



16 December 2022

TRUST LIGHTS UP TRADITIONS FOR CHRISTMAS AND HOGMANAY

- See Castle Fraser, Aberdeenshire, decked out in historically accurate festive finery until Sunday 18 December
- Druids decorated temples with evergreen trees; Christianity perpetuated the idea of yew and holly and symbols of the Resurrection and Life to celebrate its symbolism of rebirth and the cycle of life

Research by the National Trust for Scotland has shed new light on the origin and meaning behind many of today's celebrated festive traditions.

Read more here: <https://www.nts.org.uk/stories/traditional-christmas-decorations-at-castle-fraser>

The conservation charity has collated research on the origins of some wintertime decorations and traditions using its archived materials.

It has helped the Trust to recreate authentic traditional Christmas decorations that have been up at Castle Fraser, Aberdeenshire throughout December, giving visitors a sense of how Christmas would have looked at different times in Scotland's history. Visitors can see the decorations up until 18 December, before they are packed away for the year.

The research, carried out by Dr Jo Riley, the National Trust for Scotland's Collections Care visitor service assistant, was the subject of a recent episode of Love Scotland, the National Trust for Scotland's award-winning podcast presented by President Jackie Bird. Listen here: <https://www.nts.org.uk/stories/for-the-love-of-scotland-podcasts>

Dr Riley said, "With so many festive traditions enjoyed throughout the winter months, it has been exciting to uncover their history and understand their origin and the symbolism associated with them.

"As Christmas is celebrated across many parts of the world, it was useful to comprehend how different cultures, religions and social history have shaped the traditional festive customs adopted by Scots that we still enjoy today.

"Not many people realise that Yuletide traditions originated from Pagans and the Vikings before the gradual adoption of celebrations that had Christian significance as the church assumed authority. It's hard to believe that Christmas was banned by Parliament in 1640 when an Act was introduced making the celebration of Yule illegal.

There was no public holiday on Christmas Day until 1958 and this resulted in Scottish people focusing their festivities on New Year."

Yule log

Originating from an old English word 'geol', synonymous to the Norse word 'jol', Yule refers to the midwinter festival celebrating the winter solstice, marking the shortest day of the year. Burning a log during Yule was thought to encourage the sun to return. Celts burned a trunk from an oak tree on the eve of the winter solstice. The yule log would feed the fire for 12 days, finishing on Twelfth Night. It is alleged that if the fire stayed alight, the household would be protected, as well as benefitting from a plentiful harvest and good health, highlighting the way traditions ran as a thread through all the seasons, not just winter and Christmas.

Candlelight

Lighting a candle and placing it in the window to welcome a stranger is a longstanding Christmas tradition, first originating in Ireland during the 17th and 18th centuries. Lighting windows with candles is considered open-hearted and synonymous with the idea of welcoming the Holy Family who were in search of shelter. At this time of year, candles signify the arrival of Jesus, as well as messages of love, joy, gratitude and new beginnings.

Christmas trees

Christmas trees have their roots in the customs of Celtic, German and Viking people. The Celtic druids embellished evergreen trees with fruits, nuts and coins, celebrating the tree's symbolism of rebirth and the cycle of life. These decorated trees remained outdoors; it was not until many centuries later that trees were bought indoors. Queen Charlotte is said to have introduced Christmas trees to Britain in the late eighteenth century, and there are reports of entire yew trees decorated with glass ornaments, tinsel, almonds, fruit, toys and candles. Later, when Prince Albert introduced the use of spruce firs, Queen Victoria's popularity ensured they became widely fashionable.

Electric lights

In Germany candles were attached to the branches of Christmas trees. They were initially attached with wire, string and melted wax, and later with clip-on holders. Using real flames obviously posed a fire risk and in 1882 a safer alternative appeared. The first string of fairy lights was invented by Edward H. Johnson, an employee of Thomas Edison. Since 1890, Christmas lights have been mass produced, and in 1903 the first pre-wired string of lights was marketed, known as a 'festoon'.

Tinsel

From the French 'étinceler', meaning to sparkle, tinsel is thought to represent the starry skies over the nativity scene. Tinsel originated from Germany and is thought to have been first used in the early 17th century. Originally constructed from fine strands of

silver, it was originally affordable for the wealthier members of society only. To try and to make it more affordable, strips of tin and lead were used as an alternative before this form of tinsel was eventually banned in the 1960s, due to the risk of lead poisoning. It is suggested that tinsel was first used in England in 1846.

Christmas cards

The first Christmas card was produced in London in 1843, invented by Sir Henry Cole and illustrated by John Callcott Horsley. This started the fashion of exchanging cards, spurred on by the concept of mass production which developed in the Victorian era. Although a tradition stemming from England, many Scottish people had family or connections with whom they exchanged Christmas cards.

Expressions of wealth

The seasonal festive period was traditionally a time to display precious items and objects that expressed luxury and wealth. Tapestries would be cleaned and sweetened with herbs, china services and silverware used or put on show, and wax candles burnt. The finery of the house was itself used to decorate the period home. This is a custom that many people can still relate to, as today festive dining tables may still be laid with the best dinner plates and wine glasses, napkins are brought out of drawers and candles lit for the occasion.

Food

After the Yuletide and Christmas celebrations were banned in Scotland by Parliament in 1640, many customary foods were also prohibited. For example, bakers were banned from making traditional mincemeat pies and people who ordered them were reported to the church. Originally larger, these pies then became smaller in order that they could be hidden. Other baked goods associated with Christmas and Hogmanay in Scotland include:

- Yule Bread was an unleavened loaf which included caraway seeds. The dough was traditionally plaited and formed into a circle, which originated as a symbolic representation of the sun.
- Sweetie Scone Day was an alternative name for Boxing Day where the sweet treats were placed in boxes and given to servants and the poorer classes.
- Bannock buns were fruit buns given to households at New Year.

Entertainment

Games were enjoyed over the festive season, with the game Feast of the Bean traditionally played on Twelfth Night and allegedly enjoyed by Mary Queen of Scots and her ladies in waiting. Putting on and watching performances was another traditional form of entertainment. Plays in which the Celtic mythological figure, the Holly King, were put on during Winter Solstice, portrayed him as a giant, covered in holly branches and brandishing a holly bush. The spirit of the Holly King is also referred to in Charles

Dicken's A Christmas Carol. The Holly King ruled for half the year, during the winter months. In the summer it was the Oak King who controlled the lands.

Divination

Christmas Eve has traditionally been seen as a time when there are close links between the spirits of the after-world and those on earth. In Scotland, divination practices have been customary on Christmas Eve and included reading tea leaves or deciphering ashes swept from the fireplace. A single person would try to predict the profession of a future partner by cracking an egg into a bowl and interpreting the white. The egg was then used to bake a cake and if it cracked whilst baking, the person who broke the egg was thought to receive bad luck.

Hogmanay

It is believed that the Vikings, in the eighth and ninth centuries, brought traditions with them that have developed into the Hogmanay celebrations enjoyed today. The beginning of longer days and increased sunlight was a cause for much merriment. Men would dress in animal skins, bonfires and torches would be lit, with firelight signifying the strength of the sun which would cleanse the world of evil spirits. These celebrations can still be seen in festivals such as Up Helly Aa, celebrated on Shetland. Over time many traditions and superstitions have been adopted and enacted over New Year:

- A piper would lead a group from house to house, turning anti-clockwise, striking the walls and singing to raise those who dwelled inside.
- Holly was hung to keep the fairies away.
- Lighting a fire was a central theme in many customs and it was important for the fortune of the following year not to let the fire go out. Juniper was often burnt to purify the home.
- Candles were also lit, with significance placed on the necessity to keep them burning throughout the night to ensure prosperity and blessings.
- Rowan was brought into the home, symbolic of good fortune and seen to ward off evil.
- It was considered unlucky for a woman to enter the house, whilst a young man entering the house with corn, or a piece of coal was considered a joyous omen.
- The house must be cleaned, and the old ashes removed before 31 December.
- Debts should be cleared before the bells sounded at midnight to mark the end of the year.

ENDS

Editor's Notes:

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.

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