

# How Christmas came to be

Christmas is fast approaching and thousands of Christmas cards will be printed with each one depicting stockings by the fireside, coloured lights, and, of course, a Christmas tree. But how did this universally celebrated festival come to be the Christmas we all love today?

Many are familiar with the religious significance of Christmas as the day Christ was born. Yet the origins of this winter celebration actually date back to the Roman festival Saturnalia, in honour of the God of Agriculture, Saturn. For one week in December, public banquets were held and slaves were even given freedom! What you readers may not know, however, is that Christ's real birthday is still a mystery. The day of December 25th, was actually randomly chosen to carry on the traditions of the Saturnalia festival.

It may be difficult to believe, but Christmas has not always been a part of our history. When the Puritans came to power in 1647, Christmas was cancelled! They believed Christmas was a wasteful festival which distracted from the pure ideas of Christianity. Even in America, Christmas fell out of popularity after the Americans revolted against the British because they considered Christmas to be an English custom.

But then Charles Dickens came along. You may be familiar with his novel 'A Christmas Carol', which was the Christmas production at Henrietta Barnett last year. For the first time, Dickens portrayed Christmas as a time of goodwill and generosity towards the less privileged, and he popularised Christmas Carols such as 'Hark the

Herald Angels Sing' and 'God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen'. Not least, Dickens coined the now famous phrase 'Merry Christmas'!

We must also thank Queen Victoria for making Christmas what it is today. While the original tradition of the 'Christmas tree' came from Germany, the idea of decorating your tree with lights did not enter British culture until an image of the royal family with their Christmas tree at Windsor Castle was



1848 engraving of the royal family decorating a tree.

printed in the news. Queen Victoria herself wrote: "My beloved Albert took me to my tree and table, covered by such numberless gifts, really too much, too magnificent." In modern terms, one could say the image of the royal family around their Christmas tree went 'viral'.

What some people don't realise is that many customs we associate today with Christmas are actually very recent and have little to do with the festival's religious significance. Rudolph the Red nosed Reindeer was only invented in 1939 as a way of luring customers into a Chicago department store! In fact, there is still a lot of controversy around whether Christmas is merely a national holiday – a time of giving gifts and sharing laughter – or a time of true religious significance. It's even said that the original meaning of Christmas has been "lost in a shopping spree".

In reality, many people don't celebrate Christmas as a religious festival, but enjoy the opportunity to not go to school or work and spend time with family. Because of this, American card

companies have adopted the more general slogan "Happy Holidays" and it has even been suggested that we refer to the Christmas tree as a 'Holiday Tree' instead. Have you readers put up your 'Holiday Trees' yet?

And don't think I have forgotten about Santa Claus! Santa Claus is actually based on a monk in Turkey called St Nicolas, who gave all his wealth away to the sick and poor, and travelled around Europe protecting children. He became famous less than 150 years ago when he was depicted in a cartoon, wearing his iconic red suit and black boots.

But Christmas has not always been an innocent festival. In both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, Christmas was seen as a threat. On Christmas Day in atheist Moscow, children were encouraged to spit on crucifixes. In Nazi Germany, Christmas was stripped of its religiousness and used as political propaganda. It is interesting to reflect on this often-forgotten darker history of Christmas.

Even in Britain, before WWII, Christmas had mostly been celebrated by the upper classes. Now, however, the beauty of Christmas shines in its ability to bring everyone together, rich and poor, no matter their culture or religion. Millions of people celebrate Christmas not for its religious significance, but because it is a holiday! It is unique in that non-Christians and Christians alike partake in the laughter and the holiday spirit, making it truly universal.

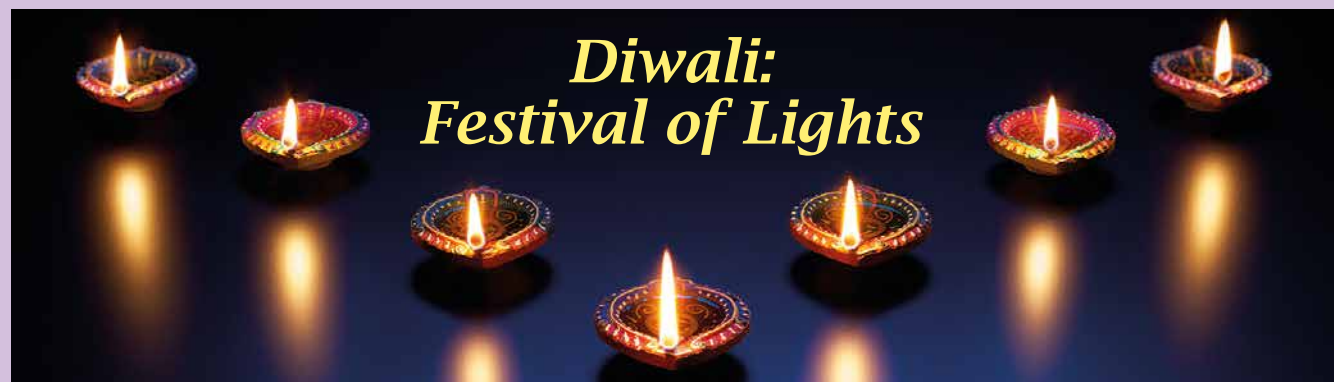
With the threat of Covid-19 robbing us of our big family Christmas, and in a world becoming ever more polarised, we are now in more need than ever of some vital holiday spirit.



A gingerbread house I decorated, Christmas 2018. Today, gingerbread is a distinctive flavour often associated with Christmas.



## Diwali: Festival of Lights



Diwali is a festival observed throughout the world, mainly by Hindus, Sikhs and Jains, which celebrates light over darkness, good overcoming evil and new beginnings and opportunities. Diwali falls in late October to mid-November as the dates come from the Hindu calendar and it will be celebrated from 12 November to 16 November this year, with festivities lasting up to a week.

The word 'Diwali' is derived from the Sanskrit (an ancient Indian language) word 'Deepavali', which means row of lighted lamps, in recognition of the return of deities Rama and Sita to Ayodhya after their 14-year exile. People celebrate by lighting candles or oil lamps also known as 'diyas', and placing them anywhere they can, in houses or places such as on doorsteps to bring good energy into the home. Lighting candles can also be seen as a way to invite prosperity and good fortune into a household. Fireworks displays are popular too, whether at home with family, or hosted by the local temple, which brings the community together to enjoy the moment.

People also create Rangolis, beautiful patterns made from coloured powders and rice, on the floor, to decorate and as a sign of good luck, especially at the entrances of houses, to invite good energy inside. Patterns can be anything from flowers to

traditional designs and use a variety of colours, making them very vibrant and beautiful.

Food is also a major part of the celebrations, with an assortment of dishes being served. Indian sweets, otherwise known as Mithai are a staple part of Diwali, with most of them being made up of flour and sugar and then fried. Many sweet treats are covered in gold or silver edible paper and can come in various shapes. Savory snack type dishes like samosas (triangle shaped parcels filled with vegetables) or bhel which is made from puffed rice, vegetables and tamarind sauce are also enjoyed through the week.

People wear traditional clothing, such as saris in bright colours and have temporary henna tattoos on their hands. It is the perfect occasion for everyone to get dressed up in fancy clothing. Many parties are also held which gives everyone an excuse for even more dressing up!

But in the end, Diwali is the best occasion for people to spend time with their loved ones, eating good food and having fun. It unites people across the world and helps people create fun memories that they will cherish for life. Diwali celebrations show a time of great festivity, light and colour!

KAYA H



## Celebrations of Light

The arrival of winter brings with it darkness at 5 o'clock and even colder, wetter weather than before. Though this can seem dismal, one upside is that against the backdrop of darkness, light shines even brighter. There are several celebrations of light around this time of year, Chanukah (a Jewish festival) obviously being one, but also Diwali (a Hindu/Jain/Sikh) festival (which Kaya has written about in her article). The Suburb also celebrates New Year's Eve with a fireworks show, and there are many displays around Bonfire Night. Light as a symbol has connotations of hope, happiness, and goodness, and the fact that it is celebrated across different cultures just shows that these feelings are universal.

In the case of Chanukah, light is the physical representation of a miracle: that the candles could burn for eight days when really there was only enough oil left for one. The story is one of success against the odds, hope in the darkness, and the triumph of good over evil. The religious significance of Diwali varies, but the most common belief is that it celebrates Rama and Sita's defeat of Ravana's evil army. On their way back home, they were guided by the lights their neighbours had placed in their windows, and in honour of this, it is customary for people celebrating Diwali to burn oil in 'divas' on their windowsills. This is strikingly similar to the Jewish custom of lighting a Chanukiah (8 branched candlestick) and placing them on their windowsills for all to see. Though from a religious point of view, Christmas is not actually about light, the beautiful displays of Christmas lights are one of the most noticeable features of this time of year.

In the darkness of winter, seeing lights in people's windows or even fireworks in the sky can really brighten my mood, at a time when hibernation can otherwise seem like the most attractive option. There is something comforting and unifying about the fact that people all across the Suburb (and indeed all over the world) are celebrating different things in similar ways, as if the need to create light in the midst of darkness is somehow ingrained in human nature.

ROSA B

## Become part of the community



If you'd like to join the Suburb community, please complete and return the form below or join online at [hgsra.uk](https://hgsra.uk). Our Privacy Policy can be viewed at [hgsra.uk/about/dataprotection.html](https://hgsra.uk/about/dataprotection.html).

### MEMBERSHIP FORM

One subscription covers everyone at the address for a calendar year  
I/We would like to join the HGS Residents Association.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Postcode \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Subscription amount (Minimum payment £15) .... £ \_\_\_\_\_

Fellowship donation\* (Optional) ..... £ \_\_\_\_\_

(To support Fellowship, a Suburb charity, in its work for Suburb senior citizens)

Total ..... £ \_\_\_\_\_

\* I declare by making this donation that I want to Gift Aid my donations to Fellowship House and am a UK taxpayer paying sufficient tax to meet the Gift Aid on my donation. I agree to Fellowship receiving my details for this purpose.

(Delete the above declaration if you do not wish to Gift Aid your donation or do not pay sufficient tax)

I wish to pay:

☐ by cheque (payable to HGS Residents Association). Please write your address on the back of the cheque and send with this form to the address below.

☐ online via PayPal or with Credit or Debit Card – visit [hgsra.uk/join](https://hgsra.uk/join)

☐ by bank transfer to HGS Residents Association:  
Bank: HSBC, 897 Finchley Road, NW11 7NX Sort Code: 40-03-11  
Account number: 91605747

Please return this form to: The Membership Secretary, HGS Residents Association, PO Box 67700, London NW11 1NS.

(SN144)