



Christmas

Are the meanings of our Christmas festivities exactly what we think?



We think of lots of our Christmas traditions as being tied in with Christianity. In fact, many of these customs began many years before Christianity.

The season of good will was not originally a Christian festival. When Christians first came to our country to convert the local people, they noticed that there was a great festival around December 25th, where people generally made merry and had a good time.

The most important date in the festive season for the Pagan locals was the Winter Solstice, which happens around December 21st. The native people called it Yule, and it was one of the Celtic fire festivals. It marked the return of sunlight after the shortest day and longest night of the year.



There has been lots of argument about the exact day that Jesus was born. Some people thought it was in September and others in February. Some others thought it might be in May.

So it was decided to have the celebrations of the Nativity on the

25th of December to fit in with the other celebrations.

The custom of giving presents, eating lots of food and having fun was taken from the Roman festival of Saturnalia, which was celebrated around the 17th December.



Saturn was a Roman God. He was responsible for farming and harvests. Giving gifts signified the giving of wealth from the rich to the poor during the season of greatest hardship for ordinary people. Rich people would lay on big feasts for their poor neighbours.



After Saturnalia came the Roman festival of Mithras. Mithras was the God of Light. His festival was on December 25th. It was the festival of the renewal of hope. This was adopted in the 4th Century as the birthday of Jesus.



In the world of modern Pagans, the solstice is still the most important festival. It is called Yule, from the ancient Scandinavian beliefs. The Anglo-Saxons called it 'Mother-Night'. It is the celebration of the return of light after the darkness of winter.



The next celebration is New Year's Eve. It was first dedicated to the Roman God, Janus, who had two faces, so that he could look forward and back. There are torch-lit processions, singing, gift-giving and other fun. Pagan people often decorate their homes with greenery, including fir, holly and ivy, to symbolize new life. We now bring greenery into our homes at Christmas in the form of Christmas trees, mistletoe and holly wreaths.





Christmas and Nature

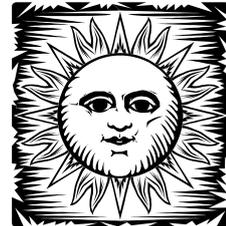


Read carefully the text about the Pagan Christmas. Now complete the tasks below.

1. When was the birth of Jesus?



2. Why do Christians celebrate the birth on December 25th?



3. What is the most important date in the festive season for Pagans? What happens at that time of year? Which word do we use at Christmas that is really the name for the Pagan festival?



4. Why do we give gifts at Christmas?



5. Who was Mithras? When was his festival? Why do you think candles were lit at this festival?



6. What happens at the Pagan New Year?



7. Which god is celebrated on New Year's Eve? Why do you think he has two faces?



8. Why did people decorate their homes with all sorts of greenery? Which plants do we still use in our own homes?



Have a cool Yule!

From Durham County Badger Group