

Medieval Christmas Celebrations

hristmas was one of the great religious feasts of the medieval year and would be celebrated by everyone at their local church, and also at home with feasting, dancing, music and games, in much the same way as we do today.

Popular medieval activities at Christmas included acting, playing the lute and harp, singing, playing at the tables (backgammon), chess and cards. Backgammon and chess had been popular for a long time, like dice, but playing cards were relatively new.

Mumming, or a masked play, was an essential ingredient of medieval Christmases, usually involving a St George and an alien knight who was Turkish. The Turks captured Constantinople when Richard was one year old.

Carols probably originated with the 'The Crib' written by Italian friar Jacopone da Todi in the thirteenth century but were slow to gain popularity and the first recorded carol-like verses appeared in later medieval plays.

Richard and Anne's first Christmas as king and queen in 1483 was happy, even though they were in London and their only son Edward had to remain at Middleham, too sickly to travel.

As the king was short of ready money at Christmas he sold items from the royal household to London merchants, and also used items from the royal treasure as pledges for loans. This brought in plenty of money and a delighted Richard presented the city with a flat cup with a cover of gold, encrusted with rubies, diamonds and pearls.

Anne and Richard spent £1200 with a mercer on new clothes and gifts for the court. On December 9th Richard licensed a merchant from Genoa to bring jewels into the country, provided he had first choice, so Anne probably had jewellery as a present.

Richard couldn't afford to repeat his brother's munificence of 1482, when Edward IV fed more than two thousand people each day at Eltham Palace.

Their second Christmas as king and queen was overshadowed by the mounting threat to the security of the kingdom, the death earlier in the year of their only son, and Anne's ill-health. Elizabeth of York wore a dress as magnificent as Anne's. The Croyland Chronicler says that too much attention was paid to singing and dancing this Christmas, and that the queen and Elizabeth exchanged clothes.

Boar's head was the main dish for medieval noblemen to have on the table, served decked with rosemary and with an apple or orange in its mouth. The French calendar dated between 1413 - 1416, 'Les très riches heures du Duc de Berry', shows a boar hunting scene for December. The boar was the enemy of farmers as it would trample crops, but there is a legend that man learnt to plough by watching a boar root with his tusks in the ground, then realising how fertile that patch of ground became. A boar's head carol sung at St John's College, Oxford, bemoans the damage done to crops by the boar. Later on the boar's head was replaced by a gilded peacock as the dish to serve at Christmas.

Christmas pudding began as frumenty, which is hulled wheat spiced and boiled in milk. Gradually eggs, mace, dried prunes and lumps of meat were added. Only later did it become the thick meatless plum pudding of today.

To wash all this down were two Christmas specialities, church ale and the wassail drink of lambswool. Lambswool was a hot concoction of beer mulled with apples bobbing on the surface. Church ale was a strong brew only served at Christmas and sold in the churchyard or even the church itself. Of course this led to singing and dancing in the church, but although condemned by some, this just served to underline the church's position as a living institution and part of everyone's daily life in those days.

And a good time was had by all! Happy Christmas everyone.

Sources:

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