

## HERITAGE CIRCLE

### Mike Wabe, The History of Christmas

Mike Wabe gave an enthusiastic and dramatic presentation of the history of Christmas when he spoke after a very enjoyable buffet at the Christmas Social of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. He explored the evolution of the traditions which are mostly taken for granted.

Mike began by considering the date of Christmas Day, 25 December. For Christians it is the day when Christ was born. There is no certainty about this and it is thought that during the 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD, the birth of Christ was linked to the Roman feast of Saturnalia, a festival of light leading to the winter solstice. It may have helped to convert some people to Christianity. Aspects of Saturnalia may be seen in the Christmas traditions of present giving and abundant use of candles.

The origins of Christmas trees are also uncertain. Fir trees were used to decorate temples during Saturnalia, and Druids are thought to have decorated trees with baked cakes and fruit when worshipping Woden. Early Christians may have used the triangular shape of the fir tree to explain the Trinity to people in Northern Europe. The first documented decorated Christmas tree was in Riga in 1510 and they became popular across Germany. The Georgian monarchy seems to have introduced the idea of Christmas trees to Britain. Each family member had a small tree decorated in beads and candles placed on top of their presents. However, the idea was not popular until Queen Victoria was shown in an illustration standing by a tree with homemade decorations. Gradually, during the later 19<sup>th</sup> Century trees became more ornate and larger. The 1960s saw the introduction of artificial trees and electric lights from the USA.

St Francis of Assisi is attributed with introducing the first nativity play in 1223. He is said to have created a stable with live animals which was decorated with ivy to symbolise the coming of Christ, and holly which both represented the crown of thorns and provided protection against witches. The first commercial decorations seem to have been made in Germany during the 1860s. The two dominant colours used were red to remind people of the blood of Christ and green to signify new life. St Francis has also been credited with the introduction of Christmas songs during the nativity play which were sung in vernacular languages rather than Latin. These later became carols.

Two other traditions linked to Christmas appear to have their derivation in Britain. Christmas crackers were invented by Tom Smith, a baker in Clerkenwell, in 1847. He had seen bonbons, wrapped sweets, in France but he developed the idea of a crack when pulled open. Later his son added gifts to crackers. By 1931, 13million crackers were being sold annually. They were banned during World War II but re-emerged post-war. Similarly, the first Christmas card was inaugurated by Sir Henry Cole in 1843 when he asked his friend John Horsely, an artist, to design a card that he sold for a shilling(5p). It is thought that about 1,000 were printed. By the 1870s cards became more popular and cheaper as techniques of printing improved and postal charges fell.

Finally, present giving has evolved from a number of sources. During Saturnalia fruits were given for good luck. The Christian church used the story of three Magi to support the idea of presents for children. This was reinforced by the legend of St Nicholas giving gifts to the poor at Christmas. By Victorians times presents were hidden around the house to be found by children.

Christmas is a happy festival for most people but the origins of many of its traditions are clouded by myth.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 24 February 2016 at The Village Hall, Rickinghall IP221HD when Derek Palgrave will be speaking about *Enjoying Heraldry*. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, [www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net](http://www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net).

Gerry Gurhy