

# VICTORIAN & CHRISTMAS

History Detectives  
Case File Number:

11





# DECK THE HALLS...

...with boughs of holly.

This month we are finding out more about the Victorians because it's nearly Christmas!

Christmas has been celebrated for hundreds of years, but the Victorians loved this time of year.

They super-charged lots of traditions that already existed and invented a whole load of new ones that we still have today. Welcome to our special issue of festive fun and frivolity!

Christmas really exploded during the 1840s. By this time, there was a large middle class of people who had spare time and spare cash, and trends were making people spend money on fashionable stuff.

It was important to look like you were keeping up with all the trends, even if you could only just afford to, so even poor people wanted a slice of the Christmas action.

They may not have invented Christmas, but the Victorians did invent... steel, tarmac, radios, telephones, modern flushing toilets, camera, films, vacuum cleaners, ice cream, bikes, trains, cars, planes, disinfectant, iron ships, and dynamite (invented by Swedish inventor Nobel, of the Nobel prize that rewards human endeavours for peace)! One of the best-known Victorian inventors is Thomas Edison, who invented the lightbulb – what a bright idea!

# DID THE VICTORIANS INVENT CHRISTMAS?

The short answer is 'No'. But the Victorians totally loved Christmas and this period of feasting and fun really grew in popularity during the Victorian period. In fact, Christmas has been celebrated since the Medieval period and there have been celebrations at this time of year for a very long time before then. About 1500 years ago, Pope Gregory the Great instructed St Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, to adopt Pagan shrines and make them into Christian ones rather than building new Christian churches. By also adopting Pagan mid-winter traditions people were encouraged to accept Christianity.



## Evidence from History:

This is the Roman God, Saturn. The Roman festival of Saturnalia was celebrated for two weeks in mid-December. The feast of the Sun God, Mithras, was celebrated on December 25th. This was really popular in the late Roman Empire and evolved into Christmas as Christianity spread.



**Q. WHY ARE CHRISTMAS TREES LIKE BAD KNITTERS?**  
**A. THEY BOTH KEEP DROPPING NEEDLES!**

Let's take a look at some of the events that happened during the 1840s that helped make Christmas the holly-jolly time it is today...

Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband, was German and he and Victoria made the German tradition of Christmas trees (Tannenbaum or Weihnachtsbaum) totally fashionable. The tradition is much older though.

Queen Caroline, the German wife of King George IV, brought the tree tradition to England in the form of a decorated yew tree with gifts and baubles. The mid-winter tree was a strong German tradition. People also decorated their houses with natural greenery such as holly and ivy. Holly trees and the ivy vine were each believed to have magical properties. In many ancient cultures, the howling, icy winds in the dark nights of winter were believed to be ghosts. Decorating with holly and ivy was thought to ward off these evil spirits

This reconnection with nature was a response to Industrial Revolution. During the Industrial Revolution, lots of people had to move to the city and start working in factories, and bringing greenery into their houses helped people reconnect with their roots (do you get it?!) back in the countryside.

## OH CHRISTMAS TREE



Queen Victoria and Albert were totally in love. They had 9 children together. Albert died in 1861 and Victoria spent the next 40 years in mourning! She was so upset when he died that she had a cast made of his hand so a copy could be made, and she could keep holding hands with him forever ...creepy or lovely?



## FATHER CHRISTMAS

We all know that the *real* Father Christmas has lived at the North Pole for centuries.

Lots of different European cultures have had a spirit that brought their children gifts. In 1823 a poem was published called *The Night Before Christmas* in an American newspaper. It was really popular. Years later a professor called Clement Clarke Moore took ownership of it, but no-one can be sure he wrote it. In the poem, St. Nicholas (Father Christmas' proper name) is described as jolly, with rosy cheeks and twinkling eyes. It is the first time he has reindeer, but there's no Rudolf just yet. His red nose didn't light the way until 1939!

# ABSOLUTELY CRACKERS!

Crackers, as we know them, have been around since 1870, but the story goes that they were invented in 1841. Tom Smith was a sweet-maker who discovered that the French were making delicious bonbons wrapped in paper. He wanted to steal the idea but make them extra exciting and unique, so he would sell lots of them. One night sitting by the fire, he heard the logs crackle and came upon the idea to pull the two ends of the paper wrapper to release a bang! Tom's crackers were first called 'bangs of expectation' (which isn't very catchy, is it?!) but soon his crackers became super popular.

Victorians loved this kind of story, but it isn't likely to be true. More likely is that Tom's brother H J Smith invented the cracker. He worked in a London theatre and probably knew all the tricks of stage magic. Nothing is really known about him, but it is probable that he came up with the idea and the technology of the cracker bang.

Amazingly, Tom Smith Cracker Company still makes crackers for the Royal Family today!



# CHRISTMAS SPIRITS...OF ALL KINDS!

The Victorians loved their food, especially the Christmas feast. Many wealthy families would donate money to feed the poor on Christmas Day, or even help to serve or deliver meals to the poor and homeless. This might sound generous, but many would only help on this one day of the year, and we don't need to tell you that people who are starving are starving all year round!



## A Christmas Carol

CHARLES DICKENS



Q. WHERE DID EBENEZER SCROOGE KEEP HIS MONEY?

A. IN A SNOW BANK OF COURSE!

Dicken's famous Christmas story, *A Christmas Carol*, was published in 1843. This is the story of Scrooge, a miserable mean old man who treats people in his life really badly. On Christmas Eve, three ghosts visit Scrooge and show him that being unkind is making his own life really bad, as well as the lives of the poor people that he is mean to. Scrooge decides he's going to change his ways (at least for Christmas Day!) The moral was that Christmas was a time for being good, and if you weren't good you would go to hell!

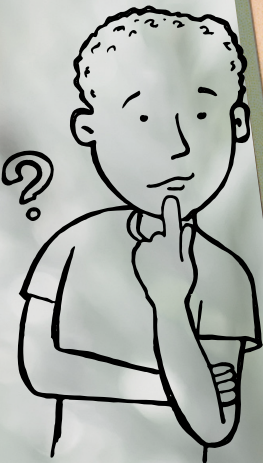
# CHRISTMAS CARDS

The Victorians invented Christmas cards. Valentine's cards were fashionable before Christmas cards, but Christmas cards quickly became the height of fashion among those who could read and write.

Victorian Christmas cards didn't usually have cute pictures and cosy scenes on them. In fact, the Victorians had a pretty dark sense of humour when it came to Christmas cards! They often had gruesome images, dead birds, and images of poor people on them.

Weirdly, some Victorians even included dead robins or rashers of bacon along with their Christmas wishes!

The first postal stamp service, the 'penny post', was used on May 6th, 1840. Before stamps were introduced, you could post things but it was expensive and very complicated. The cost of postage was paid by the person receiving the post and was charged by size as well as distance. The penny post meant that anyone could buy a stamp and stick it to a letter, weighing up to 14g, and it could be posted any distance. This revolutionised communication and it became really trendy to send cards to each other.



The world's first stamp was the Penny Black. As the name suggests, it cost a penny and it was printed with black ink. It had a picture of Queen Victoria on it. Today, some penny black stamps can be worth up to £400!

Q. WHAT KIND OF PHOTOS DO SANTA'S HELPERS TAKE?

A. ELFIES

# CHRISTMAS PRESENTS

Christmas presents and celebrations existed long before the Victorian era. Gift-giving was part of the pagan celebrations around the winter solstice, which happens in December in the Northern Hemisphere. Ancient Romans celebrated the Saturnalia holiday (a December festival in honour of the god Saturn), which included a public banquet followed by private gift-giving and lots of partying. The presents exchanged were usually silly, joke-type gifts or small figurines made of wax or pottery. As Christianity became increasingly widespread, the custom of gift-giving became tied to 25 December, adopted as the day of Jesus's birth, and to the story of the three wise men bearing gifts.

The tradition of gift-giving was made even more popular through tales of Saint Nicholas, an early Christian bishop from the Greek city of Myra, who had a habit of secret gift-giving and inspired the traditional model of Santa Claus (Sanctus Nicolaus).

Giving gifts became really popular during the 1840s, even in families who couldn't afford to give much. Children might be given a small toy, and boys sometimes got a bottle of beer! The most popular gift for adults was books. Writers all wanted to publish a book in time for Christmas to try and sell as many copies as possible. Many of the most well-known Victorian stories were actually Christmas hits, including Sherlock Holmes and Alice in Wonderland.

Did you know? Children's books only really started during the Victorian era. One of the first books for children was Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*. It wasn't meant to be a scary story, but it might give you nightmares! It is the tale of a sweep boy, Tom, who is very badly treated by his master. Tom falls into a river and drowns. The story doesn't end there though; he is turned into a magical creature called a water baby and has adventures, meeting fairies such as Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby!

His cruel master also drowns and is punished after his death. Tom goes to help his master, even though he doesn't want to, and is rewarded by being returned to human form.

The Victorians just loved stories that made you do the right thing!



## PANTOMIME. IT'S BEHIND YOU!... OH NO IT ISN'T



Pantomime is a marvellous and wonderful (if a little eccentric!) British tradition.

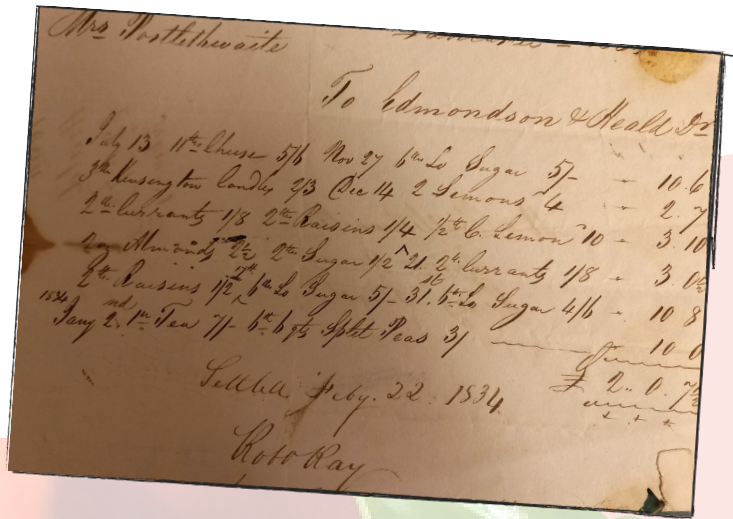
Pantomimes take place around the Christmas period and are nearly always based on well known children's stories such as Peter Pan, Aladdin, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty etc. Audience participation is a very important part of a pantomime.

The audience is encouraged to boo the villain whenever he enters the stage, argue with the Dame (who is always a man) and warn the Principal Boy (who is always a girl) when the villain is behind them by shouting out "He's behind you!"



# FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD!

One of the best bits about Christmas is eating lots of yummy food. These days families tuck into tins of sweets and chocolates and enjoy fancy party food, as well as the traditional Christmas dinner, Christmas cake, and Christmas pudding.



## EVIDENCE FROM OUR COLLECTION:



So, what might a Victorian family eat on Christmas day?

This grocery receipt from 1833 tells us about the sort of thing that what one household was ordering from their grocer!

One of the most iconic parts of Christmas dinner is the Christmas pudding. The pudding dates waaaaay back but in 1664 the Puritans in England attempted to ban it. It's said that the Puritans thought Christmas pudding to be 'sinful' and 'unfit for God-fearing people.' In 1714, King George I re-established it as part of the Christmas meal.

Plum puddings were a firm favourite of the Georgians and then the Victorians. Traditionally Christmas pudding is made five weeks before Christmas, on or after the last Sunday before the first Advent (the last Sunday in the Church Year). Everyone in the house would take turns, stirring the pudding three times to make a wish. It was believed that if an unmarried person forgot to join in they would not find a partner in the upcoming year!

Adding silver coins into plum pudding is a fun Christmas tradition. The notion is that whoever finds the coin will have good luck. The tradition may date as far back as the 1300s when several small items like dried peas and chicken wishbones were added to the pudding mixture....imagine how many people choked!

After the Victorians, in the 1920s, the Christmas pudding evolved into Empire Christmas Pudding. This recipe tried to encourage people to use ingredients from around the British Empire.

## EVIDENCE FROM OUR COLLECTION:



In 1931, an enormous Empire Christmas pudding was cooked in Morecambe at Christmas. They are mixing the ingredients in this photo. It was said to be the biggest one ever! It was served on Boxing Day.

Lots of people pre-bought a portion, but it was so disgusting that nobody wanted to eat it! A lot of it was thrown away and the sales didn't come close to covering the cost of making it!



# BE A (DICKENS) HISTORY DETECTIVE

The world-famous Charles Dickens visited Lancaster. Why not take a walk around the city and imagine what Victorian Lancaster was like?

At the corner of King Street and Market Street there was once an inn that Charles Dickens described as a 'good old inn ... in a fine old house'. He wrote this in the book the *Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices* which he authored alongside Wilkie Collins. It is a detective story, that is a little spooky in places, and was published in 1867... at Christmas! In the book Dickens and Collins wrote,

'It is Mr. Goodchild's opinion, that if a visitor on his arrival at Lancaster could be accommodated with a pole which would push the opposite side of the street some yards farther off, it would be better for all parties.'

They were making a joke that the streets in Lancaster were too narrow. Funnily enough, in 1880, this building was taken down and rebuilt so that the road could be widened!

In general, Dickens and Collins described Lancaster as,

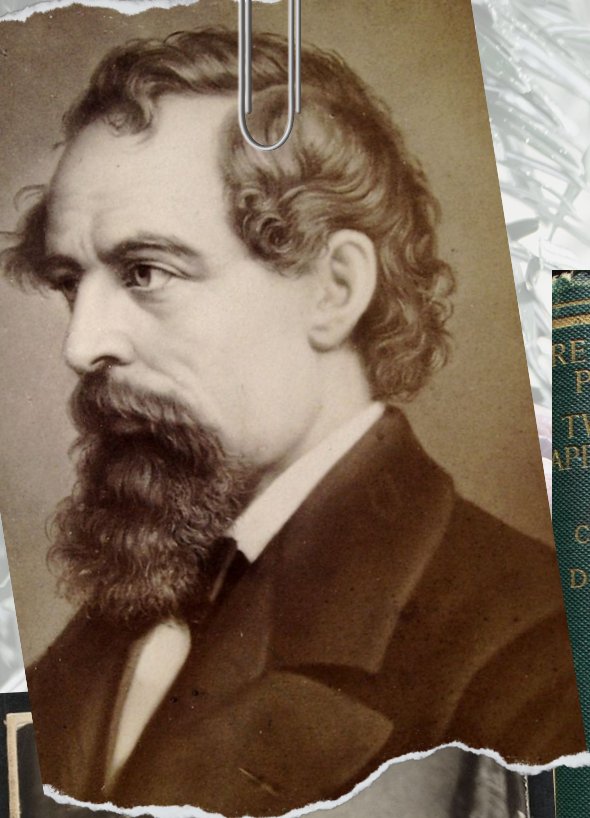
'A place dropped in the midst of a charming landscape, a place with a fine ancient fragment of a castle, a place with lovely walks, a place possessing staid old houses richly fitted with old Honduras mahogany, which has grown so dark with time that it seems to have got something of a retrospective mirror-quality into itself, and to show the visitor, in the depth of its grain, through all its polish the hue of the wretched slaves who groaned long ago under old Lancaster merchants.'

In this quote they are describing the beautiful landscape around the city. Do you know what they mean by 'old Honduras mahogany'? They are describing the dark wood furniture that was made in Lancaster by the furniture maker Gillow. They made expensive pieces from mahogany, which was a special wood grown on slave plantations in the West Indies during the 1700s.

Dickens and Collins also use the character of a local man to describe the hangings at Lancaster Castle. He says,

'Your face is turned to the Castle wall. When you are tied up, you see its stones expanding and contracting violently, and a similar expansion and contraction seem to take place in your own head and breast. Then there is a rush of fire and an earthquake, and the Castle springs into the air, and you tumble down a precipice.'

**Jolly stuff!!**



# WHAT THE DICKENS...?!

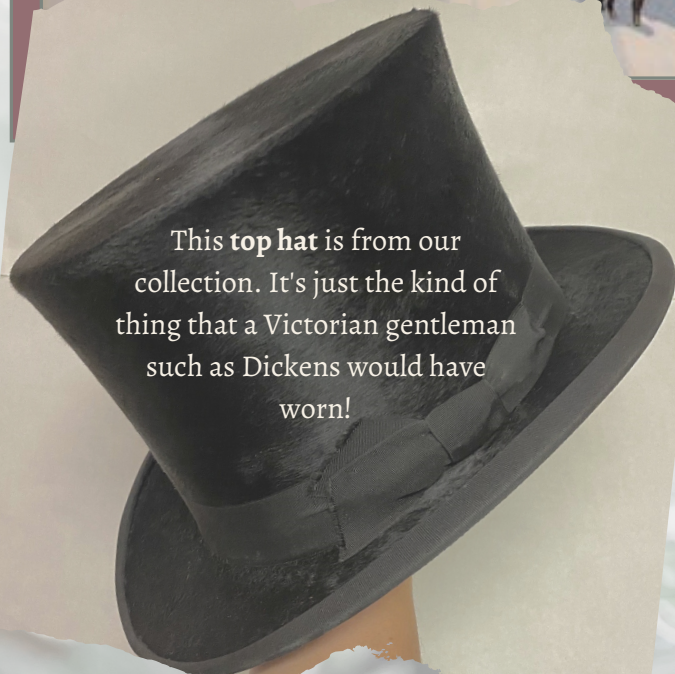
Here are some Victorian utensils from our collection that were used for cooking, serving and eating.

We thought it would be fun for you to have a go at guessing what each of them was used for! Have a look at the shape and style of each one and use your History Detective skills to try and work out what each was used for. The answers are on the back page of this Case File.



# VISIT THE CITY MUSEUM AND HAVE YOUR HISTORY DETECTIVE PASSPORT STAMPED!

See if you can find this painting on the staircase in the Museum. It was painted by Joseph Appleyard (1908-1960). It depicts Lancaster Town Hall (now the City Museum) and the Market Place circa 1840. There is a thick covering of snow on the ground and a Christmas market in the square outside the building.



This **top hat** is from our collection. It's just the kind of thing that a Victorian gentleman such as Dickens would have worn!



KNOCK, KNOCK!  
WHO'S THERE?  
DONUT.  
DONUT WHO?  
DONUT OPEN THIS PRESENT  
UNTIL CHRISTMAS!

# YOUR MISSION...

...is to make some edible Victorian Christmas tree decorations.

The Victorians enjoyed decorating their Christmas trees, but they didn't use tinsel! In fact, they strung dried fruit and nuts onto cotton thread and hung these on the branches of their trees. Have a go at making your own edible garland using dried fruit, nuts, popcorn, or even sweets in colourful wrappers.

Victorians also decorated their trees with candles. These were lit when presents were exchanged and on the most important days during the Christmas period: Christmas Day, New Year's Day, and Twelfth Night. Some people also made gingerbread decorations and hung these on their tree. Why not try our recipe?

## GINGERBREAD

350g plain flour  
1tsp bicarbonate of soda  
2tsp ground ginger  
1tsp ground cinnamon  
125g butter or hard margarine  
175g light brown sugar  
1 egg  
4tbsp golden syrup

You will also need cutters and icing pens or icing and sprinkles to decorate your shapes

1. Preheat the oven to 180C/160C fan/Gas 4.
2. Measure out all the dry ingredients and sift them through a sieve into a large bowl to remove any lumps.
3. Rub in the butter or margarine so that the mixture looks like breadcrumbs.
4. Stir in the sugar.
5. Beat the egg and add it to the bowl with the golden syrup. Give it all a really good stir until the mixture is well blended. You might need grown-up help because the mixture will be stiff (you can use a food processor for steps 2, 3, and 4 if you have one).
6. Roll out the mixture to 0.5cm on a floured surface and cut out your shapes. If you want to hang them on your tree, don't forget to make a hole for a thread!
7. Put them on a baking tray and bake for 12-15 minutes until they are golden. Leave them to cool and firm up for a few minutes before removing them from the trays.
8. When they are completely cool, you can decorate them!



There are lots of different religious festivals celebrated around the world at this time of year.

However you celebrate, have a safe and happy time.



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