The History of Christmas Traditions

Christmas is a time for a variety of traditions: Christmas cards, pantomimes, Christmas carols, decorations and a Christmas feast. Surprisingly, some of these traditions started off very differently to how we see them today.

Christmas Cards

In 1843, Sir Henry Cole, a **Public Record Office** worker, and John Horsley, his artist friend, created the first Christmas card. They became increasingly popular over time as the train network expanded, mass printing methods improved and stamps became cheaper.

Pantomimes

In the 1720s, John Rich, a famous stage artist, created the harlequinade: a short chase scene with traditional **masque** characters and little to no dialogue. Building upon this idea, performer David Garrick expanded the harlequinade by using English folk stories and dialogue. He also limited their performances to the Christmas season. Over time, colourful scenery, numerous costume changes and witty dialogue were added.

Christmas Carols

Various historians believe that carols can be linked back to **winter solstice** songs that many people sang during their celebrations long ago. Written records from the first Christmas celebration show that the Bishop of Rome announced that an old carol from AD 129 called the Angel's Hymn should be sung. It is now commonly thought of as the first carol.

As Christianity grew, more Latin Christmas carols were written and sung in religious houses all over Europe. During the Middle Ages, many popular Christmas carols were written in both Latin and English. In 1880, the first Christmas carol service was organised by Edward White Benson in Truro, Cornwall.

Did You Know...?

The first Christmas celebration on record took place in Rome on 25th December AD 336.

Christmas Decorations

As an ancient tradition sometimes linked to **Pagans**, Christmas trees became popular after 1848. This was because Prince Albert started to have evergreen trees shipped from Germany for his annual family Christmas celebrations. Soon, the idea became popular and spread throughout England and the world.

Martin Luther, a famous 16th-century Protestant reformer, is often credited with being the first person to add candles as lights to his Christmas tree. In 1880, Thomas Edison created the first set of electric Christmas lights and it didn't take long for people to use them on their houses and trees.

Christmas Feasts

Many historians believe that the traditional Christmas meal can be traced back to ancient winter solstice feasts. Roasted, stewed or minced meats, fruits and sweet treats were enjoyed from around 4000 years ago, right through the Middle Ages and up to the present day. Early feasts often included venison and pork but soon changed during the Georgian and Victorian eras to include birds, such as turkey and goose.

Since the Middle Ages, mince pies have changed from large and often rectangular meat-filled pies to the small, dainty fruit pies of today. In the 14th century, the Christmas pudding grew out of a porridge called frumenty or a stew called pottage. It wasn't until the 17th century that our modern version began to take form.

Glossary

masques:	Costume parties where people danced, sang songs and acted out stories.
Pagans:	People that don't follow any of the world's main religions.
Public Record Office:	An early version of the Post Office.
winter solstice:	The shortest day of the year.

Questions

1. Which two Christmas traditions started in 1880? Tick one.

   ○ Christmas cards and Christmas lights

   ○ Christmas carols and a Christmas feast

   ○ Christmas lights and mince pies

   ○ Christmas lights and a Christmas carol service

2. Number the events from 1-4 to show the order that they happened in.

   ☐ Christmas trees became popular throughout England and the world.

   ☐ The first Christmas celebration took place.

   ☐ The harlequinade, a short chase scene, was created.

   ☐ The first Christmas card was designed and produced.

3. Where did the first Christmas celebration on record take place?

   _____

4. Look at the section called **Pantomimes**.
   Find and copy one word that means the same as 'funny' or 'comical'.

   _____

5. Fill in the missing words.

   _____, some of these traditions started off very _____ to

   how we see them today.

6. Summarise what you have learnt about the history of Christmas traditions in 25 words or fewer.

   _____

   _____

   _____

7. Identify **two** facts that most interest you and explain your reasons.

_____

_____

_____

8. Would you have liked to have seen one of the first pantomimes? Explain your answer.

_____

_____

_____

Answers

1. Which two Christmas traditions started in 1880? Tick one.

   ○ Christmas cards and Christmas lights

   ○ Christmas carols and a Christmas feast

   ○ Christmas lights and mince pies

   ⊘ **Christmas lights and a Christmas carol service**

2. Number the events from 1-4 to show the order that they happened in.

   4 Christmas trees became popular throughout England and the world.

   1 The first Christmas celebration took place.

   2 The harlequinade, a short chase scene, was created.

   3 The first Christmas card was designed and produced.

3. Where did the first Christmas celebration on record take place?

   The first Christmas celebration on record took place in Rome.

4. Look at the section called **Pantomimes**.
   Find and copy one word that means the same as 'funny' or 'comical'.

   witty

5. Fill in the missing words.

   Surprisingly, some of these traditions started off very **differently** to how we see them today.

6. Summarise what you have learnt about the history of Christmas traditions in 25 words or fewer.

   Pupils' own responses, such as: Many Christmas traditions, such as the Christmas carol, decorations and feast, date back over 1000 years. Others date back to the 19th century.

7. Identify **two** facts that most interest you and explain your reasons.

Pupils' own responses, such as: I find it interesting how mince pies and Christmas puddings have changed because I don't really like the sweet fruit in either. I think I would have preferred the original pie and the porridge.

8. Would you have liked to have seen one of the first pantomimes? Explain your answer.

Pupils' own responses, such as: Yes, I think it would be very interesting to see how they performed them and compare things such as costumes and scenery to today's performances.

The History of Christmas Traditions

Christmas is a time for various traditions: sending Christmas cards, seeing pantomimes, singing Christmas carols, decorating the house and eating a special meal on Christmas Day. However, each of these traditions has a fascinating history.

Christmas Cards

In 1843, a Public Record Office (the early Post Office) worker called Sir Henry Cole and John Horsley, his artist friend, created the first Christmas card. Unfortunately, the cards were expensive and no more than 1000 were sold. However, as the British railway network expanded from the 1840s onwards, along with stamps becoming cheaper and printing methods improving, Christmas cards became increasingly popular over time.

Pantomimes

Most scholars believe that pantomimes grew out of Italian comedy and masques (costume parties where people performed dances, sang songs and acted out stories) that were popular from the 14th to 17th century. In the 1720s, a famous stage artist, called John Rich, created the harlequinade: a short chase scene with key masque characters and little to no dialogue. Soon after, performer David Garrick chose to expand upon the harlequinade by using English folk stories and dialogue. He also only staged them during the Christmas season.

Over time, colourful scenery, numerous costume changes and witty dialogue that often mentions current events were added.

Christmas Carols

Various historians believe that the carol developed out of songs many people sang during their winter solstice celebrations hundreds of years before Christianity was popular. On 25th December AD 336, the first Christmas celebration on record took place in Rome. Records show that the Bishop of Rome declared that a carol called the Angel's Hymn (that dates back to AD 129) should be sung. This is considered by many to be the first carol.

Over time, more religious carols were sung in churches and monasteries during the season. More traditional carols were written during the Middle Ages in both Latin and English and carols grew in popularity. In 1880, the first carol service (organised by Edward White Benson) was held in Truro, Cornwall.

Christmas Decorations

Decorating our houses with evergreen wreaths and branches can be traced back to ancient cultures, such as the Romans, Pagans and Egyptians. As Christianity spread across Europe, Christians adopted this practice, using the evergreen branches as a sign of eternal life.

As an ancient tradition sometimes linked to Pagans, Christmas trees became popular after 1848. This was because Prince Albert had fir trees shipped from Germany for annual family Christmas celebrations. Soon, the idea became popular and spread throughout England and the world.

Martin Luther, a famous 16th-century Protestant reformer, is often credited with being the first person to add candles as lights to his Christmas tree. In 1880, Thomas Edison created the first set of electric Christmas lights and it didn't take long for people to use them on their houses and trees.

Christmas Feasts

Many ancient civilisations celebrated the winter solstice with an enormous feast. Numerous scholars believe that our modern-day Christmas meal grew out of this savoury tradition. Roasted, stewed or minced meats, fruits and sweet treats were enjoyed right through the Middle Ages and up to the present day. Early feasts often included venison and various cuts of pork but soon changed during the Georgian and Victorian eras to include birds, such as turkey and goose.

Since the Middle Ages, mince pies have changed from large and often rectangular meat-filled pies to the small, dainty fruit pies of today. In the 14th century, the Christmas pudding originated from either a porridge called frumenty or a stew called pottage. It wasn't until the 17th century that our modern version began to take form.

Many Christmas traditions can be traced back to various ancient festivals. For thousands of years, celebrating with greenery, lights and good food has been part of our human history.

Questions

1. According to the text, which three ancient cultures decorated their homes with evergreen branches? Tick one.

   ○ Romans, Pagans, Georgians

   ○ Romans, Pagans, Victorians

   ○ Romans, Pagans, Egyptians

   ○ Romans, Pagans, Tudors

2. Draw **four** lines and match each person to their description.

John Horsley		a well-known performer who developed the harlequinade
John Rich		declared that the Angel's Hymn should be sung during the first Christmas celebration
Bishop of Rome		the artist that helped to design and produce the first Christmas card
Edward White Benson		organised the first carol service in Truro

3. How far back does the Angel's Hymn date?

   _____

4. Look at the section called **Christmas Decorations**.
   Find and copy one word that means the same as 'to be recognised for doing something'.

   _____

5. Fill in the missing words.

   However, each of these _____ has a _____ history.

6. If you could cook and serve your own special celebration dessert. What would you make and why?

_____

_____

_____

7. If you could design your own card to send out, what would it look like and what celebration would it be for? Explain your answer.

_____

_____

_____

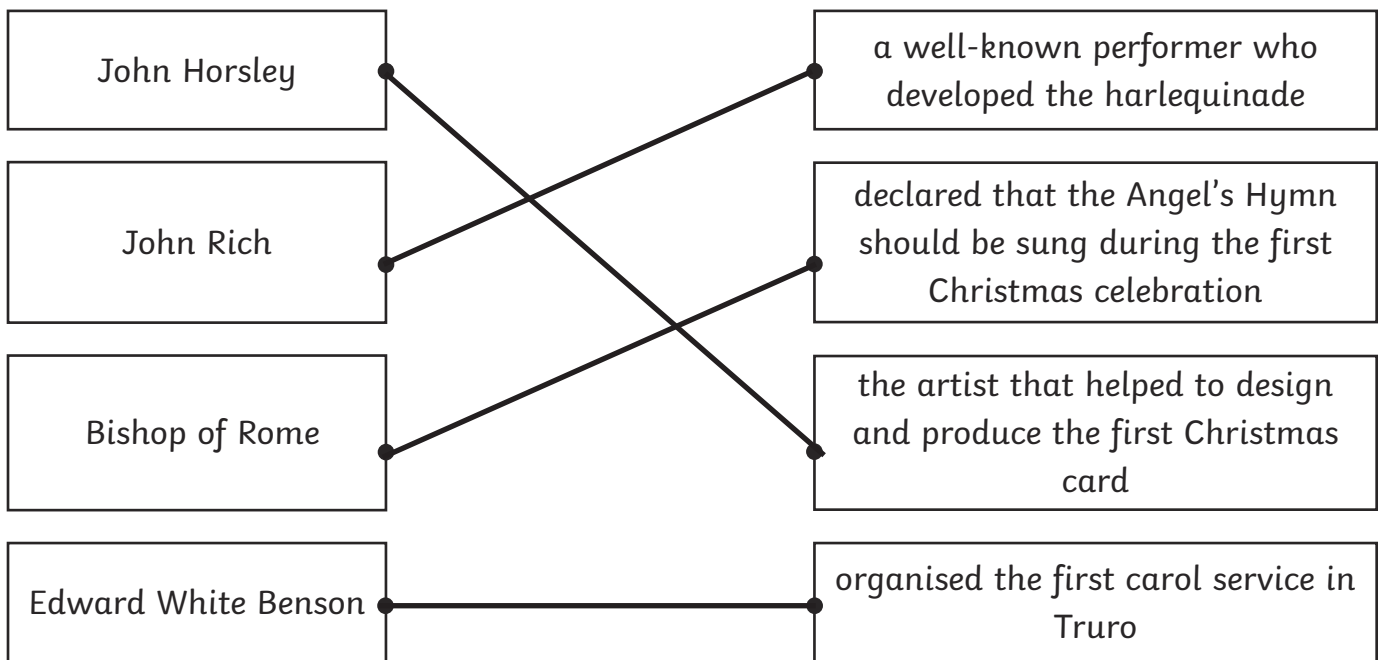8. Which tradition's origin surprises you? Explain your answer.

_____

_____

_____

9. Would you like to try a traditional mince pie and Christmas pudding?
Explain your answer.

_____

_____

_____

Answers

1. According to the text, which three ancient cultures decorated their homes with evergreen branches? Tick one.

   ○ Romans, Pagans, Georgians

   ○ Romans, Pagans, Victorians

   ⊘ **Romans, Pagans, Egyptians**

   ○ Romans, Pagans, Tudors

2. Draw **four** lines and match each person to their description.

John Horsley	a well-known performer who developed the harlequinade
John Rich	declared that the Angel's Hymn should be sung during the first Christmas celebration
Bishop of Rome	the artist that helped to design and produce the first Christmas card
Edward White Benson	organised the first carol service in Truro

3. How far back does the Angel's Hymn date?

   The Angel's Hymn dates back to AD 129.

4. Look at the section called **Christmas Decorations**.
   Find and copy one word that means the same as 'to be recognised for doing something'.

   credited

5. Fill in the missing words.

   However, each of these **traditions** has a **fascinating** history.

6. If you could cook and serve your own special celebration dessert. What would you make and why?

    Pupils' own responses, such as: If I could create my own celebration dessert, I would create a salted caramel, peanut butter and chocolate cake because I love these flavours and would like to try them together.

7. If you could design your own card to send out, what would it look like and what celebration would it be for? Explain your answer.

    Pupils' own responses, such as: I think I would like to design a funny card about a family decorating the Christmas tree because I think everyone has had the Christmas tree go wrong so people could relate and laugh.

8. Which tradition's origin surprises you? Explain your answer.

    Pupils' own responses, such as: I didn't realise that Christmas carols were so old. I thought they were more of a Victorian invention. I also was surprised that Christmas cards only date back to the 1840s as I thought they were older.

9. Would you like to try a traditional mince pie and Christmas pudding? Explain your answer.

    Pupils' own responses, such as: I'm not sure if I would like the Christmas pudding as I don't like porridge but yes, I think I would like to try the old minced pie because I like meat.

The History of Christmas Traditions

Christmas is often associated with a number of traditions: sending Christmas cards, seeing pantomimes, singing Christmas carols, decorating the house and eating a special meal on Christmas Day. But from where do these traditions originate?

Christmas Cards

In 1843, a man working in the Public Record Office (the equivalent of the modern-day Post Office), who was called Sir Henry Cole, and Horsley, his artist friend, designed and produced the first Christmas card. Unfortunately, the cards were expensive and no more than 1000 were sold. However, due to the expansion of the British railway network (from the 1840s onwards), cheaper postal service and improved printing methods, Christmas cards gained popularity over time.

Pantomimes

The word pantomime means 'all kinds of mime'. Scholars believe they were initially based on a form of Italian comedy and masques (parties where people dressed up in costumes, performed dances, sang songs and acted out stories) that were performed all over Europe from the 14th to 17th century. In the 1720s, John Rich, a well-known performer, developed the harlequinade: a short chase scene with key masque characters and little to no dialogue. Then, David Garrick, a fellow performer, chose to expand upon the harlequinade: he used English folk stories in which his characters recited lines and he only staged them during the Christmas season.

Over time, the pantomime evolved further into how we see it performed today: elaborate scenery, various costume changes and clever dialogue that often mention current events.

Christmas Carols

Centuries before Christianity spread through Europe, many people sang songs during their winter solstice celebrations. Various historians believe these were the basis for carols. On 25th December AD 336, the first Christmas celebration on record took place in Rome. Records from that event show that the Bishop of Rome declared that a carol called the Angel's Hymn (that dates back to AD 129) should be sung. This is widely viewed as the oldest carol in history.

From the 4th century onwards, more religious carols were written in Latin and sung in churches and monasteries during the season. During the Middle Ages, more traditional carols were written in both Latin and English, some of which are still sung today. Over time, carols grew in popularity and in 1880, the first carol service (organised by Edward White Benson) was held in Truro, Cornwall.

Christmas Decorations

Over 2000 years ago, ancient cultures, such as the Romans, Pagans and Egyptians, decorated their homes with evergreen wreaths and branches during their different winter solstice festivals. As Christianity spread across Europe, Christians adopted this practice, using the evergreen branches as a symbol of eternal life.

A longstanding tradition in Germany, Christmas trees grew in popularity during the 19th century largely due to Prince Albert. From 1848, he began to import fir trees from Germany annually for family Christmas celebrations. The idea spread throughout England and soon, Christmas trees were an essential element of Christmas in the UK and around the world. Many historians believe that Martin Luther, a famous 16th-century Protestant reformer, was the first person to attach candles with pins or wax as lights to his Christmas tree. After Thomas Edison created the first set of electric Christmas lights in 1880, their use on houses and trees grew over time.

Christmas Feasts

As the winter solstice was an important event to numerous ancient civilisations, many of them celebrated it with an enormous feast. Various scholars believe that our modern-day Christmas meal grew out of this ancient tradition. Roasted, stewed or minced meats as well as sweet treats made with dried fruits were enjoyed right through the Middle Ages and up to the present day. Early feasts sometimes featured unusual birds, venison and various cuts of pork but soon evolved during the Georgian and Victorian eras to include more familiar birds, such as turkey and goose.

Mince pies have changed since the Middle Ages too. Traditionally, they were larger and often rectangular so as to represent Jesus' manger. They were also filled with meat, such as lamb, as opposed to minced fruit. Dating back to the 14th century, the Christmas pudding was derived from either a porridge called frumenty or a stew called pottage. It wasn't until the 17th century that our modern version began to take form.

Over the centuries, Christmas traditions have evolved from aspects of various ancient festivals. Celebrating with greenery, lights and good food has been part of human history for millennia.

Questions

1. How far back does the Christmas pudding date? Tick one.

   ○ 4th century

   ○ 14th century

   ○ 17th century

   ○ 19th century

2. Draw **four** lines and match each person to their description.

Sir Henry Cole	He began to import pine trees from Germany annually for family Christmas celebrations.
Prince Albert	Historians believe he was the first person to attach candles as lights to his Christmas tree.
Martin Luther	He helped design and produce the first Christmas card.
David Garrick	He expanded the harlequinade and only staged them during Christmas.

3. When was the first Christmas celebration on record?

   _____

4. Look at the section called **Christmas Feasts**.
   Find and copy one word that means the same as 'features' or 'parts of'.

   _____

5. Fill in the missing words.

   _____, the cards were _____ and no more than 1000

   were sold.

6. If you could see any traditional story told as a pantomime, which one would it be and why?

_____

_____

_____

7. If you could write your own song for a special day, which special day would it be for and what would your song be about? Explain your answer.

_____

_____

_____

8. Why do you think Christmas cards became and continue to be popular?

_____

_____

_____

9. If you could go back in time, which Christmas tradition would you like to see in its original form? Explain your answer.

_____

_____

_____

10. Tick one box in each row to show whether each statement is **true** or **false**.
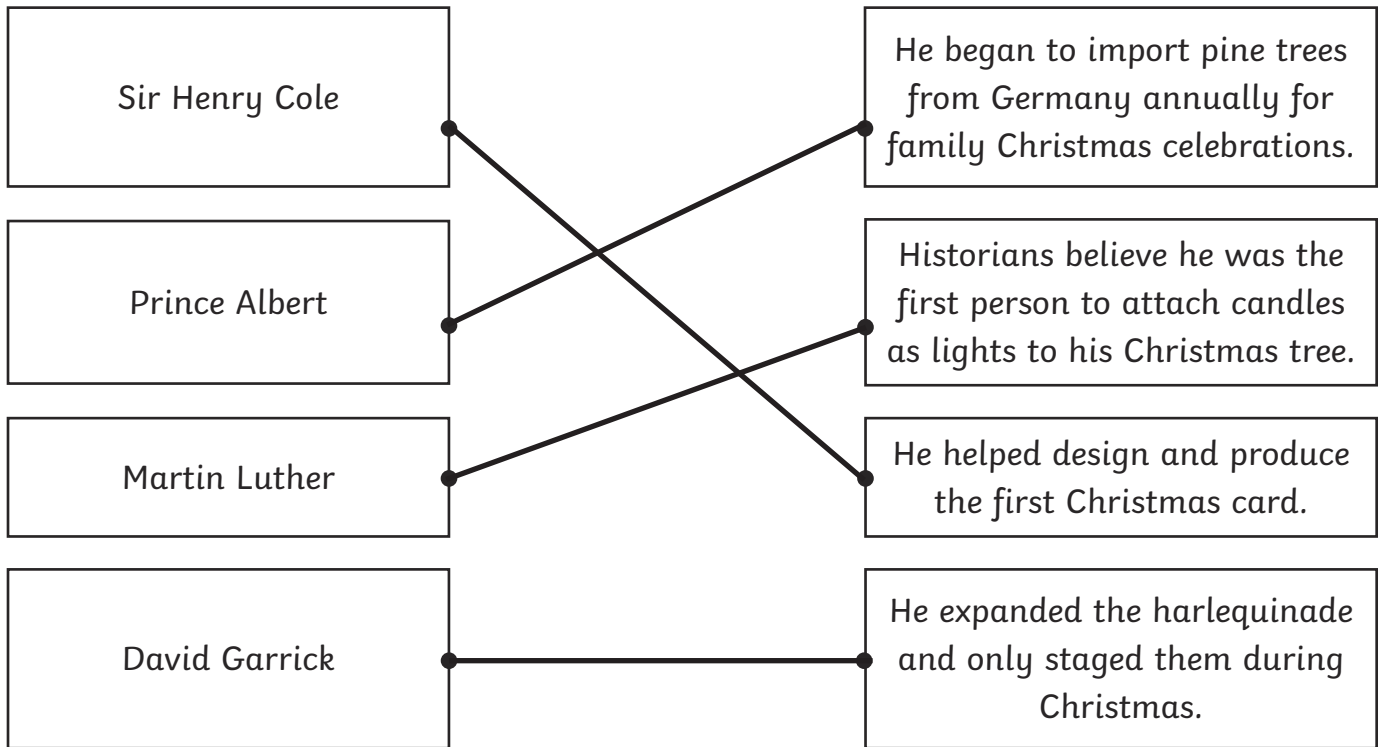
	True	False
Traditionally, mince pies were often rectangular so as to represent Jesus' manger.		
The Christmas pudding hasn't changed much since the 14th century.		
The first carol service took place in Rome.		
Thomas Edison created the first set of electric Christmas lights.		
Early Christmas feasts sometimes featured unusual birds.		

Answers

1. How far back does the Christmas pudding date? Tick one.

   ○ 4th century

   ⊘ **14th century**

   ○ 17th century

   ○ 19th century

2. Draw **four** lines and match each person to their description.

Sir Henry Cole	He began to import pine trees from Germany annually for family Christmas celebrations.
Prince Albert	Historians believe he was the first person to attach candles as lights to his Christmas tree.
Martin Luther	He helped design and produce the first Christmas card.
David Garrick	He expanded the harlequinade and only staged them during Christmas.

3. When was the first Christmas celebration on record?

   The first Christmas celebration on record took place on 25th December AD 336.

4. Look at the section called **Christmas Feasts**.
   Find and copy one word that means the same as 'features' or 'parts of'.

   aspects

5. Fill in the missing words.

   Unfortunately, the cards were **expensive** and no more than 1000 were sold.

6. If you could see any traditional story told as a pantomime, which one would it be and why?

Pupils' own responses, such as: I think I would like to see Hansel and Gretel performed as a pantomime because it would be amazing to see how they create the gingerbread house.

7. If you could write your own song for a special day, which special day would it be for and what would your song be about? Explain your answer.

Pupils' own responses, such as: I think I would like to write a song about the first May bank holiday and how the weather is getting warmer, barbecues are happening, etc. I love this day and I think the song would be fun to write.

8. Why do you think Christmas cards became and continue to be popular?

Pupils' own responses, such as: I think that Christmas cards became popular and still are because they are a way of spreading the joy of Christmas and letting someone know you are thinking of them during that time.

9. If you could go back in time, which Christmas tradition would you like to see in its original form? Explain your answer.

Pupils' own responses, such as: I think I would like to go back and see the first Christmas tree that Prince Albert put up. It would be amazing to see the candles and decorations the family used and how different it is to modern Christmas trees.

10. Tick one box in each row to show whether each statement is **true** or **false**.

	True	False
Traditionally, mince pies were often rectangular so as to represent Jesus' manger.	✓	
The Christmas pudding hasn't changed much since the 14th century.		✓
The first carol service took place in Rome.		✓
Thomas Edison created the first set of electric Christmas lights.	✓	
Early Christmas feasts sometimes featured unusual birds.	✓	