

A Royal Christmas

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Medieval and Tudor Christmases

Although Christmas had been widely celebrated before the Norman invasion of these islands, ‘the Anglo-Norman kings introduced increased splendour at this festival, as they did on all other occasions; the king wearing his crown and robes of state, and the prelates and nobles attending, with great pomp and ceremony, to partake of the feast provided by their monarch, and to receive from him presents, as marks of his royal favour; returning, probably, more than an equivalent’.¹ The cynic might suggest that this was merely a subtle way for the sovereign to bestow favour, while accepting homage from his loyal servants, under the guise of a religious festival.

Having triumphed at the Battle of Hastings on 14 October that year, King William I, the Conqueror, was crowned in Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day 1066. The occasion was recorded in verse in ‘The Kentishmen with Long Tayles’, also known as ‘the Kentish Ballad’, sung ‘to the tune of Rogero’:²

When as the Duke of Normandie,
with glistring Speare and Shield,
Had entred into faire England,
and told his foes in field;
On Christmas day in solemne sort,
then was he crowned heere
By Albert Archbishop of Yorke,
with many a noble Peere.

It was a memorable occasion, during which his knights, who had cordoned off the Abbey precincts, overreacted to the loud acclamations of ‘Vivat Rex’. The Norman chronicler, Orderic Vitalis, explained:


The armed guard outside, hearing the tumult of the joyful crowd in the church and the harsh accents of a foreign tongue, imagined that some

¹ William Sandys, *Christmastide, its History, Festivities and Carols, with their Music*, London: John Russell Smith, 1852, p. 23.

² Thomas Deloney, *Strange Histories or, Songs and Sonnets, of Kinges, Princes, Dukes, Lords, Ladyes, Knights, and Gentlemen*, London: R. B. for William Barley, 1612, p. 3.

treachery was afoot, and rashly set fire to some of the buildings. The fire spread rapidly from house to house; the crowd who had been rejoicing in the church took fright and throngs of men and women of every rank and condition rushed out of the church in frantic haste. Only the bishops and a few clergy and monks remained, terrified, in the sanctuary, and with difficulty completed the consecration of the king who was trembling from head to foot. Almost all the rest made for the scene of the conflagration, some to fight the flames and many others hoping to find loot for themselves in the general confusion. The English, after hearing of the perpetration of such misdeeds, never again trusted the Normans who seemed to have betrayed them, but nursed their anger and bided their time to take revenge. So King William received the crown and reigned well and justly in prosperity and adversity for twenty years, eight months, and sixteen days.³

Nevertheless, the festive traditions continued down the generations, with boar's head assuming prominence at the Christmas feast. William Sandys, the music writer and antiquary, wrote: 'At the coronation feast of Henry the Sixth there were boars' heads in "castellys of golde and enamel." By Henry the Eighth's time it had become an established Christmas dish, and we find it ushered in at this season to his daughter the Princess Mary, with all the usual ceremonies, and no doubt to the table of the monarch himself, who was not likely to dispense with so royal a dish; and so to the time of Queen Elizabeth, and the revels in the Inns of Court in her time, when at the Inner Temple a fair and large boar's head was served on a silver platter, with minstrelsy.⁴ The procession accompanying the boar's head sang an ancient carol:⁵

 The Boar's Head in hand bring I
 With garlands gay and rosemary,
 I pray you all sing merrily.

As the world became more stable and the Royal Family more established on the throne, there was a noticeable acceleration in the scale of the celebrations during the festive season, particularly during the reign of King Henry VIII: 'Henry the Eighth kept up the festivities of Christmas with the

³ Marjorie Chibnall, ed. and trans., *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, Vol. II, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, p. 185.

⁴ Sandys, *Christmastide, its History, Festivities and Carols*, p. 31.

⁵ Elizabeth Craig, *Court Favourites*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1953, p. 154.

same jovial spirit with which he promoted every other species of hilarity. It was his custom to keep his Christmas at his different country palaces in the vicinity of London, sometimes at Eltham, at Greenwich, or Richmond; and afterwards at Hampton Court, when that stately edifice came into his possession.⁶ Katherine Thomson provided greater detail of the revelries that took place in 1510:

On the night of the Epiphany, a pageant was introduced into the hall at Richmond, representing a hill studded with gold and precious stones; and having on its summit a tree of gold, from which hung roses and pomegranates. From the declivity of the hill descended a lady richly attired, who, with the gentlemen, or, as they were then called, children, of honour, danced a morris before the king.

On another occasion, in the presence of the court, an artificial forest was drawn in by a lion and an antelope, the hides of which were richly embroidered with golden ornaments; the animals were harnessed with chains of gold, and on each sat a fair damsel in gay apparel. In the midst of the forest, which was thus introduced, appeared a gilded tower, at the gates of which stood a youth, holding in his hands a garland of roses, as the prize of valour in a tournament which succeeded the pageant.⁷

William Sandys wrote that King Henry VIII kept Christmas ‘with great splendour’. He then explained that

Queen Elizabeth, who, to powerful intellect, joined much of the arbitrary temper of her father, possessed also great vanity and fondness of display. In her time, therefore, the festivities were renewed with great pomp and show; and theatrical entertainments were also particularly encouraged, and were frequently performed before the queen, especially at Christmas time. To restrain somewhat the great expenses of these entertainments, she directed, in her second year, estimates to be made of them previously; but this wholesome practice, judging from the cost of after years, did not exist very long.

In 1559, which may be called her first Christmas, the play before her, on Christmas Night, unluckily contained some offensive or indecent matter,

⁶ Katherine Thomson, *Memoirs of the Court of Henry the Eighth*, London: Longman & Co., 1826, Vol. I, p. 176.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 60–1.

as the players were commanded to leave off, and the mask came in dancing. On the Twelfth Night following there was a play, and then a goodly mask, and afterwards a great banquet . . . The play performed on Twelfth Night, 1571, was called *Narcissus*, in which a live fox was let loose and chased by dogs; so that the introduction of live animals on the stage is not a modern invention.⁸

In 1600–01 Queen Elizabeth commissioned William Shakespeare to write the comedy *Twelfth Night* in order to entertain her guest, Virginio Orsini, Duke of Bracciano. In keeping with the occasion, which used to be a Catholic holiday but which had now become an evening of revelry, the brief was that the production ‘shall be best furnished with rich apparel, have greate variety and change of Musicke and daunces, and of a Subject that may be most pleasing to her Maiestie’.

Queen Elizabeth I died at Richmond Palace on 24 March 1603. She was succeeded by King James VI of Scotland, who became King James I of England. He was the son of her old rival, Mary, Queen of Scots. William Sandys described an episode of ‘excessive conviviality’, which took place

✿ during the visit of the Danish king, Christian the Fourth, in 1606, when, on one occasion, during the personation of the mask of “Solomon, and the Queen of Sheba” – the King of Denmark being the Solomon of the night – the representative of the Queen of Sheba had imprudently imbibed too much of the nectar that she was to have offered to Solomon, and stumbling, distributed her classic offerings of wine, jelly, and cakes, over his dress. He in his turn, attempting to dance, found it necessary to fall, and cling to the floor, until taken off to bed.

Cassio. *Is your Englishman so exquisite in his drinking?*

Iago. *Why, he drinks you with facility, your Dane dead drunk.*

Some ladies, representing Faith, Hope, Charity, Victory, and Peace, who were assumed to have been the attendants of the Queen of Sheba, on her celebrated visit, sympathised with their mistress, and were obliged, with proper assistance to guide their tottering limbs, to retire for a time in a state of maudlin sensibility.⁹

⁸ Sandys, *Christmastide, its History, Festivities and Carols*, pp. 91–5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 102–3.

The iconography – but not the behaviour – re-emerged almost three hundred years later, during the *tableaux vivants* at Osborne House. The aspirations and admirable intentions represented by the attire of the five attendants have guided members of the British Royal Family to the present day.

Christmas and the Commonwealth

King James I died at Theobalds House, Hertfordshire, on 27 March 1625 and was succeeded by King Charles I. For the first fifteen years of King Charles's reign, 'Christmas was frequently observed with great splendour, and a variety of plays, masks, and pageants, in which the king and queen, with some of the courtiers, occasionally took part . . . the king had his mask on Twelfth Day, and the queen hers on the Shrovetide following, and considerable sums were granted for the expenses, often exceeding £2000.'¹

On 19 December 1644, during the English Civil War, Parliament proclaimed that the last Wednesday of every month should be kept as a day of fasting. Since Christmas fell on the last Wednesday of December that year, there was an appeal to Parliament for clarification on whether the traditional Christmas festivities might take place. The response came in the form of an 'Ordinance for the Better Observation of the Feast of the Nativity of Christ':

✿ Whereas some doubts have been raised whether the next Fast shall be celebrated, because it falleth on the day which, heretofore, was usually called the Feast of the Nativity of our Saviour; the Lords and Commons do order and ordain that public notice be given, that the Fast appointed to be kept on the last Wednesday in every month, ought to be observed until it be otherwise ordered by both houses; and that this day particularly is to be kept with the more solemn humiliation because it may call to remembrance our sins and the sins of our forefathers, who have turned this Feast, pretending the memory of Christ, into an extreme forgetfulness of him, by giving liberty to carnal and sensual delights; being contrary to the life which Christ himself led here upon earth, and to the spiritual life of Christ in our souls; for the sanctifying and saying whereof Christ was pleased both to take a human life, and to lay it down again.²

On 3 June 1647, Parliament formally banned Christmas and many other holidays, laying down a series of punishments for those who ignored the

¹ William Sandys, *Christmastide, its History, Festivities and Carols, with their Music*, London: John Russell Smith, 1852, p. 117.

² John Ashton, *A righte Merrie Christmasse!!!*, London: Leadenhall Press Ltd., 1894, p. 26.

ban: 'Instead of them, all scholars, apprentices, and servants should, with leave of their masters, have a holiday on the second Tuesday in every month. On this being proclaimed at Canterbury, just prior to the ensuing Christmas, and the mayor directing a market to be kept on that day, a serious disturbance took place, wherein many were severely hurt.'³ Five years later, this policy was enshrined in the following statement: 'Resolved by the Parliament: That no observation shall be had of the five and twentieth day of December commonly called Christmas-Day; nor any solemnity used or exercised in churches upon the day in respect thereof.'

The writer, gardener and diarist John Evelyn, who lived at Sayes Court, Deptford, wrote:

25th December, 1657. I went to London with my wife, to celebrate Christmas-day, Mr Gunning preaching in Exeter chapel [of Exeter house in the Strand], on *Micah* vii. 2. Sermon ended, as he was giving us the Holy Sacrament, the chapel was surrounded with soldiers, and all the communicants and assembly surprised and kept prisoners by them, some in the house, others carried away. It fell to my share to be confined to a room in the house, where yet I was permitted to dine with the master of it, the Countess of Dorset, Lady Hatton, and some others of quality who invited me. In the afternoon came Colonel Whaley, Goffe, and others, from Whitehall, to examine us one by one; some they committed to the marshal, some to prison.

When I came before them they took my name and abode, examined me why, contrary to the ordinance made, that none should any longer observe the superstitious time of the nativity (so esteemed by them), I durst offend, and particularly be at common prayers, which they told me was but the mass in English, and particularly pray for Charles Stuart, for which we had no Scripture. I told them we did not pray for Charles Stuart, but for all Christian kings, princes, and governors. They replied, in so doing we prayed for the King of Spain too, who was their enemy and a papist, with other frivolous and ensnaring questions and much threatening; and finding no color to detain me, they dismissed me with much pity of my ignorance. These were men of high flight and above ordinances, and spoke spiteful things of our Lord's nativity. As we went up to receive the Sacrament, the miscreants held their muskets against us, as if they would have shot us at

³ Ibid., pp. 118–19.

the altar; but yet suffering us to finish the office of Communion, as perhaps not having instructions what to do, in case they found us in that action. So I got home late the next day; blessed be God.⁴

The restoration of King Charles II was proclaimed on 8 May 1660 and Christmas was once again celebrated, in a democratic, if sometimes disappointing, manner, as Samuel Pepys, a close friend of John Evelyn, described in his diary on 24 December 1667:

Up, and all the morning in the office; and at noon with my clerks to dinner and then to the office again, busy at the office till 6 at night; and then by coach to St. James's, it being now about 6 at night, my design being to see the Ceremonys, this night being the Eve of Christmas, at the Queen's Chapel, But it being not begun, I to Westminster hall and there stayed and walked; and then to the *Swan* and there drank and talked, and did besar a little Frank; and so to Whitehall and sent my coach round, and I through the park to chapel, where I got in almost up to the rail and with a great deal of patience, stayed from 9 at night to 2 in the morning in a very great Crowd; and there expected, but found nothing extraordinary, there being nothing but a high Masse.

The Queen [the Catholic Catherine of Braganza] was there and some ladies. But Lord, what an odd thing it was for me to be in a crowd of people, here a footman, there a beggar, there a fine lady, there a zealous poor papist, and here a Protestant, two or three together, come to see the show. I was afeared of my pocket being picked very much. Their music very good indeed, but their service I confess too frivolous, that there can be no zeal go along with it; and I do find by them themselves, that they do run over their beads with one hand, and point and play and talk and make signs with the other, in the midst of their Messe. But all things very rich and beautiful. And I see the papists had the wit, most of them, to bring cushions to kneel on; which I wanted, and was mightily troubled to kneel. All being done, and I sorry for my coming, missing of what I expected; which was to have a child borne and dressed there and a great deal of do, but we broke up and nothing like it done; and there I left people receiving the sacrament, and the Queen gone, and ladies; only my [Lady] Castlemayne, who looks prettily in her night-clothes.

⁴ William Bray, ed., *The Diary of John Evelyn*, New York and London: M. Walter Dunne, New York & London, 1901, p. 319.

And so took my coach, which waited, and away through Covent garden to set down two gentlemen and a lady, who came thither to see also and did make mighty mirth in their talk of the folly of this religion; and so I stopped, having set them down, and drank some burnt wine at the *Rose* tavern door, while the constables came and two or three Bell-men went by, it being a fine light moonshine morning; and so home round the City and stopped and dropped money at five or six places, which I was the willinge to do, it being Christmas day; and so home and there find wife in bed, and Jane and the maids making pyes, and so I to bed and slept well.⁵

⁵ Robert Latham, ed., *The Shorter Pepys*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 855–6.