

Christmas

The Christmases of my childhood were magical times, although I am sure they were stressful for my mum who, when I was small, normally catered for the extended family at some point during the festive season. The build-up to Christmas was accompanied by the opening of the cardboard doors of an advent calendar. These were the sort with pictures behind; it was long before chocolate advent calendars, let alone anything more elaborate. I would get a new one most years but still kept and re-opened the old ones. I remember one year we had one with a window for the 26th on - very strange. When I was first married it was a Snoopy advent calendar each year.

Decorating the house was hugely important and still is. Most of the decorations are old friends and bring back many memories. One year, when we lived at Firsby Avenue, mum made amazing door decorations from coloured shiny paper, that was the latest trend that year. There was an angel, a tree and a stocking amongst the collection. A less successful attempt at home made decorations came from another innovation, the result of a 1969 visit to the 'Do-it-Yourself Exhibition', a lesser version of the Ideal Home Exhibition. Some kind of granules were purchased that could be turned into minute polystyrene balls, perhaps by boiling; I can't remember the process. These were dyed and glued to twigs from the garden. It was the gluing part that was tricky and polystyrene balls adorned the floor all that Christmas season.



**1978 at Cross Street
The First Christmas in my own
Home**

Once we had a dog, we had an artificial tree and I took responsibility for decorating this from the year I was twelve. I was very careful to put one decoration on each branch. One year I wrote and told my friend, who had recently emigrated, exactly what decoration was on each branch - 'third row from bottom, yellow light and green bell' etc.. When I had my own tree, it was always a real one and as large as the room could take, or frequently somewhat larger!

I have used the same wool to tie lights on the tree for decades and ornaments are fixed with bent paperclips. These replaced the black wire of my childhood. I do still have the wire, on its broken wooden spool but that now lives in the toolbox. For many years in the 1980s I seemed to be wearing the same brown cardigan when I decorated the tree and kept the scissors and wool in the pocket as I was decorating, usually whilst listening to Christmas music. The top decoration always went on last. In my childhood it was a gold star with gold lametta strips hanging from it. This gave way to an angel that I dressed in the late 1970s. The tree decorations are treasures and their story is told separately.

There are decorations that have not stood the test of time but they live on in memory. There was the set of decorations whose stomachs consisted of concertinaed paper and similar large balls and bells. There were commercial paper garlands that also worked on a concertina principle. There was the 'Korky' balloon, with a red nose, that was carefully inflated and tied with string, to be let down and re-inflated over a period of about eight Christmas seasons; we saved all our balloons for subsequent years. Equally precious were the rainbow painted balloons. Balloon blowing was always a hazardous



The Wire



Balloon Pump

activity. We had cylindrical, cardboard balloon pumps but the process made an awful noise and there was always the danger of them popping. I spent several years hiding under the bed with the dog when balloons were being inflated. I did grow out of this as a teenager but I could never bring myself to deliberately pop balloons.

Making paper chains was an annual activity. Normally, we used commercial packets for this but one year we made our own from cut up strips of wrapping paper. There were chains that consisted of crepe paper rolls that had to be twisted as they were unwound and by the 1980s we had gold foil 'chains'.

There were paper Chinese lanterns, which I do still have but which don't very often make it to the tree anymore as they are now very fragile. We had a nativity set that my father had painted. Strangely this had four kings, later I was knowledgeable enough to know that this was not biblically inconsistent - three gifts but no record of the number of donors. This is too brittle to display. Its 1980s replacement is kept in a 1940s box.



The 1940s Box

I still have 'angel chimes' which revolve and make an irritating noise when the candles under them are lit and the heat causes them to move. I also have a cardboard boot from the 1960s, which started life as a container for a present but which still comes out each year as a decoration. A home-sewn stuffed Father Christmas usually resides in the boot. These made the Christmases of my childhood a wonderful place. I would hate a colour co-ordinated scheme that had no sentimental associations and I cannot imagine a Christmas without my treasured decorations.



Angel Chimes

how many days there are until Christmas. We also acquired a door mat that, by means of a battery, went 'Ho, ho, ho, Merry Christmas' when someone trod on it. The novelty of this soon paled and it used to spend most of the season with its battery detached. On one occasion I was up the other end of the hall and sneezed,

Decorations that date from the 1980s include a cardboard post box that cards awaiting hand delivery are put in and which allows a dial to be turned to show



The Boot



Father Christmas who lives in the boot

always a violent activity. The vibrations set the mat off, something I have never been allowed to forget. We also have a wooden train that holds candles and whose carriages are in the shape of the letters to spell Noel. Other favourites are a collection of cake decorations including huskies and a sledge. When I was married, each year a new Snoopy poster style wrapping paper came out and we purchased these and blu-tacked them all to the doors. I don't have enough doors any longer but I can't bring myself to throw the posters away.



The Post Box

A series of cardboard angels that used to be sent annually by the foot and mouth painters' association have their place, as does a tiny



The Noel Train



The Cardboard Angels

battered gold tree. The forerunners of this from the 1940s or 1950s were two small green fold-out trees in red wooden pots, which I do still have but don't display. My recent version of entertaining family at Christmas is to display photos of past and present family members attached to strings of lights that are designed to hold Christmas cards.



The Gold Tree

I remember the annual card writing ritual and how important it was not to send one with a 'Happy Christmas' message to someone who was recently bereaved. I can also recall making presents for close relatives. I have vague recollections of spill holders and felt glasses' cases.



The Family History Photos

Family traditions were established over the years. Mum made me an enormous netted stocking for my first Christmas that was decorated with ribbon bows. There was also a special Christmas ribbon that had to ornament my 'best' present. Stocking presents were opened in



My Christmas Stocking



1969 with my Mum's Stocking



The Scissors

bed at a very early hour. I knew that childhood Christmases were over when, aged thirteen, I didn't wake up in the early hours of Christmas morning. Main presents were opened after breakfast and this might take most of the morning. They were unwrapped slowly and in turn so we could see what each other had received. We had to use particular pairs of scissors that I think had come from my great-grandmother, Clara Woolgar née Dawson. The shape was identical but mum had the larger 'mummy' pair and I had the smaller. The paper was always smoothed out and saved for another year, cutting off any sellotape round the edges so the papers got smaller and smaller each year. I still find it really difficult not to do this, even though I have enough paper to last for the rest of my life. As I got older and families members died with unfailing regularity, mum continued to buy me Christmas and birthday presents on their behalf. In the end I had plenty of Christmas presents but they were all from mum as I had no other relatives left and mum had no one else to buy for.

As soon as my dad died, when I was nine, I took Christmas present buying for mum very seriously. I saved six pences in a little boot shaped purse all year and used other pocket money to buy her a range of presents, relying heavily on Woolworths and Boots as sources of these. She didn't always have a stocking but her small under-the-tree presents usually included a reel of cotton



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and matching bias binding and a walnut whip. I continued this tradition well into adulthood as a joke. One year I purchased a packet of ten cigarettes, which I appear, as a twelve year old, to have been able to do without question and wrapped them individually. I am not sure if they were smokable afterwards! Records survive of some of my purchases. In 1969, amongst other things, I spent 4/11 on a glass animal from Kennards Arcade, 2/4 on hand cream from Woolworths and 11d on a flannel from Boots. The first year I was responsible for Christmas I chose pink wrapping paper with poodles on. Subsequently, I bought packs of six different papers from Woolworths each year.

Tags and present decorations were important. The latter were usually hand made from newly available plasticised ribbon. It was not until I left home that we began the custom of decorating parcels with ornaments that would later find a home on the Christmas tree.

Christmas was never about the food. I do remember how difficult family Christmas cooking was for mum, who was never any more fond of cooking than I am. In the years before my dad died, when we entertained my paternal grandparents, two uncles and aunt, as well as my mum's Uncle Percy, there was one year when the roast potatoes found themselves on the floor. I don't think the three second rule had been heard of then but the potatoes were eaten, we survived and none the wiser. Then there was catering for Uncle Percy, who emphatically

didn't eat turkey - except of course when we convinced him that it was chicken! Christmas mornings meant Cheeselets and ginger ale, later replaced by Benedictine or Southern Comfort. More recently, we have chocolate oranges, non-alcoholic ginger wine and tins of Roses' chocolates.

When I was married, I started making Christmas cakes and puddings each year, both of which I love. I usually produce several of each. The same recipe book is always used but I add far more peel than the recipe suggests. The ritual was important and once the girls were old enough, they joined in, taking it in turns to add ingredients. It was always difficult to fit everything in the mixer bowl and someone had to hold a spatula in place at the top of the bowl as the mixer revolved in order to stop everything coming out. More recently I have abandoned the mixer bowl altogether. We have always used the large mixing bowl that mum had as a wedding present to mix the dry



Making Christmas Cake



The Cake Tins

ingredients by hand. I use the same tins each year, even though modern tins would make it much easier to extract the cooked cakes and make the tricky procedure of lining the tins with greaseproof paper redundant.

Christmas puddings are covered with the same bits of old sheet each year and the string is traditionally tied with a surgeon's reef knot. Until I let the pan boil dry and destroyed it, the bowls were lifted from the boiling water with the aid of a device, created by my mother-in-law, that she called a Chinese bra. This was basically a knitted cotton square, with two loops attached at the corners, difficult to describe but very efficient.



Christmas Pudding

Cake and pudding making has not been without incident. One year I put silver coins in the puddings. No one had warned me that this was not especially hygienic or that they should be inserted after cooking not before. Then there was the time we accidentally put the flour in the cake mixture twice. On another occasion we used whole almonds because they were cheaper than the ground sort. We tried, unsuccessfully, to chop these up and then attempted to liquidise them. Putting them in whole was not an option as I don't actually like nuts! The icing has caused problems over the years. I am particularly inept at this so the usually opt for a 'rough snow' style. I use royal icing that I mix myself and I don't always get the consistency right. I did end up with a donut-like ring of icing on the plate round an icing-less cake one year when it was too runny to stay on the cake at all. I also remember putting it outside on the door step at Cross Street, where it was cold, to try and get the icing to set. That may have been the year that I didn't actually ice the cake until Boxing Day.

'Entertainment' came in the form of quizzes and games. I can remember one year recording the relatives on my reel-to-reel tape recorder, then playing the voices back at the wrong speed to see if we could guess who was who. Once dad died, we did make the effort to see what remained of his relatives over the Christmas period but from then on, until I married, Christmases were for mum and I and none the less enjoyable. We played many board games; there was traditionally a new one each year. During these years we usually went to visit mum's close friends and they visited us, either on Christmas Eve or Boxing Day. We would have 'tree' presents, often bath cubes or hankies for women and socks or ties for men. Card games would usually be played.



1969

We didn't particularly watch anything on television at Christmas, although we always watched *The White Heather Club* (1958) on New Year's Eve. There would be the usual round of Christmas specials from the likes of Morecombe and Wise and the Two Ronnies. *The Horse of the Year Show* was another Christmas favourite. Purchasing the Christmas Radio and TV Times (one

giving BBC programmes and the other was for ITV) was essential; these were often fortnightly, instead of weekly, issues.

Harry Bellefonte's *Mary's Boy Child* was the first Christmas record that I remember although we had a LP of traditional carols *Christmas at Home* that came out each year. When I was a teenager, we listened to Phil Spector's Christmas album. When my children were small, favourites were the Spinners' *Mrs Hooligan's Christmas Cake* and *Donald where's your Trousers*. From the 1980s we would often watch the Nine Lessons and Carols and the series of Royal Institution Christmas Lectures. The

film *The Snowman* was always a must-watch.

When I was a child, we always went to the pantomime shortly after Christmas, at the Ashcroft Theatre in Croydon. These normally starred Cyril Fletcher and Betty Astell and included a Harlequinade, which was superfluous to the plot. We usually had good seats at the front on the left as you faced the stage. I have no idea how early mum had to book, or how much she had to pay, to get these premium seats. Being at the front was very important, as at some point children would be invited to



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go up on stage and it was whoever could get there quickest. I don't remember being disappointed. The lucky children would then help with the audience participation song and I think, were given a small gift.

Church going at Christmas began in my mid-teens when a visit to the pub was sandwiched between two Christmas Eve services. For a few years we alternated between Anglican and Catholic services as the group of boys that we went round with were Catholic. When my children were small we went to carol services and Christingles and later they played at carol concerts with local brass band.



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Christmas is and always has been very special to me.