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NATIONAL TRUST FOR SCOTLAND REVEALS HIDDEN MEANINGS BEHIND POPULAR CHRISTMAS CAROL

- **National Trust for Scotland experts found hidden religious meanings behind traditional Christmas carol, *12 Days of Christmas* from when Christmas celebrations were banned throughout Scotland following the Scottish Reformation.**
- **Religious symbolism is also believed to feature in the original recipe for the traditional festive treat mince pies.**
- **The popular festive song has inspired a new children's trail at Castle Fraser to complement Christmas traditional activities and authentic decorations used throughout the property.**

An expert from the National Trust for Scotland has identified hidden meanings behind the traditional Christmas carol, *12 Days of Christmas*, that is thought to have been used to convey religious symbolism during a period of upheaval in the country.

According to Dr Jo Riley, Visitor Services Assistant from the National Trust for Scotland Collections Care team, the popular song, first published in 1780 and originating in France, was written when Catholicism was discouraged, and people were prohibited from publicly practising their faith in Scotland. The theory behind the songs suggests that they contain hidden references woven into its verses to provide Catholic teachings when the Presbyterian church had assumed authority over Scotland in 1560, known as the Scottish Reformation.

Dr Riley developed the research as a way of understanding the history and cultural aspects of Christmas celebrations, and it has been used to inform traditional decorations and new authentic festive events including a new trail and soundscape at Castle Fraser in Inverurie, Aberdeenshire, one of over 100 special places, cared for and shared by the conservation charity.

Dr Riley said: "Christmas in Scotland was prohibited following an Act of Parliament in 1640 making the celebration of Yule illegal. There was no public holiday on Christmas day, and apart from a brief period in the 17th century, this lasted until 1958. It's hard to believe that Christmas was outlawed for over 300 years considering how popular the holiday has now become, it demonstrates the significance religion played in people's lives over different centuries. The banning of Christmas celebrations had a huge

influence on the growth and popularity of Hogmanay in Scotland, which became the focus of festivities for Scottish people that we're still recognised for today.

"Religious symbolism was hidden in the most inconspicuous of places like hymns such as *12 Days of Christmas* and *O Come All Ye Faithful*. It also featured in festive foods associated with the time of year such as mince pies, with the traditional recipe containing 13 ingredients, believed to represent each of the apostles. Originally developed as long rectangle slices, mince pies were reduced in size so they could fit in pockets and passed between members of the public celebrating Christmas in secret."

"It's been rewarding to use my research to inform the new family experiences at Castle Fraser this Christmas. We know that the library would have once been a 'family room' and we want to make this an immersive experience for visitors when they enter. The room will be transformed with traditional decorations using natural materials collected from the castle's garden and surrounding estate to provide a faithful recreation of festive adornments, with a family themed tree and an area for play and storytelling. There will be interactive games for children to immerse themselves in the typical activities that would've taken place at this time of year by the Fraser family. A further new addition will be a soundscape of life within the castle walls, with chatter, laughter and music played to help recreate a truly authentic Christmas for visitors.

"Alongside these activities a new children's trail themed around the *12 Days of Christmas* will take place around the castle showcasing the history of the song and the messages behind the words will be explained in the Bailiff's Room. The Chapel and the Bailiff's Room will focus on some of the older historic messages and Jacobite links to Christmas will be revealed, making the trail interesting and enjoyable for both adults and children. It is our aim to connect people to a part of Scotland's heritage within these rooms. The interpretation and activities won't focus on religion but will exemplify how historical events have shaped the celebrations we enjoy in Scotland today. It's been very rewarding to work on this research project, collaborating with the Gardens team from the outset to discover and connect with our history to create memorable and engaging experiences at Castle Fraser this year – to the extent that they have literally sowed the seeds of historically-linked flowers and foliage around the estate. And also, thanks to our members and supporters that we're able to continue our work to care for, protect and share Scotland's cultural heritage for everyone to enjoy."

The traditional past time of singing was enjoyed by many families at Christmas as a means of entertainment. *12 Days of Christmas* was considered a memory game and a forfeit had to be paid if a mistake was made when singing the song. While the song offered a fun way for both children and adults to celebrate the time of year, its verses are understood to have hidden Catholic connotations, including:

- **The Partridge** – the mother partridge represents Christ. It is thought to be the only bird that will die to protect its young.

- **Two Turtle Doves** – signified the old and new testaments, the gift of the complete story of the Christian faith.
- **Three French Hens** – signifies faith, hope and love, relating to Corinthians 13, written by the apostle Paul.
- **Four Calling Birds** – represents the four gospels Mathew, Mark, Luke and John.
- **Five Gold Rings** – is believed to correspond to the five books of the Old Testament.
- **Six Geese-a-Laying** – is thought to relate to the first story of the bible, each egg being one of the days of creation, when the world ‘hatched’.
- **Seven Swans-a-Swimming** – the beauty of the swan corresponding with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit; prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and compassion.
- **Eight Maids-a-Milking** – conveys the message that even the lowliest receive gifts from God, being a milkmaid was a lowly occupation. The eight who were blessed were those poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted in the name of righteousness.
- **Nine Ladies Dancing** – signify the fruits of the Spirit, of which there are nine: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.
- **Ten Lords-a-Leaping** – written at a time when lords were also judges, this refers to the ten commandments.
- **Eleven Pipers Piping** – discounting Judas who betrayed Jesus and then committed suicide, this line refers to the disciples who remained true and carried the gospel message.
- **Twelve Drummers Drumming** – provides a strong catholic analogy to the twelve points of doctrine in the Apostles’ Creed

In addition to *12 Days of Christmas*, the well-known hymn *O Come All Ye Faithful*, originally written by John Francis Wade, an 18th century music scribe who was a known English Jacobite supporter, has also allegedly been used to convey political messages, a call to arms, as well as religious notions. It was often illustrated with Jacobite floral imagery, such as the white rose, and it is thought to have been sung to celebrate Bonnie Prince Charlie’s birth on 20th December as well as that of Jesus, but as the Jacobite cause waned the relevant associations dwindled.

Visitors to Castle Fraser, its garden and estate can enjoy the Christmas themed events, trails and seasonal period decorations until 18 December when the castle will close until Spring 2023, with the garden and grounds of the estate open all year round. The research and winter events support the National Trust for Scotland’s vision to care for, share and protect Scotland’s nature, beauty and heritage for everyone to enjoy, as outlined in its 10-year strategy, launched in 2022. These events help to deliver its engagement objectives to provide access and enjoyment for everyone.

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Notes to editors

Images - <https://www.flickr.com/gp/133918740@N04/R0hsz069rj>

About the National Trust for Scotland

Established in 1931, the National Trust for Scotland is Scotland's largest conservation charity and cares for, shares and speaks up for Scotland's magnificent heritage.

Over the last 90 years the Trust has pioneered public access to and shared ownership of some of the most magnificent buildings, collections and landscapes in Scotland. It cares for more than 100 sites, from ancient houses to battlefields, castles, mills, gardens, coastlines, islands, mountain ranges and the plants and animals which depend upon them.

In March 2022 the National Trust for Scotland launched *Nature, Beauty & Heritage for Everyone*, its ten-year strategy which sets out the ambitions of the charity over the coming decade. From speaking up for Scotland's heritage which doesn't have a voice, to improving the lives and wellbeing of people across the country, and responding to the climate and biodiversity crisis, the Trust will build on its work in recent years to grow its impact and conserve and restore more of Scotland's heritage, as it moves towards its centenary in 2031.

Scotland's largest membership organisation, the National Trust for Scotland relies on the support of its members and donors to carry out its important work.

For more information on the National Trust for Scotland visit www.nts.org.uk.

The National Trust for Scotland is a charity registered in Scotland, Charity Number SC 007410.