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## **Victorian Christmas.**

Special exhibition from 26 November 2011 to 12 February 2012  
in the Doll's House Museum Basel.

**In a special exhibition running from 26 November 2011 until 12 February 2012, the Doll's House Museum Basel is devoting itself to Victorian Christmas. Display cases with hundreds of Christmas ornaments, readings from Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol and performances by carol singers radiate a sense of British tradition.**

### **The exhibition.**

Hundreds of beautiful Christmas ornaments convey an impression of the splendour of the Victorian Christmas tradition. Feather trees will be adorned by large cotton crabs, cotton stars and beautiful, filigree glass ornaments with die-cuts or lametta. The accompanying programme to the special exhibition includes readings from Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol and appearances by carol singers.

### **The Victorian age.**

The Victorian age describes the period of British history from 1837 to 1901 during the rule of Queen Victoria. During her reign, Britain rose to become a leading world and economic power. The reason for this success was less Victoria's finesse but rather the industrial revolution which had a lasting impact on mining and engineering and ensured that Great Britain long enjoyed a technological advantage. The development of the railway network, pursued with great vigour during this period, also had far-reaching consequences. The result was an increase in prosperity, the main beneficiaries of which was a religious and morally conscientious middle class.

Although the name "Victorian age" might suggest otherwise, Queen Victoria's political influence was quite modest. During this period, internal politics remained unaffected by the revolutionary upheavals of the sort experienced in other European countries. As a result of the change in voting rights and administrative structures, a wider public was able to exercise political influence.

### **Ruler of the age.**

Victoria was born in Kensington Palace, London on 24 May 1819. She was the daughter of Edward Augustus, Duke of Kent and Strathearn and Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld.

On 20 June 1837, Victoria was crowned Queen of Great Britain and Ireland. At that time, no-one could have guessed that her name would one day become synonymous with an age of British history. Victoria ruled her country for more than 60 years. During her reign, the monarchy largely lost its power and was transformed into a representative authority. As a constitutional monarch, Queen Victoria was officially the ruler of over one fifth of the globe and a third of the world population. Her reign was characterised by the influence of her cousin and husband Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, after whose death in 1861, the Queen withdrew almost totally from public life. Victoria reigned for 63 years and 7 months, longer than any other British monarch before her. She was known by the nickname "the grandmother of Europe" on account of her many descendants. Her era became known as the Victorian age in recognition of her long reign.

### **Prince Consort Albert and Christmas traditions.**

On 10 February 1840, Victoria married Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, her maternal cousin. The marriage lasted almost 22 years and was regarded as very happy. In all her decisions, even political ones, Victoria was heavily influenced by the Prince Consort.

Albert preferred living in the country to the capital, for which reason the couple made Windsor Castle their home soon after their wedding. To enjoy even more privacy, in 1845, they acquired Osborne House, a 400 hectare country seat on the Isle of Wight. Prince Albert designed the house himself in the style of an Italian Renaissance palazzo and the grounds were also landscaped to his specifications. A Swiss cottage was imported for the five children. In it the

princes were supposed to learn carpentry and gardening and the princesses housekeeping and cookery.

Prince Albert is to thank for making the decorated Christmas tree popular in Great Britain. In line with the custom in his homeland of Germany, Prince Albert had the first Christmas tree erected in Windsor Castle in 1841 and adorned with traditional German Christmas decorations.

### **Victorian Christmas traditions.**

Many of our modern-day Christmas customs have their roots in Victorian Christmas traditions. Here are a few examples:

The tradition of writing and sending Christmas cards still remains popular to this day. The generally richly illustrated cards soon enjoyed great popularity in Great Britain from where they began their triumphal march throughout the rest of the world.

Although the Christmas tree is not a British achievement, it probably owes its worldwide popularity to Prince Consort Albert who introduced the custom in England. Ultimately the Christmas tree was to become even more popular in the USA than in Europe.

In 1846, two London bakers invented the ever-popular Christmas cracker and carol singers can also trace their origin back to the Victorian period.

The British middle and upper classes were also the originators of the popular custom of exchanging Christmas presents. During Queen Victoria's time, adults began to give children home-made or bought toys.

And last but not least, although usually attributed to the USA, Santa Claus also comes from Victorian England. He went by the name of "Father Christmas" and brought the children their gifts on Christmas Eve.

### **Candles and Advent wreaths.**

Candles were a firm fixture of the Victorian Christmas and were used in different variants. In many households, an advent wreath would be displayed in the run-up to Christmas. The four candles and the evergreen wreath symbolise belief,

good fortune, love and peace. Lighting the candles is supposed to show that the birth of Christ brings light into the world. It was also customary to display a candle in the window during the twelve days of the Christmas festivities. It was intended as a sign to travellers that food and shelter was available in this house. Merchants also liked to give their customers candles. They were indispensable and a vital part of every Victorian Christmas tree. Often made by hand and carefully placed on each branch.

### **Christmas cards**

The first Christmas card was drawn by illustrator John Callcott Horsley on behalf of Sir Henry Cole in December 1843. The English nobleman decided to send his friends something different to the usual Christmas letters for a change. He embellished his Christmas cards with the text: "Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You".

Inspired by the design of an altarpiece, Horsley created a picture of a family celebration, 5.7 x 3.3 inches in size and surrounded it with twigs and vines to convey cheerfulness and goodwill to the observer.

The client, Sir Henry Cole, possessed his own lithographic works and printed 1,000 copies of Horsley's design in a hand-coloured edition, selling these at the price of one shilling, an exorbitant sum of money for the time.

And yet despite that, many Britons were soon sending Christmas cards. Queen Victoria was an especially keen devotee, sending thousands of cards each Christmas.

With the growing demand came new formats and materials. Hinged and folding cards were especially popular. Decorated with silk ribbons, satin, feathers, lametta and many other things, the cards became miniature works of art. Pretty children, Father Christmas and angels were commonly employed motifs. As long ago as 1862, the company Charles Goodall & Sons of London was printing and selling Christmas cards in large numbers.

The first Christmas cards in the USA were printed by Louis Prang in Boston in 1874. He improved colour printing and used as many as twenty different shades of ink. He also introduced additional formats to the market. By 1880, the high quality of his cards and the expressive texts contained inside resulted in his output growing to more than 5 million greetings cards a year.

Although large quantities of cards were produced in Germany for export, prior to the First World War, it was more common for Germans to send so-called "good wishes notes" at Christmas. These were letters with printed decorative edgings and often a picture in which greetings or a poem could be inscribed by hand.

### **The Christmas tree and Christmas decorations**

In Germany, the Christmas tree is a tradition dating back to the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was introduced to England in 1841 by Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert. Following the publication of a picture of the royal Christmas tree in Windsor Castle in the well-known magazine "The Illustrated London News" in 1848, it became a must for the English to set up a Christmas tree of their own in their living room. Norwegian firs were imported under which small gifts were exchanged. The trees were decorated with little toys, biscuits, sweets and small bags containing sweet surprises.

From 1865 on, imported glass ornaments, wire ornaments, Sebnitz ornaments (artificial flowers) and Dresdner paperboard ornaments were also used as decoration in well-to-do family homes and were soon frequently to be found in the Victorian Christmas salons of the wealthy where they were viewed as status symbols. Many of these valuable, sometimes unique glass ornaments were passed down from generation to generation.

Commercially produced Christmas ornaments were sold in Woolworth's from 1880.

The Victorian ornaments were inspired by patriotic motifs and modern achievements. These included little paper flags in red, white and blue or small drums as sweet tins. Glass balloons with little baskets, decorated with die-cut pictures of Santas or angels were an intrinsic part of the Victorian tree. Model wax figures of angels and children for example were popular. Airships, trains, aircraft, balloons and animals were also frequently-seen motifs.

In Victorian times, young ladies spent many hours making Christmas decorations. They made little horns of plenty from coloured paper which could be filled with dates or other sweets; from small pieces of silk and feathers, they created little pouches and bags for candied fruits and almonds; from silk threads or ribbons elaborate pompons (tassels) were produced and they used cotton wool to make little snowmen or cute angels.

No traditional Victorian Christmas tree would be complete without lametta of course. In general, Christmas trees were exceptionally lavishly and extravagantly decorated. The crowning glory of a Victorian Christmas tree was often a Nuremburg tinsel angel adorning the tip. The faces were often made of porcelain or wax. In Victorian times, angels and cherubs were regarded as symbols of childlike innocence and purity.

The demand for Christmas trees grew steadily. By 1880 it had become necessary to ensure that enough trees were available around London in good time before the holiday in order to supply every family with its desired Christmas tree.

### **Father Christmas.**

Wherever you go, Father Christmas and Santa Claus are regarded as the bringers of gifts. Their histories are completely different however. Father Christmas arose from an English winter custom. Originally, he was dressed in green and was a symbol of the approaching spring. St. Nicolas (Sinter Klaas) found his way from Holland to America, arriving in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. From 1870, Sinter Klaas became known as Santa Claus in England and took over the role of bearer of gifts.

### **Christmas crackers.**

Christmas crackers are a long-standing tradition in England that can be traced back to the Victorian age. Today, crackers are part of every English Christmas celebration.

The London confectioners James Hovell and Tom Smith are credited with the invention of Christmas crackers which have been around since 1847. They rolled their sweets in a tube, wrapped it with coloured paper and draped it with a strip of paper bearing messages of love. Later, small toys and other knickknacks were also hidden inside.

Because they always form part of the Christmas table decorations, Christmas crackers are always very festively designed. Two persons each take hold of one end of a cracker and pull strongly until the cylinder breaks and the treats fall out.

**Carolling.**

Another typical British tradition is carolling (singing Christmas songs) which was quickly adopted by Americans. To this day, small groups, usually consisting of three persons, sing Christmas carols during Advent. One member of the trio played the violin, another sang and the third sold sheet music. Pedestrians on their way to do their Christmas shopping stopped and listened to them. The carol singers also liked to go from home-to-home and present their performances there. They were secretly hoping to be invited in for a hot drink.

Probably the best-known German Christmas carol dates from 1824:

O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree, Your branches green delight us!  
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree, Your branches green delight us!  
They're green when summer days are bright; They're green when winter snow is white.  
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree, Your branches green delight us!

**Charles Dickens's Christmas tale.**

When Charles Dickens published "A Christmas Carol" in 1843, no-one could have guessed that this tale would capture the literary world and be made into many films.

Charles Dickens's Christmas tale ranks among the most successful works in world literature. He began work on "A Christmas Carol" in October 1843, completing the book just two months later. By 17 December of that year, the entire print run was sold out.

The remarkable reformation. A brief introduction:

The tale is about the cold, hard-hearted and thoroughly lonely businessman Ebenezer Scrooge, who is nobody's friend and thinks of no-one else, even at Christmas. It is only when his deceased friend and former business partner Marley reappears from the hereafter that his eyes are opened. Shortly before he disappears again, he tells Scrooge that he will be visited by three ghosts, each with something important to tell him.

The first ghost presents himself to Scrooge as "The Ghost of Christmas Past". He takes him outside and shows him three different scenes. In the first scene, Scrooge looks back at his loveless childhood, when he spent Christmas learning instead of surrounded by his family. In the second scene, he is able to observe

how he meets the love of his life at the company Christmas party, but whom he soon scares off on account of his meanness and obsessive attention to business. In the third scene, the Ghost shows him how his one-time great love married a man and establishes a family. A wish that has always been denied him personally on account of his behaviour. The Ghost brings Scrooge back und leaves him, shaken, to his thoughts.

### **Evergreen Christmas decoration indoors**

At Christmas time, English living rooms are always decorated with great care. A sprig of mistletoe hangs above the doors. According to Victorian custom, any woman passing beneath a sprig of mistletoe had to allow herself to be kissed. The man, who was allowed to kiss the lady beneath the sprig of mistletoe, had to pluck one of the white berries. In bygone days, the mistletoe was a holy plant that drove away all evil and beneath which enemies could be reconciled with an embrace.

Mistletoe sprigs are not the only decorations to grace the doors. Holly branches with bright red berries and ivy tendrils are also to be seen. They are mentioned in the carol "The Holly and the Ivy".

Holly and mistletoe are the favourite plants of the British when it comes to Christmas decorations. The beautiful glossy leaves of the holly and its red berries are also part of the festive tradition. According to English folklore, holly branches bring good fortune. A holly in the garden is said to protect the house against lightning and fire. This tradition has it that holly and ivy belong together as male and female elements. The prickly holly with its firm leaves represents the man, the ivy, the smooth plant with the softer leaves, the woman.

### **Gifts.**

Nowadays, we give our loved ones gifts at Christmas. A custom that also dates back to the Victorian era. Planning the Christmas gifts began months before they were exchanged. Mothers and daughters often spent months on the gifts, sewing, embroidering, painting and gluing. The family spent long enjoyable hours together until a personal gift was planned and made for each family member. Over the course of time, it became more common to purchase the gifts.



Depending on the custom in the family, in Victorian times the gifts would be opened before or after breakfast, after attending church or after the evening meal. After a light breakfast, the father of the family would light the candles on the Christmas tree and the children would be permitted to enter the lounge. The gifts would lie, lovingly arranged, beneath the Christmas tree.

Here are some gift ideas from the Victorian period:

Mother:

A fan, a scarf, Eau de Cologne, a silk-lined sewing basket, a pin-cushion in the shape of a strawberry or tomato that could also be used as a Christmas tree decoration, a silver thimble with sewing scissors or a magazine subscription.

Father:

Embroidered braces, slippers, monogrammed tobacco pouch, an umbrella or a cigar case.

Grandmother:

A plant, a picture frame, a small tablecloth, a bookmark or pomander.

Sister

Pretty hair ribbons, a muff, a small wax doll in a cradle, a fan, a sewing set, a canary or mittens.

Brother:

A toboggan, a stamp album, carved and painted wooden toy animals, a model railway, marbles, building bricks, a money box or a wind-up soldier.

**Christmas Eve and Christmas day.**

Christmas Eve is the day on which the closest family members, grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews meet up. It was a holiday, dedicated to the family, an important social foundation in the Victorian age.

During the afternoon, the doors of the lounge would open and the long-awaited moment had arrived: at long last, everyone could see the wonderfully decorated Christmas tree with its burning candles. Hanging on the tree alongside pretty die-cuts, lametta and glass ornaments were baskets of sweets and strings of popcorn. Small gifts were also hung on the Christmas tree while the larger ones

were placed beneath the tree. All were elaborately packaged in beautiful, coloured paper and richly decorated with ribbons. On Christmas Eve, people exchanged gifts and no-one would be neglected. Depending on the recipient, they would be impatiently or carefully unwrapped. The handiwork would be admired and tried out while toys would be put into operation or tested. After the gift giving began the entertainment.

First came the popular Christmas crackers, after which each family member played a part. The youngest recited a poem, the older ones and adults amused themselves with role-playing games or short performances. There were also musical renditions or they would sing together. Party games were also extremely popular.

Christmas Day began with a visit to church. Afterwards, the Christmas goose or other meat was bought and cooking the Christmas dinner begun. What was served varied from area to area. Farming regions enjoyed beef, goose or chicken.

The famous English "Christmas pudding" (plum pudding) was baked on the Sunday preceding Advent. The traditional recipe for a Christmas pudding included suet, raisins, prunes, sultanas, currants, nuts, eggs, sugar and flour. The mixture was placed in a pudding basin and then boiled. The most exciting part about plum pudding is that it is flambéed with brandy and carried burning into the darkened room. A decorative sprig of holly is considered essential. Tradition demands that a silver coin, a button, a ring and a thimble be concealed in the plum pudding. Care should therefore be taken when eating it. According to legend, the finder of one of the objects will become rich, marry within a year or remain a bachelor or spinster.

Once the celebrations at home have come to an end, the revellers move on to friends.

Christmas is very much about charity. This is apparent in the streets that are full of people because the shops are open. All are prepared to share with the weaker members of society. The less fortunate go from door to door, in the hope of food, drink or money gifts. Families like to go from neighbour to neighbour and serenade them.

**St. Stephens Day (26.12.), Boxing Day.**

The first day after the Christmas festivities is devoted to charity. Small money gifts are packed in boxes and given to servants, delivery people or the local needy. This is the origin of the name "Boxing Day". Charity was a duty for the well-to-do and the upper class of Victorian society and was rigorously observed.

## **Facts & figures.**

### **Opening hours.**

Museum, shop and café: from 10.00–18.00 daily

### **Admission.**

CHF 7.00 / 5.00

Children up to 16 years of age are admitted free of charge and only in the company of adults.

No additional charge for the special exhibition.

The entire building is wheelchair-accessible.

## **Media contact.**

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