonight
When I hear that festive sound
Their voices carried on the wind
Peace on Earth is all around
I wanna join with them and sing!
Everything is calm on Christmas Eve
Angels sing by candlelight

[Chorus]

'Cause it's Christmas time and it's my favourite time of year
A festive melody that tells us Christmas time is here
They sing a merry song and we all sing along
See the stars tonight; they're shining bright

[Verse 2]

Wrapping presents, writing cards, helping decorate the tree
Deck the halls with boughs of holly
Angel voices fill the town
But there's one thing that makes it all for me
Give me mistletoe, it's the season to be jolly
It's like the world is joining in! (Noel, Noel)
When carol singers gather round

[Chorus]

[Middle]

So excited, can't sleep
Christmas Eve, still believe
When the morning comes, church bells ring, and he's been!

[Chorus]

Merry Christmas

by Ed Sheeran & Elton John

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_yuO8UNGmY&ab_channel=EdSheeran

[Intro: Ed Sheeran]

Build the fire and gather 'round the

Fill the glass and maybe with me

[Chorus: Ed Sheeran & Elton John]

So kiss me under the mistletoe

Pour out the wine, let's toast and pray for

I know there's been pain this year, but it's time to let it go

Next year, you know

But for now, Merry Christmas, we'll

Dance in the while embers glow

We've both known, but this we got is the best of all

I wish you could see you, then you would know

My God, you look

Right now, Merry Christmas

[Verse 1: Ed Sheeran & Elton John]

The fire is raging on

And we'll all to the song

Just having so much fun

While we're here, can we all

Spare a thought for the ones who have?

Merry Christmas,

[Refrain: Choir]

Ah-ah-ah-ah; Ah-ah-ah-ah

[Chorus: Ed Sheeran & Elton John]

[Verse 2: Ed Sheeran & Elton John]

I feel it when it

Every year helpin' us carry on

..... with so much love

All our

Are together where we all belong

Merry Christmas,

[Refrain: Choir]

[Other: Ed Sheeran & Elton John]

..... for you and I

We'll have a good night and a Merry Christmas

My Favourite Time of Year by *The Florin Street Band*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H10f2w7T5CU&ab_channel=TheFlorinStreetBand

[Verse 1]

Lanterns lighting up the town
Peace on Earth is all around
Everything is calm on Christmas Eve
There's goodwill in the air tonight
Angels sing by candlelight
Their voices carried on the wind
When carol singers gather round
When I hear that festive sound
I wanna join with them and sing!

[Chorus]

They sing a merry song and we all sing along
A festive melody that tells us Christmas time is here
See the stars tonight; they're shining bright
'Cause it's Christmas time and it's my favourite time of year

[Verse 2]

Deck the halls with boughs of holly
Give me mistletoe, it's the season to be jolly
Wrapping presents, writing cards, helping decorate the tree
But there's one thing that makes it all for me
When carol singers gather round
Angel voices fill the town
It's like the world is joining in! (Noel, Noel)

[Chorus]

[Middle]

Christmas Eve, still believe
So excited, can't sleep
When the morning comes, church bells ring, and he's been!

[Chorus]

Merry Christmas

by Ed Sheeran & Elton John

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_yuO8UNGmY&ab_channel=EdSheeran

[Intro: Ed Sheeran]

Build the fire and gather 'round the **tree**
Fill the glass and maybe **come and sing** with me

[Chorus: Ed Sheeran & Elton John]

So kiss me under the mistletoe
Pour out the wine, let's toast and pray for **December snow**
I know there's been pain this year, but it's time to let it go
Next year, you **never** know
But for now, Merry Christmas, we'll
*Dance in the **kitchen** while embers glow*
*We've both known **love**, but this **love** we got is the best of all*
*I wish you could see you **through my eyes**, then you would know*
*My God, you look **beautiful***
Right now, Merry Christmas

[Verse 1: Ed Sheeran & Elton John]

The fire is raging on
And we'll all **sing along** to the song
Just having so much fun
While we're here, can we all
*Spare a thought for the ones who have **gone**?*
*Merry Christmas, **everyone***

[Refrain: Choir]

Ah-ah-ah-ah Ah-ah-ah-ah

[Chorus: Ed Sheeran & Elton John]

[Verse 2: Ed Sheeran & Elton John]

I feel it when it **comes**
Every year helpin' us carry on
Filled up with so much love
*All our **family and friends***
Are together where we all belong
*Merry Christmas, **everyone***

[Refrain: Choir]

[Other: Ed Sheeran & Elton John]

It's Christmas time for you and I
We'll have a good night and a Merry Christmas