



a Victorian Christmas

The festive table

The industrial revolution and the development of the Empire brought in a wider range of goods and the money to purchase them. Most homes made table decorations of greenery, preserved fruits and flowers at Christmas but now wealthier Victorians could plan the table as a delight for the eye as well as the palate. Silver table wear, quality glass, flowers, towering containers of fruit, fine lace and damask were used to glorious effect.

The Christmas feast

Wealthier Victorians often had a roast goose with chestnuts (reassembled with its feathers) or a decorated boar as the centre piece of the feast. A whole fish in aspic and other smaller game birds could also be served. These were accompanied by platters of vegetables, roast potatoes and preserves and chutneys. This was followed by a cannon - ball shaped plum pudding with copious jugs of cream or brandy butter.

In the early Victorian period, dinner at the best houses was served 'à la Francais' when all the courses were set on the table at the same time. Later Victorians established the 'à la Russe' style where each course was brought separately. Children, who normally ate in the nursery, were allowed at the table for the Christmas feast.

Poorer families may only have rabbit, or as a special treat a blackbird pie cooked in the baker's oven. Everyone tried to preserve something special for the family Christmas gathering.

Christmas cards

Christmas cards were introduced by Sir Henry Cole. The Penny Post had been introduced in 1840 and Sir Henry decided to commission the well known artist John Allcott Horsley to design a Christmas Greetings Card. It was too expensive for most people but the idea caught on and in 1870 a special rate for sending greetings cards was agreed and the idea caught on. Birds, especially the Robin, flowers, Christmas greenery and family groups were popular designs and cards were lavishly embellished with lace and decorative scraps.



Christmas stockings

The tradition of the Christmas stocking comes from the legend of St Nicholas. A generous and kindly man, it is said that he threw some gold coins into a poor man's window and they landed in his daughter's stocking. Children in England adopted the practice of hanging up their stockings with the advent of Santa Claus - the American version of St Nicholas.

Christmas gifts

Gifts were always exchanged at the Roman celebration of Saturnalia and in Northern Europe the Norse God Odin was the Gift - Bringer. However the Christian Church discouraged this practice at Christmas feeling it had too many pagan overtones. Instead gifts were traditionally exchanged at New Year.

However, by the end of the 19th century the Victorians had established Christmas Day as the day for giving and receiving making the day a charitable occasion as well as a family one. Gifts of food or clothing were made to the poor but wealthier children would receive a toy.

Adults were not to be left out and the Victorian love of decorative objects encouraged home -made crafts of all kinds. Eventually the newly developed factories produced a variety of goods to cater for the demand.