

**All about Christmas – what you may or may not know**

* Christmas is supposed to mark the birthday of Jesus, the Messiah, on December 25th. But there is no mention of December 25th in the Bible and most historians believe he was born either in the spring or the autumn. That is why the sheep were “on the hills” and not on the plains. According to Biblical scholars, Jesus was most likely born in a cave rather than a wooden stable, with no ox, camel, donkey or cows present. Some people hate the abbreviation ‘Xmas’ - but it’s not actually irreligious. The letter ‘X’ is a Greek abbreviation for Christ.
* December 25th was probably chosen because it coincided with the ancient pagan festival Saturnalia, which celebrated the agricultural god Saturn. The Romans celebrated with partying, gambling, and gift-giving. Many of the popular Christmas traditions today found their roots in Saturnalia. Northern countries had other traditions such as branches from evergreen trees. They were used during the winter solstice as a reminder of the green plants that would grow in spring when the sun gods grew strong. These evergreen branches became the foundation of our Christmas tree. Germans are thought to be the first to bring “Christmas trees” into their homes at the holidays and decorate them with cookies and lights.
* The first Christmas tree was brought to England by Prince Albert in the 19th Century when he married Queen Victoria. The two were sketched in front of a Christmas tree and the tradition instantly became popular. Royal fever was real even back then.
* The well-known reason we give presents at Christmas is to symbolize the gifts given to baby Jesus by the three wise men. (Note: “wise men”, not kings and no mention of how many of them there were, only that there were “three presents!”). But it may also stem from the Saturnalia tradition that required revellers to offer up rituals to the pagan gods. Boxing Day gets its name from all the money collected in church Alms-Boxes for the poor.
* Because of its roots in pagan festivals, Christmas has not always been accepted by all Christians. Cromwell banned it after the Civil War. In America, it was illegal to celebrate Christmas in many Puritan communities. You were fined if you were caught celebrating it. Jehovah Witnesses still ignore it even today.
* Santa Claus comes from St. Nicholas, a Christian bishop living in (what is now) Turkey in the fourth century AD. St. Nicholas had inherited a great deal of wealth and was known for giving it away to help the needy. When sainted, he became the protector of children. After his death, the legend of St. Nicholas spread. St. Nick’s name became Sint-Nicolaas in Dutch, or Sinter Klaas for short. Which is only a hop, skip, and jump to Santa Claus. Santa Claus delivering presents comes from Holland’s celebration of St. Nicholas’ feast day on December 6. Children would leave shoes out the night before and, in the morning, would find little gifts that St. Nicholas would leave them.
* And stockings come from this story: A poor man with three daughters couldn’t afford the dowry to have them married. One night, St. Nicholas dropped a bag of gold down the man’s chimney so that his oldest daughter would be able to get married, and the bag fell into a stocking that was drying by the fire. One of the reasons we leave milk and cookies for Santa is because Dutch kids would leave food and drink for St. Nicholas on his feast day.
* And we leave carrots for Santa Claus’ reindeer because, in Norse mythology, people left hay and treats for Odin’s eight-legged horse Sleipnir “in hopes the god would stop by their home during his Yule hunting adventures”. Dutch children adopted this tradition too, and would leave treats for St. Nick’s horse.
* The look of Santa Claus we have today was created at an 1804 meeting of the New York Historical Society, where member John Pintard handed out wooden cut outs of jolly old St. Nick in front of stockings filled with toys.
* Though Santa Claus has worn blue and white and green in the past, his traditional red suit came from a 1930s ad by Coca Cola.
* And the image of him Santa Claus flying in a sleigh started in 1819...and was dreamt up by the same author who created the Headless Horseman, Washington Irving.
* Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer was known as the ‘Perfect Christmas Crowd-Bringer' by executives at Montgomery Ward as a marketing gimmick to get kids to buy a holiday colouring book. “Ol’ Red Nose” first appeared in a 1939 book written by one of the company's advertising copywriters and was given free to children as a way to drive traffic to the stores. Rudolph almost didn’t have a red nose either: At the time, a red nose was a sign of chronic alcoholism and Montgomery Ward thought he would look like a drunkard. Rudolph was almost named Rollo or Reginald. Reginald the Red-Nosed Reindeer doesn’t quite have the same ring to it.
* The poem that introduced us to the other eight reindeer, *A Visit from St. Nicholas,* actually named dropped Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Duner and Blixem. Like Donner and Blitzen, these names come from the German words for thunder and lightning.
* Over the years, other reindeer have been name checked on Santa’s sleigh team, such as: Flossie, Glossie, Racer, Pacer, Scratcher, Feckless, Ready, Steady, and Fireball (no relation to the whiskey).
* *Silent Night* is the most recorded Christmas song in history, with over 733 different versions copyrighted since 1978. Legend has it that “Silent Night” was written by a Father Joseph Mohr in Austria, who was determined to have music at his Christmas service after his organ broke. In reality, a priest wrote it while stationed at a pilgrim church in Austria.
* Meanwhile, *White Christmas* is the best-selling song of all time.
* *Santa Claus Is Coming to Town* actually has a truly depressing back-story. Songwriter James "Haven" Gillespie was broke, jobless, and his brother had just died when he was asked to write a Christmas song. He was originally too overcome with grief, but eventually found inspiration in his brother’s death and the Christmas memories they had together.
* The original lyrics to *Hark! The Herald Angel Sings* were “Hark! How the Welkin rings!” Welkin is an old, English term for Heaven. A preacher later tweaked the lyric.
* *Jingle Bells* was originally supposed to be a Thanksgiving song.
* Mariah Carey’s *All I Want for Christmas Is You* is considered to be the most popular Christmas song now. In the music video, Santa is played by Mariah’s then-husband, Tommy Mottola.
* And the highest-grossing Christmas movie of all time is *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. The Jim Carrey version.
* Why do we put tangerines in stockings? Well, back in the 12th Century, French nuns left socks full of fruit, nuts and tangerines at the houses of the poor.
* The first song broadcast from space was *Jingle Bells* - Gemini 6 astronauts Tom Stafford and Wally Schirra sang it on December 16, 1965.
* Robins featured so heavily on Christmas cards because 150 years ago postmen wore red tunics and were named after them.
* The best-selling Christmas single across the world, according to the Guinness Book of Records, is Bing Crosby's *White Christmas*. It has sold over 50 million copies worldwide since its release in 1942.
* Why does Oslo send a Christmas tree to London? Well, it’s to thank Britain for its help in the Second World War. They have sent a tree since 1947.
* We're used to a turkey dinner these days, but before that the traditional Christmas meal in England was a pig's head and mustard.
* The first commercial Christmas cards were commissioned in 1843 by Sir Henry Cole. In Britain, the best-selling festive single is Band Aid's 1984 track, *Do They Know It's Christmas?* which has sold over 3.5million copies. The Beatles hold the record for most Christmas number one singles, topping the charts four times: The highest-grossing festive movie is *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (2000), which has generated over £175m so far.