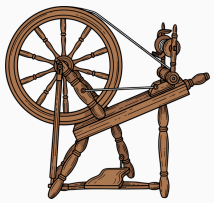
Twelfth Night and Tudor Christmas traditions

Christmas was the greatest festival celebrated by the Tudors. The main three days of celebration were Christmas Day, New Year's Day and Twelfth Night.

During Advent (the four weeks before Christmas) everyone fasted and on Christmas Eve no meat, cheese or eggs could be eaten. The celebrations began on Christmas Day when all work on the land stopped, except for looking after animals. Spinning, where fibres are turned into yarn or thread that can be used to make cloth for clothes and blankets, was the main occupation for women. This was banned during the Chistmas period and flowers were placed on the spinning wheels to stop them from being used.



The twelve days of Christmas (25th December - 6th January) were all celebrated although the three main days were celebrated the most. Work restarted on the first Monday after Twelfth Night, known as Plough Monday.

Many of the ways we celebrate Christmas today are a continuation of the traditions of the Tudors. Today, people 'deck the halls' with holly, ivy and other festive foliage. The Tudors decorated their homes with mistletoe, holly, ivy, rosemary and yew. Another traditional decoration was the kissing bough. This was a circle of evergreens that was decorated with loops of ribbons, baubles and shiny red apples. The centre piece of the bough was a sprig of mistletoe. Tudors put their decorations up on Christmas Eve (it was thought to be unlucky to do it before then) and usually took them down on Twelfth Night.



In many households, a Yule log was brought in on Christmas Eve to burn throughout the twelve festive days. If the fire was deliberately extinguished, it was considered to bring a year of bad luck. It was believed to be good luck to keep some of the charred remains as a deterrent against lightning and fire and these remains would be used to light the log the following year. The ashes were also used to treat toothache, to rid cattle of vermin and to enrich the soil. Today, the most common type of Yule log is a chocolate cake, made to look like a real log, eaten during the Christmas period.



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Much like today, Christmas for the Tudors was a time to visit friends and communities would come together to celebrate. The tradition was to keep an 'open house' for everybody so anyone could knock on the door and join the festivities. During the celebrations they would eat food such as meat, vegetables, salads and desserts - they even had mince pies! Mince pies then had 13 ingredients, including meat, to represent Jesus and his Apostles. Ingredients included fruit (raisins, prunes, currants) and spices (such as black pepper, cinnamon, saffron, mace, cloves) and also mutton to represent the shepherds in the nativity story. The fashion was for them to be shaped like a crib.



As well as feasting, the festivities to celebrate Twelfth Night included singing, dancing, playing games and performing plays. There are records from the early 16th Century that both Oxford and Cambridge colleges employed travelling players as part of their entertainment. People in towns would come together to celebrate the Feast of Folks. There would be a Lord of Misrule who would preside over the celebrations. This 'Lord' was like a mock king; he supervised entertainment, revelry, role reversal and general chaos. They would choose the music and songs to be performed and would give out gifts to children.

Although Shakespeare does not directly mention Christmas in the play, 'Twelfth Night', he uses the ideas of mischief making, tricky and confusion in the story. There is mistaken identity, girls becoming boys and 'misrule' in the trick played on Malvolio. All of this confusion made the play very well suited for Twelfth Night celebrations. The first recorded performance of 'Twelfth Night' was on 2nd February 1602.



Activity ideas

- Compare Tudor Christmas traditions and modern celebrations - you could create a poster or a presentation to share with others
- Create your own performance for Twelfth Night celebrations using the ideas of confusion and 'misrule'
- Collect different evergreen foliage and decorate your room for Christmas 'Tudor style' - you could even have a go at making a kissing bough! (PLEASE NOTE: Yew can be poisinous so don't include this!)
- Bake your own mince pies using our mince pie recipe - don't worry, they don't include the mutton!

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