

A Traditional Irish Christmas



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Traditional Irish Christmas

Introduction

Have you ever wondered what the holiday season is like in traditional Ireland? We wanted to share with you this magical time by giving you a little taste of all the events that make up a wonderful Christmas here in Ireland.

Included amongst this eBook is the tale behind St. Stephen's Day, what makes a traditional Irish Christmas dinner and the importance of social gatherings throughout the holiday season.

So take the time to learn about how our ancestral history has paved the way for such a joyous season here in Ireland.

The Christmas Countdown

December 7th marks the official day that the Christmas countdown begins in Ireland. On this day, houses all across the country set up their Christmas trees, hang their stockings above the fireplace and decorate their houses in holly, tinsel and festive banners.

Sending Christmas cards is a big tradition in Ireland. People often receive as many as 50 cards each year. Because of this, we often place a long line of string above the fireplace so that we can hang all the cards and they become another Christmas decoration.

Ireland is a small island and we rely on agriculture massively which means that farmers are busy throughout the year and Christmas is a difficult time for them. Our capital city, Dublin, will often see farmers and other people who live ‘down the country’ wandering around the inner-city streets on December 7th trying to get all their gifts sorted in one day.

The Winter Solstice

The winter solstice in Ireland is a real sign that winter is closing in. It's traditionally marked on December 21st but it runs from December 19th to the 23rd and it really adds to the festive spirit.

There is a place in county Meath called Newgrange where people gather to celebrate the winter solstice. It is a 5,000 year old monument that it is a huge part of Irish tradition and fills everyone with wonder at how our ancestors could build something so intelligent and advanced all those years ago.

A lucky number of people gather together in the chamber of the monument every year and watch as the sun rises. A shaft of sunlight shines through a roof box over the entrance and penetrates the passage that then lights up the chamber. It is an event that lasts for 17 minutes and happens every day from the 19th to the 23rd.

Christmas Eve - Oíche Nollag

Religion has played a huge part in shaping Ireland's traditions. Although there are many religious festivals

throughout the year, there are none more exciting in Ireland than midnight mass on Christmas Eve.

It has become a huge social event for locals across the country where family, friends and neighbours gather together. Children from local schools gather in their parish church and act out the nativity play and a live gospel sing hymns and carols accompanied by the pipe organ.

It has also become a tradition in Ireland for people to flock to their nearest city during the day of Christmas Eve to fetch some last minute gifts and soak up the festive atmosphere. Quite often, services such as the fire department will have members dressed as Santa Claus collecting money for charity and gospel choirs and other musically talented people will be gathered in town halls and shopping centres playing live music.

Christmas Day - Lá Nollag

There are two aspects of Christmas Day that are important to the Irish:

1. The giving of gifts

2. The traditional Irish dinner

Many Irish people will tell you that Christmas just isn't the same unless you have children. The excitement of Santa Claus is something that can't be described on Christmas morning in Irish households. Kids will often wake up as early as 6am and wake their parents up to open up all their presents and see what little gifts have been left in the stockings that are hanging over the fireplace.

Then families will travel to each others houses to bring over any gifts they have for each other. A lot of families will congregate in one household and all have dinner together that the women have prepared. The traditional Irish dinner is made up of three courses.

Winter is such a cold time in Ireland so the most common starter is a vegetable soup. It's easy to make, quick to serve and warms everyone up.

The main course is a feast within itself and is the most loved dinner by every Irish person. It consists of both roast turkey and ham, stuffing, roast potatoes and mashed

potatoes, carrots, brussel sprouts and a deliciously rich gravy. Some of these elements, such as the boiling of the ham and preparation of the brussel sprouts are usually done by the women of the house on Christmas Eve.

The dessert is something that has been in preparation for two months previous to Christmas Day. It is a rich fruit pudding that contains plenty of alcohol - usually whiskey. The pudding becomes a central attraction at Christmas. It is placed on a plate in the middle of the dinner table where it is drizzled in Brandy and then set alight. It is then served with brandy butter or cream.

St. Stephen's Day - *Lá Fhéile Stiofáin*

St. Stephen's Day is December 26th and is one of the biggest social events in the Irish calendar. Pubs can now open their doors once again and friends, family and neighbours gather inside to get merry and, as we say, have the 'craic'. There is a real electric buzz surrounding this day as everyone is in great spirits and quite often pubs will have some form of live music to keep festivities going.

The Wren - pronounced 'The Ran' - is a tradition where people dress up in old clothes and paint their faces, wear straw hats and travel from door to door singing, dancing and playing music.

Long ago in Ireland, young boys and men known as 'The Wren Boys' would go out into the woods. They would hunt for and then kill a wren and then parade the dead bird through the town on top of a decorated pole.

There is a lot of speculation as where this tradition stems from. One story says that long ago there was a plan by Irish soldiers to ambush a Viking soldier camp and a whole bunch of wrens pecked on the Viking soldiers drums and woke them up just in time for the plan to fail. The Irish soldiers were defeated. From then on, the wren was known as the bird of the devil.

The poor little Wren is also blamed for the betraying the Christian martyr St. Stephen when he was in hiding by making noises, hence the reason for hunting the Wren on St. Stephen's Day.

In the old days it was a real wren that was killed and placed on the top of the pole and the “wren boys” would carry it around to houses and beg for money to bury the bird as it was considered to be evil.

The Wren Boys would sing this traditional song at each house:

*The Wran, the wran
the king of all Birds
on St. Stephen's Day
it was caught in the furze,
up with the kettle
and down with the pan
give me a penny
to bury the wran.*

Thankfully though, nowadays, it just means a little face paint and a good old sing song.

Women's Christmas - Nollaig na Mban

Women's Christmas (or Little Christmas as it's sometimes referred to) occurs on January 6th every year and signifies

the winding down of the Christmas season. The women of the house are very much respected during this season because of how much effort they put in to make it such a joyous time. Between cooking, cleaning and decorating the household there's a lot to be done and January 6th is a day for them to put their feet up and relax.

On this day, the men of the house take down all the Christmas decorations and clean the house while women will often meet up for a chat, have lunch or dinner out, do a spot of January sales shopping and generally relax while the men take care of everything back home.

Irish Language Phrases & Blessings for the Winter Holidays

Below you can find several phrases and blessing in the Irish language you can use to connect with others and wish them happy holidays.

Look at the following pages.

How to say “Happy Christmas” in Irish

Nollaig Shona dhuit!

/Null-eg hunna gwitch/

Happy Christmas!

Nollaig Shona dhuit is used when addressing **one** person.

To address more than one person at a time:

Nollaig Shona Daoibh

/NULL-eg HUH-nuh DEE-iv/

Literally “**Happy Christmas to You**” (plural)

A more elaborate greeting, often seen on cards, is:

Nollaig Faoi Shéan is Faoi Shonas Dhuit

/NULL-eg fwee hayn iss fwee HUH-nuhss gwitch/

“A Prosperous and Happy Christmas to You.”

How to say “Happy Christmas, and a Happy New Year” in Irish

Nollaig shona dhuit, agus athbhliain faoi mhaise dhuit

/Null-eg hunna ghwitch, ogg-us ah-veen fwee vosh-ab ghwitch/

Happy Christmas, and a Happy New Year

How to say “Santa Claus” in Irish

San Nioclás

/San Nik-uh-lawss/

Saint Nicholas

Daidí na Nollag

/Daddy na Nul-ug/

Father Christmas

How to say “Decorations” in Irish

maisiúcháin

/mosh-oo-khaw-in/

decorations

maisiúcháin Nollag

/mosh-oo-khaw-in Null-ug/

Christmas decorations

How to say “Happy New Year” in Irish

Athbhliain faoi mhaise dhuit!

/Ah-vlee-on fwee wash-ah gwitch/

Happy New Year!

How to say “New Year’s Resolution” in Irish

Rún athbhliana

/Roon ah-vlee-ah-na/

New Year’s resolution

**Tá sé mar rún athbhliana agam an Ghaeilge a
fhoghlaim.**

*/Taw shay mor roon ah-vlee-ah-na a-gum on Ghayl-guh ah
oh-lum/*

My New Year’s resolution is to learn Irish.

Christmas Stories from the Bitesize Irish team

How about the members of the Bitesize Irish team? Since almost everyone was born and raised in Ireland, we have a few Christmas stories of our own. Here are just a few of our most beautiful Irish Christmas memories.

Eoin - Bitesize Irish founder

“I was staying at my grandad’s house for Christmas, in Tralee, County Kerry. He was a native of Kerry. To the best of my understanding, he would drive a milk truck, collecting milk from farms and delivering it to the creamery in Dingle (An Daingean) in Kerry. It’s at the creamery where my grandmother worked and where they met. He spent years away from Kerry (in England and then Dublin). But Kerry was his home and I suspect he was happy to be back there. These days, there is a small brewery in that creamery. I was visiting the brewery once and only when I was inside I realised its significance to me.

It was Christmas Eve and I was probably 6 or 7 years old. I was lying in bed, my three sisters in the same room. We were giddy for Santa to come. It was my strongly held belief that he was going to land on the roof of the small house with his reindeer. My bed was by the window. Every couple of minutes, I would open up the curtains to look out but nothing unusual was on the roof. Sleep must have gotten the better of me, but not for long, haha! By about 4am I was up with my sisters enjoying the gifts that Santa had brought.”

Siobhán - Irish Language Assistant

“Childhood memories of Christmas time are etched indelibly into my memory. As a family, we stayed faithful to the tradition of abstaining from doing anything festive before the 8th of December; the Roman Catholic feast of the Immaculate Conception. As soon as the 8th was reached, however, I was very excited to erect the manger, or nativity scene as you may call it, and hang up the tinsel.

That did not stop me, however, from deliberating for weeks on the best and most reasonable requests to Santy and a letter to the North Pole would be attempted several

times before getting it just right. The dearest memory of all, however, are the trips to midnight Mass and seeing houses and farm sheds lit up like cities on the way there and back.

The sky was often clear enough to see the big bright moon and I often thought I caught a glimpse of Santy and his sledge passing across it. I can still feel the excitement and wonder I felt when I saw the high neon star shining brightly away in the distance on a midland plain. “

Gabrielle - Community Manager

“Growing up, my parents were teachers in our local secondary school and every Christmas Eve the Nuns invited us to Midnight Mass in the convent. It was a lovely evening and we had a chance to catch up with all the other families we only see at Christmas!

Every Christmas morning in the Campion house, we have croissants for breakfast (not very traditional!) and then my Mammy, my sisters and I get to work on the Christmas dinner.

Every year we have turkey, ham, stuffing, brussel sprouts and the most important ingredient - roast potatoes! In our house, we all fight over who has been given the most brussel sprouts - whoever gets the most is the winner!

After dinner, we exchange small gifts and then read the books we got for Christmas by the fire.

We have a really special family day - we relax and forget about everything outside...it's too cold to go out anyway!

Even as the family has dispersed, and our traditions are starting to change, we still keep the same relaxed-family feeling to our day.”