

Christmas in the UK is the biggest holiday of the year. Family gatherings, turkey, presents and parties are just some of the things that come to mind when we think about Christmas time.

Christmas can mean different things to different people. For many people it means eating a lot, spending time with family and visiting relatives and friends. For children it often means presents, presents and more presents!

The origins of Christmas

In ancient times people had mid-winter festivals when the days were short and the nights were very long. They believed that their ceremonies would help the sun's power return. The Romans decorated their homes with green plants in December to remind Saturn, their harvest god, to return the following spring. In the year 440 the Christian church decided that the birth of Christ should be celebrated every year on 25 December. Some of these ancient customs were adopted by early Christians as part of their celebrations of the birthday of Jesus Christ. Green plants are still used to decorate many British homes in December. At Christmas we cover trees (real ones or reusable synthetic trees) with shiny balls and flashing lights!

Cards and presents

It's very common to send Christmas cards to friends, family, colleagues, classmates and neighbours in the weeks leading up to 25 December. Christmas is traditionally a time for helping other people and giving money to charities. Many people send charity cards, where a percentage of the price of each card goes to charity. People send fewer cards than in the past as they now send Christmas greetings by email or via Facebook.

Christmas presents are reserved for close friends and family. Traditionally the giving of a gift is symbolic of the Three Wise Men giving their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus. Popular presents for young people in the UK in recent years include a smartphone, a Playstation and 80s retro fashion.

Father Christmas (aka Santa Claus)

Every year small children tell Father Christmas, also known as Santa Claus, exactly what presents they would like to receive. They can write him a letter with a list of requests or they can visit him personally in one of the large department stores across Britain in the weeks before Christmas. On the night of 24 December, Father Christmas travels through the sky on a sleigh pulled by magic reindeers and delivers presents to children across Britain. How does he enter the children's houses? Via the chimney, of course!

The Christmas number one

Every year, for a few weeks around Christmas time, the UK music charts go mad. Groups and singers who normally make cool music create a song that they hope will be number one – the best-selling song on Christmas Day. The Christmas number one is written about in newspapers, talked about on the radio and people can even bet money in betting shops to see which song will win the race. Recently, the Christmas number one has been dominated by singers who have won reality television competitions.

However, some music fans are not happy about this dominance. One year, they started an anti-corporate Facebook campaign to try and prevent the Christmas number one being another reality show song. Instead, they encouraged people to buy a song by the rock band Rage Against the Machine. They won!

Snow

Snow at Christmas is part of British culture. You often see it on Christmas cards, you can buy fake snow to decorate your house and there are even songs about snow at Christmas. It doesn't snow every year in Britain, but many people hope for a white Christmas. People can bet on whether it will snow or not on 25 December too.

Turkey and crackers

Christmas dinner is usually eaten at midday or early afternoon. It usually includes roast turkey, vegetables and potatoes. There are also lots of alternatives to the turkey dinner for vegetarians who prefer a meat-free Christmas. For dessert, there's a rich, fruity cake called Christmas pudding.

Traditionally, a Christmas cracker is placed next to each person. When you pull the cracker with the person next to you, you hear a loud 'bang!' and a paper hat, a joke and a small gift fall from the cracker. You have to wear the hat, tell the joke to the other people at the table and keep the gift.

Christmas means ...

Does everyone like Christmas? These comments from young Brits reflect some of the wide range of opinions about Christmas in the UK.

'Christmas to me means catching up with your family and having a laugh. Last of all opening your presents.'

Yasmeen, 20, Liverpool

'It's too commercial. There are too many adverts trying to get everyone to spend their money.'

Ruby, 15, London

'Bringing all your family together, having a laugh, giving presents and eating loads of delicious foods. YUM! YUM!'

James, 13, Crediton

'The shops start selling Christmas cards in September! That's three months before Christmas. Ridiculous!'

Tony, 18, Bakewell

'I work for a charity that gives food to homeless people every Christmas. These people have no home or family so we try to make 25 December a happy day for them.'

Claire, 22, Derby

'I think Xmas is as much about giving as it is about getting. I also think it's a time for the whole family to get together and enjoy being with each other.'

Charlie, 15, Canterbury

'I think that Christmas is a religious time, not just for Christians but for Jews and Muslims too. I celebrate the season the Christian way.'

Alisha, 16, Manchester