



# Here comes Christmas!

The Christmas lights have been switched on, cards are being written and shop windows are brimming with gifts and glitter. While most people associate the month of December with shopping, pantomimes and calendars stuffed with chocolate, for Christians the weeks before Christmas, which are known as Advent, have a more serious meaning.

## What does Advent actually mean?

The word "advent" refers to the Latin word "adventus" which means "arrival". It refers to the time when Christians prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus. It begins four Sundays before 25 December and lasts until midnight on Christmas Eve. This year, Advent began on Sunday 29 November. In the past, Christians spent these weeks fasting and praying. Fasting means restricting how much food we eat.

## Advent wreaths



During Advent Christians light candles at home and in church. They light one candle on an evergreen wreath on each of the four Sundays before Christmas. A fifth candle is lit on Christmas Day. Traditionally the wreath has three purple candles, one pink candle and one white for Christmas Day, but it's not a strict rule and any colour can be used.

**DID YOU KNOW?**  
Christmas markets, like this one in Saxony, originated in medieval Germany. But it took until 1997 for them to arrive in Britain.



The festive season has begun again, but do you know the real reason we start the celebrations now?

**DID YOU KNOW?**  
Norway gives Britain a fir tree every Christmas, to say thank you for helping the country during the Second World War. The tree sits in Trafalgar Square in London.

## A very Victorian Christmas



There are many traditions we think about in December, such as decorating the Christmas tree. Yet festive firs only became popular in Britain after 1841, largely thanks to Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, who brought them over from his native Germany, although the British Royal Family had celebrated with a tree since Queen Charlotte had one in the 1790s. Today, around six million Christmas trees are sold each year.



Puddings are made with dried fruit.



Christmas carols started in 1800s.

Other December Christmas traditions that date back to the Victorian period include carol singing and Christmas cards. The first major collection of Christmas carols was published in 1833. The first Christmas cards were also sent at this time as printing technology improved, making cards much cheaper.

As for Christmas pudding, people believed the correct time to make it was the first Sunday before Advent. They would stir the mixture of dried fruits and suet from east to west to symbolise the journey of the three wise men to see baby Jesus. Some people still continue this tradition today.

## Advent calendars from pretty Bible scenes to toys and chocolates

As far as historians can tell, the tradition of marking the days leading up to Christmas dates back to the mid-1800s. German Protestants made chalk markings on their doors or lit candles for each day. The first printed Advent calendars featured religious scenes and Bible verses hidden behind paper windows. They appeared in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century.



This Advent calendar is more than 100 years old.

### A new tradition

A cardboard shortage during the Second World War briefly put an end to the tradition. After the war, however, the calendars became popular across Europe. They took off in the US too, after President Dwight D. Eisenhower's grandchildren were photographed with one in 1946. The end of war rationing also meant that chocolates and sweets began to appear behind the windows.

This town hall in Germany turns into an Advent calendar.



Modern calendars usually have chocolate inside.

### Novelty calendars

Today, Advent calendars have pictures of pop stars and animals – some have toys inside. One of the most expensive calendars ever created was made in Belgium in 2010. It had 24 diamonds set in gold and cost £1.7 million.



One of the world's costliest Advent calendars.

### DID YOU KNOW?

According to the Guinness Book of Records, the world's largest Advent calendar was put up in St Pancras station, London, in 2007. It was 71m high – that's taller than a 20-storey office block!

