

December 2017's Equality, Diversity & Inclusion topic is "Christmas". At SHS, 26% of our tenants told us that they are Christians.



Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, who Christians believe is the son of God. His birth date is unknown because there is little information about his early life. There is disagreement among scholars on when Jesus was born. Christians celebrate Jesus' birthday on December 25. The first recorded date of Christmas being celebrated on December 25th was in 336, during the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine (he was the first Christian Roman Emperor). A few years later, Pope Julius I officially declared that the birth of Jesus would be celebrated on the 25th December.

The name "Christmas" comes from the Mass of Christ (or Jesus). A Mass service is where Christians remember that Jesus died for us and then came back to life. The "Christ-Mass" was the only one that was allowed to take place after sunset and before sunrise the next day.

Over 2 billion people (over a third of the world's population) will celebrate the birth of Christ. In 2017, one more country was added to the long list that celebrate Christmas Day on 25 December when Ukraine decided to make Catholic Christmas a national holiday in addition to Orthodox Christmas on 6 January.

Whilst the holiday has a strong grounding in the story of the birth of Jesus, many of the traditions we associate with Christmas have evolved from pre-Christian beliefs and the traditions have evolved beyond purely a Christian holiday to have a wider secular significance.

The celebration of Christmas in late December is as a result of pre-existing celebrations happening at that time, marking the Winter Solstice. Most notable of these is Yule (meaning 'Feast'), a winter pagan festival that was originally celebrated by Germanic people. The exact date of Yule depends on the lunar cycle but it falls from late December to early January. In some Northern Europe countries, the local word for Christmas has a closer linguistic tie to 'Yule' than 'Christmas', and it is still a term that may be used for Christmas in some English-speaking countries. Several Yule traditions are familiar to the modern celebration of Christmas, such as Yule Log, the custom of burning a large wooden log on the fire at Christmas; or indeed carol singing, which is surprisingly a very ancient tradition.

## Traditions – Mistletoe



Kissing someone who happens to be stood under a sprig of mistletoe is seen as a tradition popularised in Victorian England. Mistletoe bears its fruit around the time of the Winter Solstice; it is supposed to have a mythical ability to heal and increase fertility. In Norse mythology, an arrow made from mistletoe killed Balder, who was a brother of Thor. Frigga, Balder's mother brought him back to life shedding tears that changed the red berries on mistletoe to white. Frigga then blessed the mistletoe and promised a kiss to anyone who passed beneath it.

A hint of Mistletoe's integration from pagan ceremonies into Christmas tradition is said that the mistletoe plant used to be a tree, and its wood was used to make the Cross on which Jesus was crucified.

## Traditions - Carol Singing



The tradition of singing of songs can be traced back to the pagan festivals before the advent of Christmas. The word "carol" is derived from the Greek word choraulein, which meant "an ancient circle dance performed to flute music." As carols were already an established custom, early Christians made the decision to integrate Christian songs into the tradition. Most new Christian Carols were written in Latin, which was by the middle ages, a language only used by the church, thus reducing the popularity of the custom. However, carols received an injection of popularity when St. Francis of Assisi started his Nativity Plays in Italy in 1223, which included songs written in the local people's language.

## Christmas Day around the world

### Denmark

Christmas is called 'Jul', derived from Yule. Christmas starts with advent, the fourth Sunday before Christmas Eve. A wreath with four candles and ribbons is hung up and one candle is lit. Another candle is lit on each of the following Sundays before Christmas.

## **United Kingdom**

A law often quoted in regards to Christmas is the Holy Days and Fasting Days Act of 1551, which said that everyone in England must attend church on Christmas Day without using any form of transport. This law was repealed in 1969.

## **USA**

Alabama was the first US state to legalise the celebration of Christmas. The last state to make Christmas a legal holiday was Oklahoma in 1907. The White House had its first Christmas tree in 1856. It was decorated by US president Franklyn Pierce.