

# All spruced up

To us, the Christmas tree is a metaphor for traditional family celebration, but this evergreen was once a symbol of vigour and a talisman against witches and ghouls

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**T**HE WAY WE MARK CHRISTMAS TODAY IS MUCH AFFECTED BY THE VICTORIANS. When, in 1848, the *Illustrated London News* printed a picture of a young Queen Victoria, with her family around a twinkling spruce strewn with garlands, it sent the upper classes scuttling to repeat the scene in their own drawing rooms. While Victoria's German husband Albert is credited with bringing the indoor Christmas tree to England, Victoria had, in fact, already encountered the custom. As a 13-year-old she remembers 'two trees hung with lights and sugar ornaments. All the presents being placed round the trees.'

Interestingly, when the image of the British royal family and their tree was published in America, Victoria's crown and Albert's moustache were removed, but the effect was no less inspirational, with fashionable East Coast families rushing to bring their own conifers indoors. Until then, in some parts of the States, decorated trees were relatively unheard of, and even sacrilegious to more sober observers of Christmas.

Christmas trees actually predate Christianity, but their role was more to protect than celebrate. Ancient peoples believed evergreens to be a magical symbol of vigour and a promise of spring in a dark winter, and would scatter boughs around their dwellings to keep the witches and ghouls at bay. Both Romans and Celtic Druids decorated homes with evergreens to mark the winter solstice.


But it wasn't until the early 16th century that the custom of putting up Christmas trees really began in earnest. In what is now Estonia, the Brotherhood of the Blackheads – a guild for unmarried German merchants – put up a tree and danced around it in the town square at the end of the holiday period, hoping perhaps to meet a damsel or two. Not to be outdone, other Rhineland towns and cities took

to decorating spruces in the market squares, where young men and maidens 'first sang and danced there and then set the tree aflame', according to one historian of the era. A chronicle from Bremen in 1570 reports how a tree was decorated with 'apples, nuts, dates, pretzels and paper flowers' for the guild members' children to gather on Christmas Day.

The trees were still outdoors, while indoors German households put up wooden pyramids decked with boughs and candles – the three points of the triangle representing the Holy Trinity. Legend has it that the baubles on today's trees owe their origin to Protestant reformer Martin Luther, who's also credited with bringing the tree indoors. One night, returning home, Luther saw stars twinkling through the trees and promptly cut a fir and decorated it with candles to recreate the scene for his family.

Long before decorations became gaudy, subtle differences emerged in how we decorated our trees. Europeans opted more for sweets, biscuits, even pickles, while Americans went for glitz.

The first tinsel – made from silver until the mid-20th century – and exquisite glass baubles came from Germany. Even the first artificial tree was invented there in 1880. Young ladies would quill snowflakes and stars and sew pouches for sugared almonds and secret gifts, while Union Jacks became a popular tree-topper in expanding parts of the Empire.

Fire brigades across the west breathed a sigh of relief when America patented electric tree lights in the late 19th century, eventually dispensing with the need for candles. When Queen Victoria died, our appetite for trees abated, but a revival of Victoriana, interest in Dickens and perhaps the invention of nostalgia in the 1930s brought the spruce and fir back to living rooms. War-time households were reluctant to leave precious decorations to the mercy of air raids and opted for smaller trees. The Christmas tree revived in popularity, even exploded with the advent of the gaudy and mass-produced adornments of the 1960s. 



## NORWEGIAN WOOD

Since 1947, a giant spruce from Norway has decorated London's Trafalgar Square over the Christmas period. The tree, flown in from Oslo, is a thank you to Britain for supporting Norway during the Second World War. From 1940 many of her ships were evacuated to Britain, and her squadrons operated under Royal Air Force command. Also, some 80,000 Norwegians fled their country during the war, many coming to serve with the Allies, and Norway's parliament operated in exile from our shores.

London isn't the only city to receive this token of thanks. The city of Bergen gives a tree to Newcastle and Washington receives one for wartime support.

Standing more than 20m (65ft) tall and up to 60 years old, the tree is chosen, sometimes years in advance, from the woods surrounding Oslo. No stage passes without a ceremonial event of some description: the spruce is felled in November in the presence of the lord mayors of Norway and London and a diplomat or two.

Transported by ship and road, it takes a specialist rigging team and crane to plant the tree upright in Trafalgar Square.

The spruce is decorated with 500 tiny white – and now energy-efficient – Christmas lights, in keeping with Norwegian tradition. It stays up from 2 December until Twelfth Night, after which it is recycled.

Left This greetings card from the turn of the 20th century epitomises the kind of Christmas we'd all like to have. Far left Each year a 20m-giant tree from Norway decorates Trafalgar Square

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