

Early Tudor Christmas

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In England before the Reformation Christmas for many begun with the decoration of buildings with holly and ivy.¹ Churchwardens acquired them for churches while John Stow recalled that in London, 'every man's house' was decked.² Greenery was customarily used to adorn buildings for feasts and holly and ivy were available in the winter. Mistletoe had been significant anciently but appears to have been paid little attention by this time.

Candles featured heavily with churchwardens' accounts showing them made or bought in bulk for Christmas morning. The book of ceremonies most widely used pre-Reformation was the one originally written for Salisbury Cathedral. This specified that three masses were to be held on the feast of the Nativity which meant commencement long before dawn, illuminating the church from the dark outside. In some places the rood loft, the carved wooden balcony above the screen which divided nave from chancel, laity from clergy, was lit up. The rood was the effigy of the crucified Christ flanked by the Virgin and St John. The Salisbury rite directed that during the opening service someone was to stand in the loft and read the genealogy of Christ from St Matthew's Gospel.

After church people would often enjoy their first large meal for over four weeks, having restricted their diet since Advent Sunday. For the better sorts this meant soups, stews and fish instead of roasts or pies while for the poorer this could be a burdensome limitation. Christmas Eve was a strict fast with meat, cheese and eggs all forbidden. The feasting of Christmas Day was a release and an opportunity for generosity. Thomas Tusser wrote that,

At Christmas we banquet, the rich with the poor,

Who then (but the miser) but openeth his door?³

The wealthy were expected to open their doors to all but in reality, many only entertained their social equals and immediate inferiors.

¹ Charles Phythian-Adams, *Local History and Folklore: A New Framework* (1975), 21-5.

² John Stow, *A Survey of London*, ed. Kingsford (1908), i. 97.

³ Thomas Tusser, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* ed. Payne and Herrtage (1878), 68.



Geoff Welding, *Tudor Christmas decorations at Trerice* ([CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/))

Christmas Day ushered in twelve days of merriment lasting until the feast of Epiphany. There were a range of amusements including by players, jesters and musicians for the upper sorts, religious houses and municipal corporations. Ordinary parishioners might pool together to hire players or perhaps put on their own productions in the village church. These events could be opportunities for fundraising with food and drink sold by churchwardens. There was much card-playing, board-gaming and many private parties. People dressed in festive costumes at court, in great households, and smaller events.

There were many songs, and scores survive from the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Most were religious while a few celebrate feasting or are about the weather. Some appear to have been bawdy or satirical. We do not know the setting of their performance though some seem suited to the home while many could have been sung door-to-door like carols in modern times. There is no evidence they were usually performed in church before the Reformation.

A feature of the Twelve Days was the Lord of Misrule, sometimes known as the Abbot of Misrule or by other local names. They were appointed in many noble houses and the royal court as well as by sheriffs, mayors, university colleges and Lincoln's Inn. We know also that some parishes in East Anglia also had them. It is difficult however to discover what they did before the Reformation. It seems they were part of the entertainment and appear to have been maintained by the household. These mock-rulers were drawn from the lower ranks with the position offering a role-reversal, elevating a servant to apparent authority. Their activities seem to have included processions, costumes, music, games, and performances. In

some places they appear to have 'reigned' for several months, while in many their appointment was much shorter. Practice varied from place-to-place. They had a parallel in the ecclesiastical world in the Boy Bishop, a child given episcopal vestments who officiated in some religious activities in December.



Tymperleys, Tudor house in Colchester, Essex. With Christmas wreath.

There were also Hognells (or variant spellings) for which evidence has been found in the south and west of the country, as well as the Lincolnshire fens. These mysterious people provided the largest contribution to parish finances and in some places included the wealthiest people in the village. Several handed in their contributions at Easter but for most it seems their activity was over Christmas. It is uncertain however what these people actually did. The name seems to derive either from the Old English or Norman for a protracted guest or New Year's present. We do not know whether they gave a service or a performance though it appears they went round collecting money for their activity.

Another activity of the period was around the wassail cup or bowl which was taken by the leader of the gathering with a cry of 'Wassail', Old English for 'your health', and was answered with 'Drinkhail' and passed to another with a kiss to then be repeated. This related to the custom of wassailing orchards during the Christmas season to wish them health and abundant crops, which was first recorded in the sixteenth century.

References and Resources:

Information for this post was taken from the excellent Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* (1994), 5-14.

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[Seven Medieval Christmas Traditions - Medievalists.net](#)