

a Victorian Christmas

A Victorian Christmas in Guernsey

For the ordinary Guernsey family, Christmas was a time of family gatherings. Most people did not stop work until Christmas Eve, so the Christmas tree and any other decorations had to wait until the last minute.

At the beginning of December the children would make an Advent Wreath with ivy, laurel and holly and four candles, one to be lit on each Sunday of Advent. They may also have made an Advent calendar, with windows to be opened daily until Christmas Eve.

Before Queen Victoria's husband Prince Albert made Christmas trees popular, people decorated what was called a 'Kissing Bough'. A large branch or a ball of evergreen leaves was hung up and decorated with fruit and small presents.

Christmas started on December the 23rd with 'la laongue veille'.

La laongue veille

In her book *Folklore of Guernsey*, Marie de Garis describes it thus:

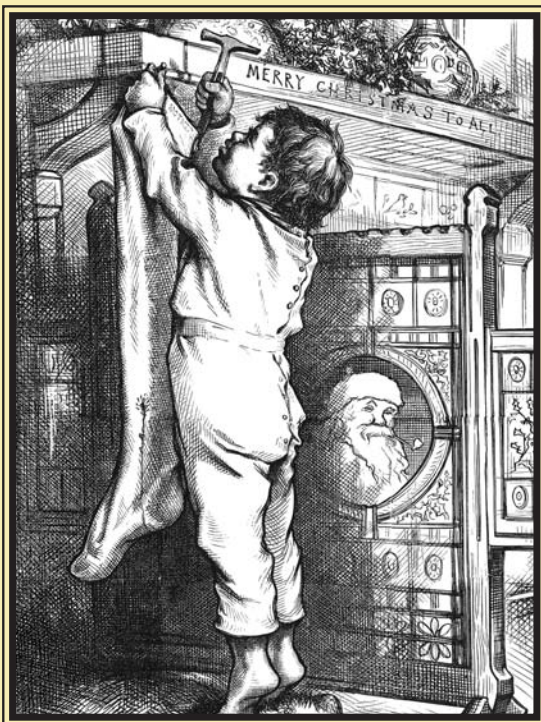
December 23rd.

This was "la serai'e d'la laongue veille", Longue Veile Night, a relic of the days when knitted goods were the chief export of the island. A special market for these was held in town on Christmas Eve. The evening before was spent in preparing and packing up these articles for sale. Earlier in the day the oven had been given a trial heating in preparation for the Christmas Day baking. The occasion was therefore made the opportunity for a feast. A batch of Guernsey biscuits was baked with apple gâche and other delicacies. Mulled wine was drunk, from cups, often to excess. It was one of the occasions when grown men hung grimly on to the kitchen bacon rack with one hand, whilst the other held the cup as they recited:

"Cher, p'tit pepinot,
A quand j'té veit,
Tu parais bian,
Si, j'té beit, j'm'en sentiral.

Et si j'te lesse, j'm'en r'pentirai,
I'faut daouc bian mux bére et son
sentir,
Que t'lessier, et mon r'pentir,
- A vot santi, la com-pognie!

My dear little grog,
When I see you
How fine you look
If I drink you,
I will feel it If I leave you,
I will be sorry
How much better then to drink
and feel you
Than to leave you and be sorry,
- Your health, everyone!



Thomas Nast, *Harpers Weekly*, 1876

This tradition continued on into the 19th century and on Christmas Eve many people would go into St. Peter Port early to buy their presents. It was a night of revelry, and the military police from the garrison were kept busy.

By comparison with Christmas Eve, Christmas Day was a quiet day. The children would find the stocking that they had hung on the fireplace filled with small toys, fruit, nuts and sweets by Jean Noué and possibly a stick to remind them when they had been naughty! A special gift might be kept under the tree, but children didn't receive large numbers of gifts even in the wealthier homes.



Cobo Alice doll

Penny woodens from Germany were dressed from the 'bit box' and glass balls made bags of marbles. Building blocks and jigsaws, Noah's Ark and doll's houses were all popular and often home made. At the end of the 19th century Cobo Alice appeared. She was a doll made of calico and stuffed with sawdust and dressed out of the 'bit-box', and was to prove one of the most popular Guernsey toys ever.

Children frequently made their own Christmas gifts for their family and friends, and would also make their own Christmas decorations out of coloured paper and scraps of gold and silver collected throughout the year.

Christmas dinner was traditionally roast beef with roast parsnips and roast potatoes, and plum pudding with Guernsey cream. Tea consisted of gâche and Guernsey biscuits or gallaëttes. In the evening the family would attend the special Christmas service in the Parish Church.

On January 1st the children used to stick evergreen leaves into an apple, and go around giving a New Year blessing in exchange for gifts of food and drink.