**Christmas Times Past**

**By Dave Taylor-Jones**

In England there is something magical about the end of the month of December, for as Christmas starts to get nearer and nearer, there is an increased awareness that the old year is finished and a new one is about to begin. When I was very little, I thought that Christmas Day was the last day of the year and that Boxing Day was the first day of the New Year. It was only when we started to visit some friends of my Mother’s for New Year’s Day that I realized my mistake and understood there were more days before December was finished!

When I was a kid there was so much excitement in the coming of Christmas. It was not just the prospect of receiving presents, but more the idea of having something to really look forward to. It began with the rehearsals for the School play with the parts of the text corresponding to my character’s dialogue being underlined in red, helping me learn my lines. Then, from the second week of December, carol singers would come around our bungalow estate at Carpenders Park. They were often little kids, who knocked at our door and then began singing a carol only when it was opened. My Mum always gave them a three-penny piece, whether they sung well or not. I remember writing when I was a teenager:

***Christmas Callers***

*Two more cards arrived today*

*A little boy was turned away*

*Carol singing at the door*

*He’s been here five times before*.

The local church had a choir of about 30 singers who used to walk around the estate and sing carols, clustered together in the middle of the road. They were really good and you could easily hear them from inside your house. We went out into the damp, foggy evening air to hear them better and put pennies into their collection box.

I think my first memories of Christmas are really when I was about five years old. My mother would bring out the Christmas decorations box, which held amongst other things rolls of red and green cordlike streamers. The red was bright pillar box red and the green the emerald colour of Christmas tree branches. She twisted these streamers together to make a fat red and green rope which she suspended from the picture rails in our lounge. Along its length it was fixed with drawing pins, so that it would hang in neat loops. There were also lantern decorations that were packed flat, but when you took them out, you could spread them apart with a fan-like movement and they took the form of lanterns of coloured paper that you could hang up. They were a bit delicate but I loved them.

My Mum also bought kits of coloured paper for us to make paper chains. These came in the form of little books of different coloured strips about 6” long by 1” wide and were gummed at one end. My Mum, my brother Steve and I would sit together at the kitchen table and peel off a strip and then make it into a ring by licking the gum and sealing the paper strip into a circle. The next link in the chain was made by choosing a different colour and threading it through the first link and closing it sealed as before. You continued like this making the chain grow longer until it was about 10 feet in length and ready to be suspended from the kitchen ceiling. These decorations changed the aspect of our little bungalow completely. We were enchanted.

Mum had saved some old Christmas tree decorations from before the War and she would buy a small Christmas tree and decorate it with them. Mostly there were little glass Chinese lanterns, in pale colours of yellow, orange, light blue and white. They had torch bulbs inside them that were supposed to light up, being run off a battery. But we could not make them work and had no Dad to fix them. Still they were put on the tree anyway.

There were also some silver icicles made of very thin sparkly wire, which dropped into shape when they were dangled on the Christmas tree. Then finally lametta shreds were draped on the branches. In the dark of the lounge, with only the light of the coal fire and the electric street lights from outside, the room took on a new and magical aspect.

My brother Steve and I hung up our socks on Christmas Eve and when we woke up on Christmas morning we were delighted to find them filled with marbles, oranges, little games and chocolate sovereigns covered in gold paper. During the latter part of the forties most people could not afford much more than this, so I think it was what most children traditionally received.

We posted our letters to Father Christmas up the coal fire chimney in the lounge, hoping like mad that we would get a tricycle or scooter. I remember one time Steve’s letter fell down and burnt up quickly in the flaming coals. His chin dropped as he thought that his wishes were lost. My Mum quickly improvised, “Don’t be silly Stephen, Santa will read them in the smoke!” So that was alright then.

Some years later, after my Mum remarried and twins Victor and Vanessa were born in 1951, Christmas became more elaborate and even more exciting. New modern paper decorations were bought but we always used the red and green streamers too. The tension built up over the days with our parents shopping and bringing home parcels that were stored away in the bottom of locked wardrobes. The week before Christmas, on a Saturday afternoon, we had our trip to Watford to visit Father Christmas in Cawdell’s department store. Here you sat on Santa’s knee and he asked you what you wanted for Christmas and enquired if you have been good during the year past. After receiving a small gift you could then run through Santa’s Grotto of white cotton-wool winter scenes with a few tired-looking stuffed penguins.

Stan, my Mum’s new husband, was from Yorkshire and he had different traditions to ours. He immediately instituted a large Christmas Eve dinner for his close family and Olive, my Mum, would spend an enormous time preparing for it by cooking his favourite dishes. These were mostly cold meats like brawn, hams, scotch eggs and pickles, with salads and savoury desserts. Steve and I were packed off to bed after being presented to various new aunts and uncles.

It was Christmas 1950 when they made their first Christmas Eve meal. Olive and Stan must have had a successful evening and they probably did not get to bed until after midnight, after having done all the washing up and clearing away. They placed our stockings, full of all sorts of toys at the end of our beds and retired for a well-earned night’s sleep. Unfortunately we woke up at about 2.00 AM and were so excited with Father Christmas’s gifts, that we started to play with them immediately. If I remember rightly mine included a small plastic trumpet and a little drum, so we were soon heard by our parents in the room next door. Olive and Stan were not amused to be woken up so quickly and we were told off very sharply and the stockings removed.

The next morning we woke up and there were our stockings at the end of our beds. But when we investigated them they were full of pieces of coal and sticks of wood to start the fire!

Our hearts sank, where were our real stockings?

With tears in our eyes we went into to see our Mother and ask for our real stockings to be returned. She was not very forgiving and it was only after a gloomy breakfast she relented and gave us the ones that Father Christmas had brought for us. I remember this Christmas now and can only wonder what their Protestant souls were trying to instill in two innocent children of 5 and 7 years? Did we really deserve such a drastic shock?

As the fifties progressed my parents could afford to buy us more expensive presents and Victor and Vanessa joined the paper chain production in the kitchen. Every year we were all bought a special big present, like roller skates or cowboy guns, which we received after breakfast in the lounge. We always had our Christmas dinner at lunchtime around two o’clock. With Stan’s salary from the Sun Printers in Watford, Olive and Stan could afford much better fare and we normally had the English roast lunch with a turkey. Stan always bought a bottle of Barsac white wine to accompany the turkey, which many years later, when I was allowed to taste it, I discovered was quite sweet. My Mum made a large Christmas pudding and a silver threepenny piece was hidden inside it for a lucky person to find. We had the pudding with custard, although in later years we changed to cream. After lunch we would help Mum wash-up and sing carols with her leading us. Then she always liked to listen to the Queen’s speech at 3.00 PM.

After this we sat around in the lounge, with the coal fire lit and presented one another with the presents we had bought for them. Steve and I received sixpence a week pocket money from our parents, so we used to save it nearer Christmas, so we could buy the other family members a little gift. After we were eleven years old, we both used to earn money doing a paper round every morning, so then we could afford to buy more expensive presents. Usually we went to Boots the Chemist in Watford and bought Mum a packet of bath salts or talcum powder. For Stan we would usually buy a screw-driver or some useful tool for his garage.

England in December is a rather grim month. It doesn’t always snow, but often it freezes at night and rains a lot in the day. The skies are covered in low leaden clouds giving the impression that winter is a bit interminable and spring will be a long time coming. That’s why British people have so many social clubs and events to give them something to do, during this winter period of darkness.

At Christmas there were always invitations to friends’ and relatives’ houses for drinks, but for teenagers there were lots of parties to go to. Dance halls, like the Trade Union Hall and the Top Rank in Watford had special Christmas evenings. All this gave you so much pleasurable anticipation and the 25th of December was the centre of that attraction.

On Christmas morning, when we were older, we had our friends call on us at home to drink a toast to Christmas. We always put up holly which we gathered from trees on nearby Old Redding hill and had mistletoe to be kissed under.

Fifty years ago I wrote the poem below, which was a little girl’s Christmas list to Santa Claus.

***Lucy’s Christmas List,*** *Christmas 1965*

*Dearest Santa, please excuse*

*This little note, for we would choose*

*A rocking horse for little Kevin,*

*Not too big, he’s only seven,*

*Two six guns, a big wigwam*

*Two sheriff badges if you can.*

*Cheyenne Bodie too, I hope,*

*He’s my very own dreamboat.*

*A cricket bat, football and stuff,*

*A life-size Yogi-Bear’s enough*

*For Gillian who lost a tooth,*

*It grows again is that the truth?*

*Please can you send me a blue ribbon?*

*Two teddy bears called Titch and Biggun’.*

*A new doll’s house, a tennis ball*

*A painting book, oh that’s for Paul*

*Who comes to play on rainy days.*

*A dozen marbles, a doll which says*

*“Mama” when she’s upside down*

*And don’t forget my new ball gown*

*Just like Mummy’s – very long,*

*A puppy too, if that’s not wrong*

*With Daddy, who’s not here right now,*

*He’s working late and that is how,*

*I’m all alone to write to you.*

*Please I’m sorry that the flue*

*Of our chimney’s very small*

*It’s so sooty, dark and all.*

*Now I’ll send this Christmas Letter,*

*Hoping Rudolph’s nose is better.*

*I wonder how you find this list,*

*Posted up the chimney twist.*

*Why don’t the flames burn it away?*

*Mummy said she couldn’t say.*

*So all that’s left for me to write*

*Are thanks from me, this Christmas night.*

*P.S.*

*A last request from Pete and Bob in*

*Can they meet Batman and Robin?*

Nowadays I wonder if children write Christmas lists and if they do, do they still put them up the chimney? My children did, because we had an open fire. But now we have an insert log-burning stove, which would make things more difficult. However, I am sure that this little act increases the expectations of very young children and that is what Christmas is all about for them – looking forward to things.

In this electronic age perhaps some enterprising soul has invented an App so that a Christmas List can still be written and posted up a virtual chimney to Father Christmas.

If they did perhaps today’s Lucy might have written the following:

***Lucy’s Christmas List,*** *Christmas 2015*

*Dearest Santa, please excuse*

*This little note, for we would choose*

*A red skate board for little Kevin,*

*Not too fast, he’s only seven,*

*Two MP3s of One Direction*

*“Up All Night” is my selection*

*Liam Payne would do (I hope),*

*He’s my very own dreamboat.*

*A robot puppy, Lego and stuff,*

*A Miffy Lamp would be enough*

*For Gillian who lost a tooth,*

*It grows again is that the truth?*

*I’d love Rio Rollers of my own,*

*And those snazzy Beats Headphones*

*Jurassic Park - Blue Ray 3D*

*Robot Transformers, they’re for Steve.*

*He lives next door and is asking for*

*One of those Razor Ground Force cars.*

*For me a Princess Phone I think,*

*In my favourite colour pink,*

*Barbie’s Colour Change bag, zoot!*

*Two Furby Booms, they are so cute.*

*My Mummy’s promised me a kitten,*

*But it’s a long shot, I’m admittin’*

*With my Dad, who’s not here right now,*

*He’s working late and that is how,*

*I’m all alone to write to you*

*On my I-Pad, if that’s not too*

*Electronic, for I’m sure that*

*You will use the new Chimney App.*

*It looks like a virtual chimney flue*

*Just add this list and click it through.*

*Now I’ll send this Christmas Letter,*

*Hoping Rudolph’s nose is better.*

*I’ll press the button on my Pad*

*Knowing Santa will be glad*

*With my list in digi format*

*What could be better than that?*

*So all that’s left for me to write*

*Are thanks from me, this Christmas night.*

*P.S.*

*A last request, I’m sure you’ll moan*

*But do you think I could have a Drone?*

St Blaise, France, December 1st 2015