Christmas in Scotland – Why the Scots didn’t celebrate Christmas for over 400 years…

**The celebration of Christmas in Scotland is a surprisingly recent phenomenon.**

With just one week to go until Christmas, let’s take a stroll down Mary King’s Close to uncover how celebrations surrounding the festive season changed over time.

Before the [Reformation of 1560](https://www.nts.org.uk/stories/scottish-christmas-traditions#:~:text=Before%20the%20Reformation%20in%201560,bread%20was%20a%20criminal%20act!) happened, the 25th December was celebrated as a religious feasting day in Scotland. In fact, Early Modern Scots, like their forebears, revelled in feasts and merry-making all throughout the wintertime. However, these joyous celebrations waned thanks to the beliefs of the Protestant Reformer, John Knox. He, among others, considered Christmas to be an overly indulgent and Catholic-driven festival, leading to its widespread suppression.

The Scottish Parliament subsequently banned Christmas celebrations officially in 1640 (well before Cromwell did in 1647!).

Residents of Edinburgh’s Old Town, including Mary King, her children, and Dr Arnott, probably did not observe the holiday. For centuries, the 25th of December was merely another workday for most Scots, contrasting with the lavish celebrations found in other parts of the world.

Change only arrived in the late Victorian era when the burgeoning middle classes in Scotland, mirroring their English counterparts, embraced an Industrialist culture of gift-giving, card exchanges, and stocking fillings – something that Janet Chesney (pictured) and her family would have enjoyed while living on Mary King’s Close in the 1880s.

Yet, despite festivities growing in popularity, Christmas Day wasn’t made a public holiday in Scotland until 1958! Now how’s that for a piece of festive history?

**Druids, pagans and a 400-year ban**

What many people don’t know is that Christmas in Scotland was banned for nearly 400 years. However, let’s go back to the days of Yore when our bonny land was inhabited with druids and pagans.

The pagans celebrated the winter solstice, taking greenery into the house as a symbol of life during the dark nights. Mistletoe, revered for its fertility properties, was cut and hung – and as it compels us today to kiss underneath it, we suppose its fertility prowess works! The pagans also bought light into the dwellings, burning a Yule log with the charred remains being used to protect the house throughout the year. Since then, placing candles in the window to welcome a stranger is a long-upheld Scottish Christmas tradition. By honouring the visit of a stranger in the night, you honour the Holy Family, who searched for shelter the night of Christ’s birth. Many Scots today still burn a twig of the rowan tree at Christmas as a way to clear away bad feelings of jealousy or mistrust between family members, friends, or neighbours.

Similarly, the Celts knew Christmas as Nollaig Beag or Little Christmas, and they burned the Cailleach – a log carved with the face of an old woman, also known as the Hag of Winter - who brought the long nights and the cold. Burning the log was supposed to banish the cold and darkness and to take away any lingering bad luck. As it stands perhaps more luck was needed, as in the mid-16th century, Cromwell’s Reformation saw Christmas branded a catholic celebration and it was made illegal to celebrate. When Cromwell fell, The Scottish Presbyterian Church guided by its very own grinch John Knox, cancelled the festive season, forbidding any Christmas holiday festivities.

And that’s how things were, until the Victorian era which saw a revival in festive celebrations, when Prince Albert bought many rituals from Germany which form the Christmas we recognise today. In the late 1950s, Christmas and Boxing Day became recognised holidays for the Scottish people, a now hodgepodge of Celtic, pagan and European traditions.

**Traditional Christmas customs**

One still-popular custom is first-footing – after the stroke of midnight, neighbours visit each other, bearing traditional symbolic gifts such as shortbread or black buns. The visitor, in turn, is offered a small whisky, a wee dram. The first person to enter a house in the New Year - the first foot - could bring luck for the coming year. The luckiest was a tall, dark and handsome man. The unluckiest, a redhead and the unluckiest of all a red-haired woman…you’ve been warned!

At the stroke of midnight, the quaich filled with whisky is passed around, and everyone enjoys a celebratory sip, sharing love and good luck for the New Year to come. Another traditional day for Scots is the first Monday after New Year, where small gifts, or handsels, were given out. Traditionally coins and items of food such as cakes or pastries, it soon became synonymous with Lairds, or Ladies, of a household giving them to their staff. This tradition was eventually overtaken by the English custom of giving boxed gifts to your employees on ‘Boxing Day’ in Victorian times.

So, there you have it. When you kiss under the mistletoe, find a charm in your pudding, or bite into your mince pie, take a moment to remember the canny folk that kept the traditions alive, even when celebrating was illegal. Perhaps you could introduce some new traditions, such as carving your own Cailleach to banish the dark and cold midwinter nights or try purifying your house with a burning rowan branch.