

# A Man Forgot - And Christmas Cards Were Born

## Custom Dates From 1843

By RONALD BOXALL

It all began in the year that the finishing touches were put to Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square. Christmas was coming and the early Victorians were laboriously writing greetings to relatives and friends. All except one man.

Sir Henry Cole (then plain Mr. Cole) had fallen behind with the correspondence that winter of 1843. There just wasn't time to write to all the people who ought to be written to. But the man who founded the Victoria and Albert Museum wasn't to be put out by a little thing like that.

The idea struck him that his friends might be content with a printed card. Doubtless he felt that "after all, it is the thought that counts." Cards would at least be novel.

The artist Cole chose to design the world's first Christmas card as J. C. Horsley, a popular painter of his day.

The result was considered the last word in artistic fashion, and a thousand copies were printed at Summerly's Home Treasury Office in Old Bond Street. Those not needed by Mr. Cole were sold at a shilling each.

Several of these original Cole-Horsley cards have survived, and one of the most interesting is reproduced here. It was sent by Horsley to "His old young friends Emma and Agnes." (The spelling — and the rather ham-fisted wit — are Horsley's own.)

Though this was the direct ancestor of the 500 million Christmas cards that were sent in Britain last year, it was not an unqualified success at the time. A contemporary journal, "Notes and Queries," described it thus: "A trifle of rustic work in the Germanesque style divided the card into centre and two side panels. The sides were filled by representations of the feeding of the hungry and the clothing of the naked; in the centre compartment, a family were shown at table — an old man and woman, a maiden and her young man, and several children — and they were pictured drinking healths in wine."

Horsley was criticised not only for "trying to wed art and manufacture," but also for "encouraging drunkenness." But what his critics couldn't know was that Horsley had started something that was to grow into a vast world-wide industry.

Yet Christmas cards did not really catch on with the public until about thirty years later. This was partly due to the crudeness of the cards themselves — many bore no relation at all to the festive season — and partly to the high cost of postage. But with the introduction of better designs, color printing, and greetings in verse, the cards gradually gained in popularity. Then, when the postal rates were reduced in 1871, they really arrived.

The dispatch of Christmas cards was still on nothing like the modern scale, of course, but the habit had grown sufficiently to cause concern among our staid Victorian ancestors. The London "Times" was moved to complain about the craze of people trying to outdo each other in the number of cards they acquired, and the subsequent hold-up in the delivery of "legitimate correspondence."

Despite this disparagement, however, the Christmas card industry — for that is what it had become — developed so quickly that in 1880 Sir Adolph Tuck launched a nation-wide competition to discover original ideas for his firm's cards. Five thousand entries competed for 500 guineas, prize money — a big sum in those days — and Royal Academicians acted as judges.

Emboldened by success, Sir Adolph began to commission well-known artists and famous writers for designs and verses. Lord Tennyson, the poet laureate, was one of those approached. Turning down an offer of 100 guineas for a dozen verses, the poet in his eightieth year, wrote to Sir Adolph: "You cannot imagine with what regret I have forfeited this opportunity of world-wide fame; for, beyond a doubt, these verses would have found their way into many far corners of the earth where I name is known."

Around this time, the cards underwent a drastic change in appearance. Previously, their designs bore little, if any, relation to the season. Some even depicted summer scenes. But all that was changed with the introduction of robins, holly, mistletoe, snow-motifs, and other "Christmassy" motifs. The public loved them — and still do.

More and more ingenuity was now going into Christmas card production. Elaborate cut-out shapes, intricate and delicate lace-work, satins and bows, jewels and beads, gold embossing — even 3-D effects — were tried and found successful.

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This did not come all at once.



THE CHRISTMAS FEAST

Bringing in the Boar's Head at the Queen's College, Oxford, in 1846. During the sixteenth century the boar's head was gradually superseded by the turkey as principal Christmas dish, but at the Queen's College it is still served in the traditional manner. This ceremonial dish is first mentioned at a royal banquet in 1170. The boar's head was garished with bay and rosemary, with an orange in its mouth, and the snout gilded. The dish had a ritual significance derived from Norse mythology: Freyr, the god of light and fertility, rode on a boar with golden bristles, symbolising the rays of the sun, and the boar's head, with its gilded snout, celebrated the renewal of light and growth at the winter solstice. At the Christmas feast the boar's head was brought in to the singing of a special carol, which appears in the first printed collection made by Wynkyn de Worde in 1521. The three verses of this carol symbolise the Holy Trinity, and the boar's head becomes Satan defeated and borne in triumph. (Courtesy U. K. Information Office)

## Fire Precautions at Christmas

During all the joyous festivities of the Christmas Season, a cigarette butt, a match, a screenless fireplace, or a faulty electrical circuit may at any time change the joy and gladness into heartbreak as it did in many homes last year throughout Canada.

An even greater tragedy is that most of these fires could have been avoided by following a few simple rules. A little extra care may save a home — yours.

Two factors contribute to the danger of the Christmas Season. Firstly, added decorations are too often not flameproofed. Secondly the increased tempo of entertainment increases the hazard from misplaced cigarette butts and gift wrappings which will blaze like tinder if ignited.

Let's look at a few safety suggestions:

1. Use flameproofed decorations. For greatest safety, many manufacturers produce flameproof materials that were tested and classified by Underwriters Laboratories, and these products bear the familiar Underwriters' label as your guide to safety.
2. In selecting the tree pick one that is small. A small, well-formed tree can be decorated easier and more attractively than a large one and does not produce the same hazard. To preserve the tree, place it in water or moist earth, thereby keeping the needles from drying out. Dry Christmas tree needles are a dangerous fire hazard and a dry tree should not be given house room. To further help preserve your tree, keep it in a cool corner away from drafts.
3. Avoid decorations of paper and candles on the tree. Here again, many of the electrical, decorations and Christmas tree lights bear the label of the Canadian Standards Association or the Underwriters Laboratories, signifying that they have successfully passed rigid fire hazard tests.
4. Watch your electrical circuits. All the added decoration lights may threaten to overload the circuits in your house. If this happens, you can either have qualified electricians put in new circuits, bring extensions in from circuits that are not heavily loaded, or scale down your decorative scheme to fit the load your circuits will bear. Remember, the fuses are there for your safety and installing heavier fuses is an invitation for fire. And this menace is always ready to accept, leaving its trail of grief behind.
5. After your Christmas entertaining, check your furniture for lighted cigarettes. A butt will smoulder under the sofa cushion for hours and come to life in the dead of night.
6. Remember children and candles don't mix. If you must use candles keep them out of the children's reach. Better still, use the electric variety and be certain.
7. And on Christmas Day (mothers, this will be your chore) pick up those gift wrappings as soon as possible. When they are safe in the garbage can, we know they can't add to a fire under the tree. Obey these simple rules and those which your own Fire Department will give you. Remember your Fire Department stands ready in the background, supported by national safety organizations such as Underwriters' Laboratories of Canada, Dominion Board of Insurance Underwriters, Dominion Fire Prevention Association and Canadian Standards Association, hoping that you and yours will have the merriest (and safest) Christmas ever.

THE quest for novelty in Christmas cards was unending. One firm hit upon the idea of decorating its cards with frost that really glittered. Unfortunately, they had a d'n't enough crushed mica to make as many cards as the public wanted. But production went on — with crushed Epsom salts substituted for mica.

The quest for novelty proved expensive more than amusing for a certain Herr Hollinger of Germany. He found an old painting of the Holy Family in the Bethlehem stable and sent it to a friend with a scribbled Christmas greeting. The friend showed the painting to experts who promptly identified it as a missing Rembrandt. Hollinger finally gave up trying to get it back after spending nearly 12,000 pounds in legal fees.

No account of novelty Christmas cards would be complete without mention of the smallest and the largest ever sent. The smallest one was sent to the Duke of Windsor when he was Prince of Wales. It consisted of a single grain of rice on which was inscribed in Indian ink: "To His Royal Highness, The Prince of Wales. Sincere Christmas Greetings From The Joseph G. Gillof Pen Co., London, England. Season 1929."

And the largest? This is believed to be a card sent to President Coolidge in 1924. It measured 21 bore little, if any, relation to the season. Some even depicted summer scenes. But all that was changed with the introduction of robins, holly, mistletoe, snow-motifs, and other "Christmassy" motifs. The public loved them — and still do.

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Animated cards began to appear. A very early one of this type depicted a Victorian maiden whose billowing skirts could be made to rise and reveal her voluminous petticoats and three or four inches of severely-stocked ankle as the card was opened.

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## King Richard's Feasts

Once upon a medieval Yuletide, King Richard III of England celebrated at Litchfield — and during the festivities 2,000 oxen and 200 tons of wine were consumed.

Of course, the feudal set-up provided the great lords with the wherewithal of magnificence that lords received gifts from their tenants and kings received gifts from their nobles; and the graduated scale for giving and receiving was as well ascertained as the quid-pro-quo honorarium of any barrister or physician.

Queen Elizabeth received a large part of her wardrobe as gifts from her courtiers, and if the quality or quantity were not satisfactory, the donors were unceremoniously informed of the situation.

When Henry III entertained a thousand knights, peers, and assorted nobles who came to attend the Yuletide marriage of the Princess Margaret, His Majesty received a royal Christmas gift of 2,700 pounds, plus 600 fat oxen from the Archbishop of York. With similar assistance, whether

exhorted or given in the spirit of generosity appropriate to the season, His Majesty could well afford to give Christmas feasts for the poor like the one given in Westminster Hall in 1248, which lasted a week.

Striving to outdo his predecessors and give his successors something to shoot at, Henry VIII kept one Yuletide at which the cost of gold cloth that was used amounted to 600 pounds alone. He had tents erected and artificial gardens "otted within the spacious hall of the tents to joust in tournaments covered from head to foot with gay ribbon streamers, emerged from the gardens to entertain the guests.

Preparation for the feasting on such occasions is perfectly appalling to epicures of the 20th century — and can only be vaguely comprehended by considering that Richard II normally employed 2,000 cooks to prepare food for the 10,000 persons who dined — irrespective of special feasting — at his expense every day.

He wrote "Christians Awake"

The most popular of all the Christmas carols? Probably the festive hymn, "Christians Awake, Salute the Happy Morn."

Nearly two hundred years ago, Dr. Byrom, of Manchester, was asked to pen some verses for his laughter to send as a greeting to his friends. The verses beginning "Christians awake" were the result. A copy of Dr. Byrom's in spring lines was sent to John Wainwright, organist of the Manchester Collegiate Church. He was so taken by them that he immediately composed the tune known as "Stockport," to which the words could be sung. That tune, written two hundred years ago, is now known throughout the world.

The carol, "Christians Awake," was sung for the first time the following Christmas night — outside the home of Dr. Byrom. And the choir was conducted by John Wainwright.

## Christmas Candles

It would be astonishing, indeed, if no candles appeared in homes throughout the nation on Christmas Eve. The legend which surrounds the custom is believed to have started in Ireland.

There on Christmas Eve a large candle was burned which could be snuffed out only by one named Mary. As the Irish put it: "Who knows, on some Christmas Eve, Jesus and Mary and Joseph may come again, not to Palestine but to the Holy Isle on the farthest edge of Europe?"

Their first use for Christmas is not recorded in the annals of any nation, but that the "Christ Child candle burned in the window on Christmas Eve is, according to an old legend, placed there to light His way if He makes an earthly visitation, and a monument for the night of His birth when there was no room for Him.

Also among the legends is one

## The "Christ Flower"

One flower appears in most homes at Christmas time — the chrysanthemum. You may imagine that this is a natural happening, for, after all, there are few other flowers at the end of December. Actually, the chrysanthemum — which means "Christ flower" — has its origin in the story of the Saviour's birth.

It is said that the Wise Men, when trying to locate the stable where Mary and the Child were lying, saw a small starlike flower at the side of the road. One of them stooped down to pluck it — and as he did so, the stable door opened, revealing the birthplace of Christ.

That first chrysanthemum, was it became known, was white. Today, the flowers that grace our Christmas festivities may be any colour from blue to vivid orange, proof of the florist's art.

The Christmas berry or California holly is a shrub found chiefly in the chaparral area of the Sierra Nevada mountains of California.

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For each pound of ammonium sulphate use 1 1/2 pints of water to make the fireproofing solution. Mix the solution in something tall and narrow that will hold the tree upright. Then saw off the tree diagonally so as to give a large cut surface. Set the tree in the solution in a cool place, away from the direct sunlight, and leave it there until most of the solution is absorbed.

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