

The midwinter feast

Contributed by Sally Pointer

This article is based on the first part of a booklet of mine (Seasonal Scents, a history of the smell of Christmas). It attempts to provide an overview to the background to the tradition of holding a festival at Midwinter where gifts might be exchanged and rich and often fragrant food and drink consumed.

Christmas and the Midwinter Feast

The first thing to consider when approaching such a subject, is what exactly do we mean by Christmas? The name is a reference to the assumed anniversary of Christ's birth, but many scholars today concur that his actual birthday is not likely to have been mid December. The date was chosen because of a much older festival, and it is the traditions associated with this that flavour our celebrations to this day.

Christmas Day, December 25th, falls a few days after the midwinter solstice (about December 21st), a time when the world as viewed from the Northern Hemisphere is at its darkest and most threatening. To our earliest ancestors who observed the lengthening and shortening days closely, the solstice was accompanied by a few dark days when the sun seemed most reluctant to rise in the morning and hurried away over the horizon early at night. Even if winter stores were ample, it also heralded the start of the difficult period before the new growth started again in the spring.

At this stage, fears were kindled, tempers frayed and it seemed all-important to do something to banish dark spirits and encourage the Sun to return. To this end, it became usual to have a feast, partly to comfort the people's anxiety, and partly to encourage the turning of the year through sympathetic magic. If the magic worked, a few days later the slight lengthening of the days had become noticeable and it was felt that the Sun had been reborn.

Several well known prehistoric monuments are aligned on the midwinter sunset or sunrise, suggesting that it was considered a crucial point of the year as far back as the Neolithic period. (approximately 4500-2500BCE) Other cultures had similar feasts. - December 25th was the 'Victory of the Sun-God' Festival in the Babylonian world. The Romans celebrated at this time of year the Kalendae and Saturnalia which honoured Saturn, the harvest god, and Mithras, the originally Persian god of light, during the Natalis Solis Invicti, or 'Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun.' The Norse and Anglo-Saxons called the general period of the solstice Yule. The word 'Yule' is from the Chaldean (Aramaic) word for 'infant', and the Old English version was geol.

In the earliest days of Christianity the Church tried to forbid the festivities of midwinter being adopted by Christians, but the traditions proved too strong and the superstitions too well ingrained. The only thing for it in the end was to overlay the old ideas with the new.

The Scriptor Syrus commented on the overlap in the late fourth century:

'It was a custom of the pagans to celebrate on the same 25 December the birthday of the Sun, at which they kindled lights in token of festivity. In these solemnities and revelries the Christians also took part. Accordingly when the doctors of the Church perceived that the Christians had a leaning to this festival, they took council and resolved that the true Nativity should be solemnised on that day.'

This is why the celebration of Christ's birth is also held on this day, and it remains one of the best examples of the merging of Christian and Pagan practices.

Christmas Past

The way in which Christmas has been celebrated over the years is worth considering in order to gain an insight into why certain smells became so linked to the season. A full discussion of Christmas traditions would fill a much larger book than this one, so I will only outline some of the impressions which can be gained by reading reports of Christmases long gone.

During the early part of the Middle Ages it was usually more customary to celebrate Twelfth Night (Epiphany). The feast of Christmas slowly rose to popularity with the growth of the cult of the Virgin Mary, and we know that evergreens were used in decorations at this time. By the 11th century evergreen trees were often decorated with apples and bread to symbolise the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge referred to in Genesis. It was known as the Paradise tree and used in the popular mystery plays. In keeping with the story of the visit of the Magi to the infant Christ, gifts were frequently exchanged at this time. As part of the festivities a feast would be held and it was common for mummers to entertain the guests with ribald dances and songs. The Carol owes its origins to a popular style of medieval dance tune, which was sometimes described in contemporary sources as being 'lewd', due mostly to its tendency to break down into energetic horseplay.

The Medieval poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight refers to a Christmas feast at the legendary court of King Arthur. Written in the North of England during the fourteenth century it tells of the celebrations which lasted 'for fully fifteen days, with all the feasting and merrymaking which could be devised; such sounds of mirth and merriment, glorious to hear, a pleasant uproar by day, dancing at night.' The description of the seasonal feasting is lavish and detailed, and it is easy to imagine the sights and scents of such an occasion.

Elizabethan sources show that the medieval traditions continued. Garlands of evergreens were commonly wound round wire hoops to form a ball, which could be suspended from the ceiling to provide decoration. The Twelve Days of Christmas were still the focus of solstice celebrations at this stage, and Shakespeare's Twelfth Night premiered in 1600 in a performance at the court of Elizabeth the First.

In 1752, 11 days were dropped from the year when the change was made from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar. This redressed the steadily growing discrepancy between the calendar year and the actual year. Greece was the last country to adopt the Gregorian Calendar in 1923. As far as the effects on Christmas go, it is interesting to note that many Eastern Orthodox churches still use the old Julian Calendar and celebrate Christmas in, what to the rest of the European world, is early January.

The Nineteenth Century saw the importation of customs from the continent, largely due to the influence of Prince Albert, although in America, European settlers had made the Christmas tree a popular item before it took off over here. The popular images of Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol' has ensured that the image of a Victorian Christmas remains firmly with us to this day.

The Early Twentieth century encompassed the two World Wars and this naturally meant that resources were limited. Looking at Christmas preparations within these periods gives a good indication of the aspects considered essential to a Christmas even during times of crisis. Cakes made from carefully saved ingredients were enriched with spices, which disguised the simplicity of the basic recipe. Reports from soldiers stationed in desert areas tell of how they considered an orange the most important part of their Christmas celebrations, as much because of its juiciness and skin which kept the sand out as anything else.

American influences also make a big impact at this time. It is fairly well known that the current 'official image' of Father Christmas is one popularised by a certain popular fizzy drink in an advertising campaign, and by now it looks set to stay that way. As the years pass, advertising campaigns have an even greater impact on the average family Christmas, but even in the most 'off the peg' festivities, if you look carefully, you can find echoes of the traditional celebrations that led to this point.

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The full version of this booklet (Seasonal Scents, A History of the Smell of Christmas (2000) £1.75) and other works by Sally are available from her website www.sallypointer.com