

Quintessential Christmas

They say there are three stages in a man's life – first you believe in Father Christmas, then you don't believe in Father Christmas, and finally, you are Father Christmas. I can just about remember my transition to the second stage - a dim, hazy memory of my mother's (not Santa's as I had been led to expect) arm snaking around my bedroom door to deposit a bulging gift-packed stocking at the foot of my bed. I believe I remember thinking 'So...there is no Father Christmas after all !', pondering this for about 3 seconds before moving onto the far more important matter - 'I wonder if I'm going to get that electronic chess set I asked for'.

Things have changed a lot since then of course but the essential ingredients of the festive season have remained roughly the same. Let's have a look then at the five key elements of a British Christmas

First of all – food. No family Christmas is complete without a massive Turkey, cooked for about a week, garnished with spicy stuffing, drowned in gravy and accompanied with roast potatoes and assorted vegetables(including the dreaded sprout). Turkey is essentially a fairly tasteless dish, avoided for the rest of the year (interesting comparison with osechi here). That said there is much more focus on natural and organic food these days and the special Christmas markets have become a major attraction in many towns and cities.

<http://www.christmasmarkets.com/UK.html>

Secondly – music. Big changes here. We still have carols and choirs of course but far more popular ,especially with the young, is the fairly recent tradition of the Christmas number 1 (the best selling pop single in the week running up to Christmas day). Who will claim the prestigious top spot is a matter of national debate and bets are even taken on the outcome. Winners used to have a vaguely Christmassy feel and there were several novelty artists (e.g. Mr Blobby) but in recent years winners of talent shows have dominated.

The third element is TV and particularly 'specials'. Our most popular TV shows throughout the year often prepare a one-off Christmas special, longer than usual and set at Christmas (though often filmed in the summer). In addition BBC and ITV will battle it out for best ratings by saving up their blockbuster films for the big day. In my day it was a James Bond film or The Great Escape. These days it tends to be more family orientated and always seems to involve dinosaurs (Jurassic park ...etc).

The fourth essential is gifts. This is, naturally, delightful but also a potential minefield. What do you get people you barely know? How much should I spend? How should I react if I receive something I really don't like? Etc etc...

The fifth and final element is moaning! The British love to moan and moaning at Christmas is a vital part of the event. Typical moans are directed at the early run up the festive season; the expense; the weather, the crowded shops and the quality of the TV programmes. The one thing that should never be complained about though is the Christmas dinner: however dry the turkey, overcooked the sprouts and even if the desert is frozen solid in the middle, everything must be declared to have been 'delicious'.

These moans are typically voiced by the older members of the household and should not be taken too seriously. They form a useful counterweight to the enthusiasm of the children, helping to keep the festive merriment on the right side of decorum. Indeed for some British people, mysterious creatures that we are, moaning at Christmas is probably the highlight of the whole event.....

Surviving Christmas - Some useful phrases:

How to say thank you for dinner:

The comedian Graham Fellows advises that if you find yourself invited to Christmas dinner, you should show your appreciation three times during the meal.

As the food is served - *'Mmmm this looks good'*,

While actually eating – *'Mmm, this is good!'*,

And finally when the meal is over – *'That was good!'* Any less might suggest dissatisfaction and any more would just irritate.

How to respond when given a gift:

'Oh thank you so much! It's lovely!'

'Oh you shouldn't have!'

'It's just what I've always wanted!'

How to moan about Christmas:

'It gets earlier every year!'

'It's just too much trouble! We're not going to bother next year!'

Written by Philip Patrick
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