

St Augustine's Centre, Halifax

English for Life in the UK

Season 2 - Episode 8 - Christmas in the UK

December 2020

Mark Hello, and welcome to the podcast **English for Life in the UK**. This podcast is for anyone who wants to improve their English and at the same time learn more about life in this country. If you want to get the transcript for this episode - and to find all our other episodes - you can do this on our website, details of which are available at the end of this episode.

Today, we're going to talk about Christmas in the United Kingdom. In the first part, I'm going to talk with Christine and Sheena about some of the traditions and history of Christmas celebrations in this country, and in the second part, I'm going to interview the vicar of St Augustine's, to talk about the importance of Christmas to Christians.

I hope you find this episode useful and interesting.

(Music)

And I'm joined today by Sheena and Christine. Sheena, how are you?

Sheena I'm fine thank you, Mark. I've had a very Christmassy day. I met some friends, socially-distanced¹ and exchanged Christmas presents, so it was very nice to see them, very nice to have a little chat, to see how they were, and it was nice to be able to give Christmas presents to them. So, I feel quite Christmassy.

Mark That's lovely. Christine - how are you?

Christine Well, I too have met some friends and we went for a walk and it was very wild weather, today: very windy, and we tried to find a public place where we can meet up, because we're allowed to meet up in a public place, so we managed to find a bench where a couple of people could sit and there were a couple of us, just talking, so we ate sandwiches and chatted.

Mark That's lovely.

Christine And we talked mainly about our plans ...

Mark That's lovely. Well, I had a ...I went for a nice walk with one of my grandchildren, up into the woods, near our house, which was lovely. And I was looking after him, because his school had finished for Christmas, but his parents were still working, so I did a bit of childcare for them today.

¹ under the Covid-19 restrictions, meeting people requires 2metres distance to be maintained

So, as you may have already gathered we're recording this on the 19th, I think it is, of December and that means we are just coming up to Christmas - just a few days to go to Christmas, so we thought we'd do an episode about Christmas in the UK.

And, I think, Sheena, you're going to start us off with a bit of history and how that relates to what we do traditionally, these days.

(3 minutes:27 seconds)

Sheena Yes, just a little bit. I was doing some research for a quiz with St Augustine's and I always wondered how all the different elements of Christmas fitted together. I never knew why we had wreaths² on our doors, why we had branches of evergreens³ in the house, sometimes, and the candles and decorating the Christmas trees. So I was really interested to read how thousands of years ago, people, around this time of year, when it was very dark, have always had some kind of celebration, to celebrate the longer days - the winter solstice⁴. So, basically, after the shortest day, that, in future, the days are going to get lighter and it seems, in lots of countries, like Iran and Egypt - that that was happening, and has been happening for a very long time. And it would always be a time when people would get together, with families, and celebrate as well, in the way that we do now.

I was interested in things like the Yule log, because at Christmas, when we eat, we sometimes have a Yule log⁵ - and to find that that goes back to the Norse⁶ and to Northern Europeans who celebrated Odin, to celebrate him at this same time - at this solstice time - and to find that people ... the idea was that a member of the family would bring the log into the house and they would keep that log burning for up to twelve days and then the festivities - the feast and the celebrating - would be carrying on, as long as that log would burn. I just found that interesting because we have the twelve days of Christmas now, even though it is a more Christian celebration - so I found that interesting. I also found the idea that for Odin⁷ they'd decorated trees to please the god, so that it would be a spring and everything would renew itself eventually, so they would decorate trees with carvings, and they would have bonfires, so again, that idea of light and candles that we have inside churches and things now and inside our own homes.

I was also interested in - and confused by - the idea of Santa Claus and how we ... those two things fit together: the idea of the birth of Christ and Santa Claus. I think Mark, you might be able to tell us a little bit more about that - can you?

(6:35)

Mark Yes - well certainly. Obviously, Christmas became a Christian festival for quite a ... in the early period after Christ and then we get something ... there is a legend called the

² a wreath is a round decoration usually made from plants and flowers

³ evergreens = plants which keep their leaves throughout the year, not dropping leaves in Autumn

⁴ the Winter Solstice is the shortest day of the year, that is the day with the least daylight time, and happens on 21st December in the U.K.

⁵ a Yule log is a log-shaped chocolate cake

⁶ Norse = ancient Scandinavian culture

⁷ Odin = the supreme god of Norse mythology

legend of St Nicholas. Now, St Nicholas seems to have been a person living around 300AD in what is modern-day Turkey. And this person was celebrated for doing good works and particularly for looking after children - children and sailors, interestingly. So St Nicholas became an important character in the Christian tradition, at that time. But not a lot more happened about that until into the 18th and 19th centuries, and then, both in Europe and in America, in particular, in the USA - the idea of somebody who became called Santa Claus - that's certainly the name that he was given in America - more commonly in England, in Britain, he was called Father Christmas. And it was a character that was based on this idea of St Nicholas, so that's kind of where all of that comes from.

And I suppose that if I think about the kind of Christmas that I've been used to having, both as a child and as a grown-up, and having had children, now grandchildren, it has been around some of those things that you've already talked about there, Sheena. So we've always had a Christmas tree, which was .. which is decorated, usually goes up a couple of weeks before Christmas. We've always had this idea of an advent calendar which is a calendar where you open a little window every day, between the beginning of December and Christmas Day. In my childhood, you just opened this little window and there was just a picture inside it. These days, you get chocolates and presents and all sort of things in there, but that's always been part of that tradition and is still, for my children.

And then, when you get towards Christmas Day itself, then this is where Santa Claus and Father Christmas comes in, and the legend is: that this character, Santa Claus, sets out from the North Pole, with presents for all the children and comes by sleigh⁸, pulled by reindeer, and they land on the roofs of every house and Father Christmas goes down the chimney and leaves presents for the children, around the tree. And that story has, it still seems to me, to be quite commonly told, certainly in Britain, but also in large parts of Europe and North America, and there are different versions of it, in different countries. But certainly, for my children and now my grandchildren, this idea that they go to bed on Christmas Eve - so the day before Christmas - and they put a stocking, so a large sock, at the end of their bed, and when they wake up in the morning, there are lots of presents: presents around the Christmas tree and their stockings are full of presents, and those have been brought by Father Christmas. But that's been the kind of tradition that I've been used to.

(10:36)

I was brought up in a Christian family, and so there was the Christian side of Christmas [which] was important, as well, and we always used to go to church at midnight on Christmas Eve and there would be a service with carols sung - carols are Christmas hymns - so that part. And the other thing we've always, as a family, continued to do, is to have a nativity display. So we have characters that are around a - what is the representation of a - stable, where Jesus is born, and we have Mary and Joseph and shepherds and kings - characters - little figures that represent these things and we still do that. And Janice, my wife, makes a really elaborate nativity display, which the children always like to see in the lead up to Christmas, and when

⁸ sleigh = also known as a sledge; a vehicle on strips of metal instead of wheels, known as runners, to cope with transport over snow

they come to see us on Christmas Day, lo, and behold!⁹ there's always a little baby figure in the middle, as well.

So that's some of my memories, some of the traditions that we continued - the other important part has always been the Christmas meal. And, I think, Christine, you're going to tell us a bit about your experience of that.

(12:05)

Christine Yes. Thank you Mark. I am because, eating ... it is a time of feasting as you said, Sheena, from ancient times and it's certainly a time of feasting, now, and there is a traditional Christmas meal. You could say it's turkey and Brussels sprouts and Christmas pudding, perhaps, would be what you would, what you would expect. But I remember, as a child, in Scotland - I'm in my sixties now, so this would be in the '50's [1950's] ... erm ... as a child, in Scotland, we didn't have turkey: we would have pheasant, perhaps, if my father had shot one, or a goose, if he'd shot one of those, so that's ... but anyway we would have pheasant and we would always have a Christmas pudding, which is a pudding made with lots of dried fruit and then, it's set alight; brandy poured over - they would pour brandy over it - it used to be my mother - would pour brandy over it and set it alight, so it's brought to the table, aflame. And if you were very lucky, when you have a helping of Christmas pudding, you're going to find in it, a silver threepenny [piece¹⁰]. That's what, certainly what we had in my childhood - and ... that meant you were going to be very lucky that year. Sometimes, you could find a button and that meant you were going to be very hard-working. No - sorry - I've got that wrong! The button means you're going to be poor, it was a thimble to show that you were going to be hardworking, and a foreign coin: if you found one of those, that would show you were going to travel.

(14:00)

So, that was my childhood. These days, when I brought up my own child, for the meal - for the Christmas meal, of course, would be very important - we would usually mix with a friend - we eat with friends - friends from all over the country - all different parts of the United Kingdom - we'd sit down for a huge meal. But of course, everybody had to have their own traditions, and so we discovered that the traditions were different. For example, one friend - we certainly would have soup as a starter¹¹ - oh no, somebody else had to have a prawn cocktail, somebody had to have smoked salmon. So we'd have three different starters. And then we would settle on a turkey, because there were a few people who were used to turkey and they were adamant. And, of course, we were such a large group, that turkey's very good because turkeys are large birds. We'd need roast potatoes, oh no! We'd need mashed potatoes - let's have both! This was how our planning would go - we'd have carrots, we'd have parsnips, we'd just have huge amounts of food. Oh, I haven't mentioned of course, we'd start the meal with crackers. Somebody has to have Christmas crackers and they're paper tubes that, when you pull them apart - two people would pull them apart - and they'd explode with a bang, and inside are a hat, to wear - so you would be wearing a paper hat, during the meal - and a silly joke, and if you're very lucky, a little present - a key ring, in my experience - so a little nonsense present.

⁹ 'lo and behold' is an exclamation meaning suddenly appears

¹⁰ silver threepenny piece = a coin no longer in circulation

¹¹ starter= first course of food

Then, for pudding of course, I'd insist we had to have a Christmas pudding but somebody else - another family - would have to have a trifle - which is fruit and custard and cream and jelly, mixed together - so we'd have to have a Christmas pudding and a trifle, but then somebody else would have to have a Yule log and that's not - they didn't mean something to burn on the fire! They meant a chocolate Swiss roll¹², for pudding, and then somebody else of course would have to have a fruit salad. So we'd have four desserts. Another food tradition, which is a particularly Yorkshire one, most all of us - all of our families had Christmas cake, at some point, which is again a rich fruit cake, with marzipan¹³ and icing on to decorate with Christmas-type scenes. But in Yorkshire, I learnt to eat that Christmas cake with cheese. I was a bit surprised the first time I had it, but I've grown to love it now, so we have Christmas cake and cheese - not with the meal, but at some other point in the day. Another aspect of the commercialisation of Christmas - isn't it? It really has become a big shopping fest, now!

(17:24)

Mark

Just ... We've brought in that idea about, as Christine said, the commercialisation of Christmas. So, I guess, let's explain that word. If you commercialise something, it means it turns into buying and selling of things and spending money on things. From the business side, it's about marketing things, about trying to persuade people to spend lots of money on things. I don't think there's any doubt, certainly in my lifetime, I remember when I was young, my sister and I, we were in a very comfortably-off¹⁴ family but we only got one present each from our parents, and I'd then get a few small presents from one or two of my other relatives, and that was it. But I have to say now, that most of my grandchildren will get piles of presents, bought for them, by all sorts ... all their relatives, me included - we spoil them. We spend lots of money and, it does feel to me, that Christmas has become ... it's gone too far, in my view - around that idea that you have to spend lots of money, give lots of presents, for lots of people. And that puts huge pressure on families that actually don't have a lot of money, who feel that they have to do that, for their children. And there's lots of evidence that families go into significant debt, so they owe lots of money, as a result of Christmas.

Christine

Well, I agree with you and it is so sad. I believe you're going to talk to the vicar at St Augustine's about the Christmas message and about the Christmas tradition and it is ... I mean, I'm not a Christian myself, nonetheless, that message of good will to all men at Christmas time, it can get lost in all the commercialisation, and puts a lot of stress on people and I find that very sad.

Sheena

Well, yes - I agree - but I think maybe, this year, things might be a little bit different because of Covid. I think less people are going out shopping, to buy things and less people care about material things. I think they care about the health of people and their well-being, so maybe this year might be a little bit different. Things might be a little bit simpler and it might all be about just caring for each other, which would be a really good thing, after the year we've had.

¹² Swiss Roll = a type of sponge cake, usually flavoured and covered with chocolate for a Yule Log

¹³ Marzipan = a paste of almond nuts

¹⁴ comfortably-off means we had enough money to lead a comfortable life, to buy what we needed and have some money left over

Mark Sheena, I agree with you. I mean, the other thing is, there will be less meeting of large families together. I mean people are being advised not to have big gatherings at Christmas, because of the worry about spreading the virus, at that time, I think it does mean that Christmas will be scaled down. It'll be a smaller event, perhaps, this year. But I like very much what you say about maybe it's also a place where people will just think about caring for each other.

(20:53)

Well, I'm delighted to say today that we're joined by John, that's Reverend John, who is the vicar of St Augustine's, and who is also the chair¹⁵ of our charity. And John: very nice to have you with us.

Rev John It's good to be with you. Thank you.

Mark Good. So, we're talking about Christmas this episode, John. So tell me how you ... what the importance is, of Christmas, to Christians.

Rev John Well, it's a celebration of the start of the greatest event in history, as far as Christians are concerned, which is the whole life story of Jesus. So, for Christians, Jesus is God in human form; God came down to earth, so the birth of Jesus is the moment at which God - who, we believe, created the whole of the universe, or universes - stepped into that creation as part of His creation, in the form of a little, helpless baby, who was named Jesus, which means "God saves". And for Christians, the whole of the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus, is all part of one significant event in the history of the universe.

And so, Christmas marks the beginning of that: the point at which God comes, as part of his creation, so we see a God who is not separate from His creation, sending down instructions about how we should live, or what we should do, but rather, who comes Himself, to be part of His creation, and demonstrate it, by His very life, by His teachings and, perhaps, most importantly, for Christians, by the way that He lived and gave His life the first Easter time. So Christmas and Easter are for Christians are linked events, if you like, even though they are separated, originally by maybe 33 years, but for us, 3 months, give or take¹⁶, in an annual remembrance of those events. So it's the start of that and that's why it's important, as we mark the birth of any child, for most people, we mark that, annually, so we do, with, what we would argue is the most important child, Jesus.

(24:05)

Mark That's lovely, John, thank you. And the Christian story ... sorry, the Christmas story itself - is that an important part of that?

Rev John It is. I think a lot of the Christmas story, that we tell so easily and remember, is just that: a story. It's not actually what most Christians would accept is what happened, because that's not how it's described that way in the bible. But the basic outlines of it, I guess, are - so, I guess, most of us are happy to go with the generally accepted story, even though the details we would probably argue about, if that's the right word! The trivial details - Mary's always dressed in blue, for example; and the donkey that they rode on, whatever that is, wherever that comes from; the fact that there were three wise men, when they were told that, for example. Things like that, they're details, they're not the heart of it. The heart of it is the fact that Jesus was born and, for Christians, that baby is both God and human being.

¹⁵ chair = a non-gendered way of saying chairman, or chairperson.

¹⁶ give or take = approximately

- Mark That's great, thank you, John. And how do you feel about the fact that Christmas is celebrated - and it's celebrated in most countries - as far as I can tell, around the world, in some form or other. It's celebrated by people of other faiths - it's celebrated by people with no faith. How do you feel about that?
- Rev John Personally, it's great that people talk about the Christian story and the Christmas story together because they're inter-linked, so, whether people have a personal faith or a faith that's different from mine - the fact that we're able to talk about it, perhaps, more at this time of year than other times of the year, is a positive thing. It's probably the time of year that more people come into a church building, than any other time of the year, as a general rule, and it's great to be able to share that story, so for me that side of things is great. I do, personally, rather bemoan¹⁷, I suppose, the commercialisation in the sense that the pressure, that many people feel, to spend money. There's all the other bits that are positive: you know, the family atmosphere ... the family gatherings and so forth, that are positive. They're all part of things that human beings affirm¹⁸ and that Christians affirm too. I think the pressure to spend money that lots of people struggle with, and the significant numbers of people who get into significant debt in order to celebrate in what they think is an appropriate way, worries me. That's ...erm .. in a sense, that's not a Christian worry, that's a human worry, that people get into those sorts of problems, celebrating in a way that I don't think is necessary to the heart of Christmas.

Mark That's great - thank you very much for joining us, John, and if I could wish you, from all of us, a very merry Christmas?

Rev John And a very blessed and peaceful one, to everyone whose listening.

(Music) (27:54)

Mark This is our final episode of 2020. We'll be taking a short break, but will be back with you early in the New Year. Until then, a very happy Christmas to all of our listeners and we hope you'll join us again in 2021.

You can find the transcript - that's the written version of this episode - on our website:

www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

And that's where you can also find links to all the other episodes, and the transcripts, so you can listen and read along at the same time. That's also where you can find out how to donate, to help our work. We are a charity, supporting particularly, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants but also, all those in need in our local area and we would welcome your support, if you felt able to give it. If you follow on the website, the links to "**Get Involved**" and "**Donate**".

We also have an email address - that's **englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com**

And we would love to hear from you - your thoughts on our podcast and ideas for the future.

We also have a Twitter account : **@EsolSaint**
and there is additional material on that site.

¹⁷ bemoan = slightly old fashioned way of saying "regret, feel sorry about"

¹⁸ affirm = to confirm, to uphold, to assert

I'll spell out all those addresses:

So, the website: w-w-w-.s-t-a-u-g-u-s-t-i-n-e-s-c-e-n-t-r-e-h-a-l-i-f-a-x.org.uk

So that's the website.

The email is: englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com - And that's "English for" spelt: f-o-r

And finally, the Twitter account: is : @ [at] [capital E] E-s-o-l- [capital S] -S-a-l-n-t

(Music). (31:01) (ends).