

Christmas Traditions

In Anglo Saxon Milborne Port, the evergreen holly and ivy that were part of the pagan celebration were used as Christian symbols of eternal life. Other traditions evolved; the kissing-bough, decorated with mistletoe, once sacred to the Druids, hung from a beam and no woman could refuse a kiss if caught under it. The Yule log was put on the hearth on Christmas Eve and burnt throughout the twelve days of Christmas, having the greenery of the decorations thrown on to it on Twelfth Night to symbolise the end of the festival.

By the Middle Ages, the celebrations began at Advent, forty days before Christmas, and Boxing Day was when the rich gave alms to the poor. Only the wealthy could enjoy all these celebrations; food had to be cooked and served and beasts fed. The twelve days of Christmas, from Christmas Eve to the eve of Epiphany, were the days on which the lower orders would be allowed to work slightly less, while shops and businesses opened for shorter hours. By Tudor times, Christmas for the wealthy had become a time for great feasts, gambling, plays, and dances, giving extravagant gifts and generally having a good time.

Puritans had a strong work ethic and they tried to ban Christmas completely. Shops were to stay open, Church services were only to be held on a Sunday, and feasting, gambling and drinking were forbidden. However, Christmas was often celebrated in private. Once the monarchy was restored, Christmas celebrations were allowed again, but they would never be as extravagant as before. Most people had to work on Christmas day, although this might be for shorter hours. The Christmas meal would be as good as a family could afford and gifts were given, particularly to children. For many poorer families these gifts might be a piece of fruit, sometimes the only fruit they would get all year, or a home-made toy that would be passed down to each child in the family in turn. The poor often suffered around Christmas as the weather turned cold. In 1819, the Reverend Owen and the principal inhabitants of Milborne Port set up a fund to provide the poor with coal and other necessities at low cost.

It was the Victorians who introduced many of our Christmas traditions including the decorated tree. In 1871 Boxing Day, Easter Monday, Whit Monday and the first Monday in August were made official Bank Holidays on which everyone was entitled to a day off with pay, although servants were seldom allowed these holidays, being offered time in lieu when it suited their employers. On Boxing Day 1901, the Milborne Port Town Band took up a position near the weighbridge and played during the morning to entertain the town's people. Sir Medlycott gave a dance to the people of Milborne Port at Ven, which started at 9pm, included supper, and did not finish until 3am.

The world wars of the twentieth century prevented many traditions from continuing. Mummers probably started in Milborne Port in Tudor times but the troop disbanded during the First World War. In addition to Father Christmas, characters included a Turkish Knight who would stage a fight to represent the crusades and a Doctor who could cure 'the pip, the pox, the palsy, and the gout'. In 1936 the Milborne Port Women's Institute organised a Christmas party for the old people of the village and this continued until the early sixties. Today's tradition in Milborne Port is the Christmas Lights Switch On. The trees along the High Street and the large tree outside the Town Hall are

supplied by the Spirit of Milborne Port and switching on the lights has always been a well supported event, accompanied in previous years by street markets, Father Christmas and a Children's Service in St John's Church.

Dr Lesley Wray