



CHRISTMAS PAST



Dorney is approaching another Christmas, one hopefully free from the restrictions of the past two years. Families and friends will be preparing to enjoy the festivities together. Decorations will emerge from storage to brighten our houses inside and out. Parents and grandparents will watch their children's Nativity plays and take them to see Father Christmas. The post-box will be fuller than usual. Old traditions will be revived and new ones created. St James' church will welcome villagers to Christingle and midnight services and the ancient church in Boveney will once again be filled with candlelight and the sound of carols. How, I wonder, did Dorney celebrate Christmas in times past?

Christmas really became the celebration we know and love today in Victorian times. Many features were popularised by Queen Victoria and the Royal Family, such as the Christmas tree bedecked with candles, decorations and gifts. Sending cards, decorating the house with more than greenery, singing carols and eating turkey for Christmas dinner all developed into the traditions associated with the big family get-together.

In Dorney the church has always been the focal point for Christmas, and the Windsor and Eton Express reported that the Christmas services in 1904 were unusually bright, the singing by the choir boys greatly improved under the instruction of the new organist. No doubt the congregation joined in with the processional hymn "O come all ye faithful".

In 1897 a Christmas party for 250 children was put on in the coach house at Dorney Court. The room was decorated and there was a Christmas tree. A tea was provided at 4pm, followed by a concert performed by both children and adults. Who knew that the comic song "Daddy wouldn't buy me a bow-wow" was already popular that long ago! Afterwards the children were given prizes of warm clothing and presents of toys and sweets and were sent home with a bun and an orange each.

The tea was served by local ladies including the wives of the vicar and the doctor, and the event was funded largely by the Dowager Lady Palmer. She was renowned for her generosity and kindness not only to the children but also the poorer folk of Dorney and Lake End. It was recorded that at Christmas 1900, shortly before her death, she had given them her customary gifts – 70 pounds of tea, seventy sacks of coal and 200 yards of flannel to make clothes.



THE CHRISTMAS TREE.

Then as now, charity was very much to the fore at Christmas, when good causes solicited contributions to help those less fortunate. On Christmas Day in 1850, even the inmates in the workhouse and the prisoners in gaol were treated to beef and plum pudding, thanks to charitable donations. By 1910, the workhouse celebrations had become more elaborate. The wards were decorated with evergreen foliage and paper streamers and the tables with flowers and plants. There was a Christmas tree and stockings full of presents for the children, who



sang carols in the chapel and round the infirmary wards, largely filled by the elderly. Dinner was roast beef with mashed potatoes and parsnips followed by Christmas



pudding, with oranges, sweets and nuts for the children, tea and sugar for the women and tobacco

and snuff for the men.

Food has long been an important element of Christmas festivities. For much of the 19th century, a key feature locally was the displays of meat in the butchers' shops in Windsor, Eton, Slough, Burnham and Maidenhead. Much of the beef and lamb had been bought at Slough livestock market, some prize beasts being reared by Dorney farmers. Beef was the meat of choice at this season for Queen Victoria who often spent Christmas at Windsor with her family and guests. But pork and ham, poultry and game were also in demand. Sausage meat for stuffing turkeys was advertised as being made fresh every few minutes during Christmas week.

The descriptions in the local press of the butchers' and grocers' shops evoke the words of Charles Dickens in "A Christmas Carol". A shop in Eton was said to be "*literally covered with fat turkeys, geese, capons, hares, pheasants etc*". At the grocers, oranges and lemons from Spain and Italy were artistically arranged alongside French apples and plums, preserved figs and crystallized fruit. Dried fruit, nuts and citrus peel were being advertised for Christmas in mid-November, no doubt so that the Christmas puddings could be made. Stuchbery and Thompson, grocers in Maidenhead, delivered free to Dorney on Mondays. High street shop windows from bakers and confectioners to drapers, stationers and toy sellers were all designed to tempt the customer looking for goodies or gifts. Post offices were reported as being super busy with parcels and Christmas cards. On Christmas Eve in 1893 – a Sunday – Maidenhead Post Office had to take the exceptional step of organising a second delivery to deal with the large quantity of perishable items.

Another perennial desire is for a white Christmas but hopes often seem to have been dashed. At Christmas 1857, *“the unusual warmth of the weather was the remark of everybody”*. On Christmas Eve 1910 it was observed that *“there is no sign of what people love to call ‘the good old-fashioned Christmas’ with which frost and snow and the yule log are all associated.”* Instead, the Thames had *“suddenly been transformed into a swollen torrent”* and riverside towns and villages including Dorney and Eton Wick were suffering from floods. The following year there was still no snow and a green Christmas was predicted. Regardless of the actual weather on 25 December, Christmas card manufacturers continued to depict snowy backgrounds to their seasonal greetings.

The few days off work over Christmas provided the chance for different activities. The editor of the Windsor and Eton Express on Christmas Eve 1910 commented *“everybody is talking of the holidays and how and where they are going to spend them....people whose time is fully occupied with the cares and trials of a strenuous life allow themselves a little relaxation”*. In 1893 Burnham football club had matches on 23 and 26 December. Boxing Day was also the date for sports such as an afternoon pigeon shoot at the Palmer Arms in 1906 and competitive cross country running in 1910. Christmas holiday excursions by train to London on Boxing Day 1906 were advertised at 2s 6d from Windsor and Eton. Evening entertainments were also on offer. In

Windsor, there was a big audience at the Wellington Music Hall during the evenings of Christmas week in 1869 while the Theatre Royal put on a Christmas pantomime in 1870 which was so successful that the run was extended. While pantomime remains popular, some shows would not be repeated today. In December



1893, the Burnham Minstrel Troupe performed at various venues, including Dorney schoolroom to raise money for the Dorney Reading Room – *“the room was well filled by an enthusiastic and delighted audience”*. Morris dancers from a nearby village performed in the streets in Eton for Christmas shoppers in 1857. However we spend Christmas, it remains an occasion to celebrate just as it was for the Victorian residents of Dorney. I wish all readers of DPN and their families a happy holiday. In the immortal words of Tiny Tim at the end of *“A Christmas Carol”*, *“God bless us, every one!”*.

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