

The Christmas Archives
by
Countess Maria Hubert von Stauffer



**THE CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY OF THE
CHRISTMAS TREE**

St. Boniface Story

Why do we have a decorated Christmas Tree? In the 7th century a monk from Crediton, Devonshire, went to Germany to teach the Word of God. He did many good works there, and spent much time in Thuringia, an area which was to become the cradle of the Christmas Decoration Industry.

Legend has it that he used the triangular shape of the Fir Tree to describe the Holy Trinity of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The converted people began to revere the Fir tree as God's Tree, as they had previously revered the Oak. By the 12th century it was being hung, upside-down, from ceilings at Christmastime in Central Europe, as a symbol of Christianity.

The first decorated tree was at Riga in Latvia, in 1510. In the early 16th century, Martin Luther is said to have decorated a small Christmas Tree with candles, to show his children how the stars twinkled through the dark night.



Christmas Markets

In the mid 16th century, Christmas markets were set up in German towns, to provide everything from Christmas presents, food and more practical things such as a knife grinder to sharpen the knife to carve the Christmas Goose! At these fairs, bakers made shaped gingerbreads and wax ornaments for people to buy as souvenirs of the fair, and take home to hang on their Christmas Trees.

The best record we have is that of a visitor to Strasbourg in 1601. He records a tree decorated with "wafers and golden sugar-twists (Barleysugar) and paper flowers of all colours". The early trees were biblically symbolic of the Paradise Tree in the Garden of Eden. The many food items were symbols of Plenty, the flowers, originally only red (for Knowledge) and White (for Innocence).

Tinsel

Tinsel was invented in Germany around 1610. At that time real silver was used, and machines were invented which pulled the silver out into the wafer thin strips for tinsel. Silver was durable, but tarnished quickly, especially with candlelight. Attempts were made to use a mixture of lead and tin, but this was heavy and tended to break under its own weight so was not so practical. So silver was used for tinsel right up to the mid-20th century.

The First English Trees

The Christmas Tree first came to England with the Georgian Kings who came from Germany. At this time also, German Merchants living in England decorated their homes with a Christmas Tree. The British public were not fond of the German Monarchy, so did not copy the fashions at Court, which is why the Christmas Tree did not establish in Britain at that time. A few families did have Christmas trees however, probably more from the influence of their German neighbours than from the Royal Court.



The decorations were Tinsels, silver wire ornaments, candles and small beads. All these had been manufactured in Germany and East Europe since the 17th century. The custom was to have several small trees on tables, one for each member of the family, with that persons gifts stacked on the table under the tree.

The Victorian and Albert Tree



In 1846, the popular Royals, Queen Victoria and her German Prince, Albert, were illustrated in the Illustrated London News. They were standing with their children around a Christmas Tree. Unlike the previous Royal family, Victoria was very popular with her subjects, and what was done at Court immediately became fashionable - not only in Britain, but with fashion-conscious East Coast American Society. The English Christmas Tree had arrived!

Decorations were still of a 'home-made' variety. Young Ladies spent hours at Christmas Crafts, quilling snowflakes and stars, sewing little pouches for secret gifts and paper baskets with sugared almonds in them. Small bead decorations, fine drawn out silver tinsel came from Germany together with beautiful Angels to sit at the top of the tree. Candles were often placed into wooden hoops for safety.

Mid-Victorian Tree

In 1850's Lauscha began to produce fancy shaped glass bead garlands for the trees, and short garlands made from necklace 'bugles' and beads. These were readily available in Germany but not produced in sufficient quantities to export to Britain. The Rauschgoldengel was a common sight. Literally, 'Tingled-angel', bought from the Thuringian Christmas markets, and dressed in pure gilded tin.

The 1860's English Tree had become more innovative than the delicate trees of earlier decades. Small toys were popularly hung on the branches, but still most gifts were placed on the table under the tree.

Around this time, the Christmas tree was spreading into other parts of Europe. The Mediterranean countries were not too interested in the tree, preferring to display only a Creche scene. Italy had a wooden triangle platform tree called as 'CEPPO'. This had a Creche scene as well as decorations.

The German tree was beginning to suffer from mass destruction! It had become the fashion to lop off the tip off a large tree to use as a Christmas Tree, which prevented the tree from growing further. Statutes were made to prevent people having more than one tree.

Just as the first trees introduced into Britain did not immediately take off, the early trees introduced into America by the Hessian soldiers were not recorded in any particular quantity. The Pennsylvanian German settlements had community trees as early as 1747.

America being so large, tended to have 'pockets' of customs relating to the immigrants who had settled in a particular area, and it was not until the communications really got going in the 19th century, that such customs began to spread. Thus references to decorated trees in America before about the middle of the 19th century are very rare.

By the 1870's, Glass ornaments were being imported into Britain from Lauscha, in Thuringia. It became a status symbol to have glass ornaments on the tree, the more one had, the better ones status! Still many home-made things were seen. The Empire was growing, and the popular tree topper was the Nation's Flag, sometimes there were flags of the Empire and flags of the allied countries. Trees got very patriotic.

They were imported into America around 1880, where they were sold through stores such as FW Woolworth. They were quickly followed by American patents for electric lights (1882), and metal hooks for safer hanging of decorations onto the trees (1892).

High Victorian Trees

The 1880's saw a rise of the Aesthetic Movement. At this time Christmas Trees became a glorious hotchpotch of everything one could cram on; or by complete contrast the aesthetic trees which were delicately balanced trees, with delicate colours, shapes and style. they also grew to floor standing trees. The limited availability of decorations in earlier decades had kept trees by necessity to, usually table trees. Now with decorations as well as crafts more popular than ever, there was no excuse. Still a status symbol, the larger the tree - the more affluent the family which sported it.

The High Victorian of the 1890's was a child's joy to behold! As tall as the room, and crammed with glitter and tinsel and toys galore. Even the 'middleclasses' managed to over-decorate their trees. It was a case of 'anything goes'. Everything that could possibly go on a tree went onto it.

By 1900 themed trees were popular. A colour theme set in ribbons or balls, a topical idea such as an Oriental Tree, or an Egyptian Tree. They were to be the last of the great Christmas Trees for some time. With the death of Victoria in 1903, the Nation went into mourning and fine trees were not really in evidence until the nostalgia of the Dickensian fashion of the 1930's.

The American Tree

In America, Christmas Trees were introduced into several pockets - the German Hessian Soldiers took their tree customs in the 18th century. In Texas, Cattle Barons from Britain took their customs in the 19th century, and the East Coast Society copied the English Court tree customs.

Settlers from all over Europe took their customs also in the 19th century. Decorations were not easy to find in the shanty towns of the West, and people began to make their own decorations. Tin was pierced to create lights and lanterns to hold candles which could shine through the holes. Decorations of all kinds were cutout, stitched and glued. The General Stores were hunting grounds for old magazines with pictures, rolls of Cotton Batting (Cotton Wool), and tinsel, which was occasionally sent from Germany or brought in from the Eastern States. The Paper 'Putz' or Christmas Crib was a popular feature under the tree, especially in the Moravian Dutch communities which settled in Pennsylvania.

The British tree in the 20th century

After Queen Victoria died, the country went into mourning, and the tree somehow died with her for a while in many homes. While some families and community groups still had large tinsel strewn trees, many opted for the more convenient table top tree. These were available in a variety of sizes, and the artificial tree, particularly the Goose Feather Tree, became popular. These were originally invented in the 1880's in Germany, to combat some of the damage being done to Fir trees in the name of Christmas.

In America, the Addis Brush Company created the first brush trees, using the same machinery which made their toilet brushes! These had an advantage over the feather tree in that they would take heavier decorations.

After 1918, because of licensing and export problems, Germany was not able to export its decorations easily. The market was quickly taken up by Japan and America, especially in Christmas Tree lights.

Britain's Tom Smith Cracker Company which has exported Christmas goods for over three decades, began to manufacture trees themselves for a short while.

In the 1930's There was a revival of Dickensian nostalgia, particularly in Britain. Christmas cards all sported Crinoline ladies with muffs and bonnets popular in the 1840's. Christmas Trees became large, and real again, and were decorated with many bells, balls and tinsels, and with a beautiful golden haired angel at the top. But wartime England put a stop to many of these trees. It was forbidden to cut trees down for decoration, and with so many raids, many people preferred to keep their most precious heirloom Christmas tree decorations carefully stored away in metal boxes, and decorated only a small tabletop tree with home-made decorations, which could be taken down into the shelters for a little Christmas cheer, when the air-raid sirens went.

Large trees were erected however in public places to give morale to the people at this time.

Postwar Britain saw a revival of the nostalgic again. people needed the security of Christmas, which is so unchanging in a changing world, as one of the symbols to set them back on their feet. Trees were as large as people could afford. Many poorer families still used the tabletop Goosefeather trees, Americas Addis Brush Trees were being imported into Britain, and these became immensely popular for a time. But the favorites were still real trees. The popular decorations were all produced by a British manufacturer, Swanbrand. and sold by FW Woolworth in Britain. Translucent plastic lock together shapes, Honeycomb paper Angels, 'glow-in the -dark icicles; also Polish glass balls and birds In South Wales, where real trees were often difficult to find in the rural areas, Holly Bushes were decorated.

The mid-1960's saw another change. A new world was on the horizon, and modernist ideas were everywhere. Silver aluminium trees were imported from America. The 'Silver Pine' tree, patented in the 1950's, was designed to have a revolving light source under it, with coloured gelatine 'windows, which allowed the light to shine in different shades as it revolved under the tree. No decorations were needed for this tree.

Decorations became sparse. Glass balls and lametta created an 'elegant' modern tree. Of course, many families ignored fashion and carried on putting their own well loved decorations on their trees!

America made a return to Victorian nostalgia in the 1970's, and it was a good decade later that Britain followed the fashion. By the at first this was a refreshing look, and manufacturers realising the potential created more and more fantastic decorations. Some American companies specialised in antique replicas, actually finding the original makers in Europe to recreate wonderful glass ornaments, real silver tinsels and pressed foil 'Dresdens'.

Real Christmas Trees were popular, but many housewives preferred the convenience of the authentic looking artificial trees which were being manufactured. If your room was big enough, you could have a 14 foot artificial Spruce right there in your living room, without a single dropped needle - and so good that it fooled everyone at first glance. There are even pine scented sprays to put on the tree for that 'real tree smell'!

The late 1990's tree has taken the Victorian idea, but with new themes and conceptual designs. The Starry Starry Night Tree, The Twilight Tree, The Snow Queen Tree.....

These trees are still with us - what will the new millennium bring? Well, I do have some inside knowledge - but its a secret! Watch this space!