

The Origins of Christmas Wreaths and Christmas Trees

BY DAVID TILSON

The Christmas season is here again and with it many of our beloved traditions. Each year, we look forward to seeing house after house decorated with beautiful Christmas light displays, gatherings with loved ones, Christmas cookies, and of course, Christmas wreaths and Christmas trees. Both are widely recognized symbols of Christmas; however, we may not even realize that by some accounts, these merry traditions date back at least hundreds of years and have very interesting origins.

There are different accounts of the origins of the wreath. One account is that the tradition is rooted in Christianity, used to symbolize Christ with its circular form representing eternity and everlasting life. It has been said that the art of wreath-making dates back as far as 1,000 years before the birth of Christ when pagans would gather to mark the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, which represented both death and rebirth to them. Wreaths were made to symbolize their will and strength to survive the severe winters, as well as optimism for the following spring season. Such wreaths were often crafted from evergreens and included four candles to represent the four elements: earth, wind, fire, and water.

There are accounts that the wreath's history may be traced back to the ancient Greece and Rome where wreaths were a symbol of success and importance. Members of these ancient civilizations would wear handmade ring-shaped wreaths as headdresses or headbands, composed of fresh tree leaves, twigs, small fruits, and flowers. Such designs would symbolize an individual's occupation, achievements, status, and rank. Victors of the ancient Greco-Roman Olympic Games were crowned with a laurel wreath, the most common type of wreath at that time. Military leaders also wore them to signify victory and wreaths were also hung on doors following a victory in battle.

By the 16th century, Catholics and Protestants in Germany had embraced the tradition established by the pagans to celebrate Advent, which represented the preparation for the birth of Christ. During this time, traditional Advent wreaths were constructed with four candles. There are also accounts that some Advent wreath traditions included a fifth candle. A candle would be lit at dinnertime followed by another candle lit every week until the last candle, the one in the centre of the wreath, being lit on Christmas Eve, representing the birth of Jesus and everlasting life brought through him.

The ever-popular Christmas tree dates back to sixteenth century Germany. During that time, trees were decorated both indoors and out with apples, roses, candies, and coloured paper. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in both Austria and Germany, the tops of evergreens were cut and hung upside down in a living room corner. They were decorated with apples, nuts, and strips of red paper.

The first record of Christmas trees in America was for children in the German Moravian Church's settlement in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in 1747. The actual trees weren't decorated; however, wooden pyramids covered with evergreen branches were decorated with candles.

In 1834, Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, was credited with bringing the first Christmas tree to Windsor Castle for the Royal Family. By 1850, the Christmas tree had become fashionable in the eastern part of the United States. Before this date, the tradition was considered a quaint foreign custom. The first retail Christmas tree lot opened on the streets of New York in 1851.

The hustle and bustle associated with Christmas can be challenging for each of us; however, our beloved Christmas traditions, such as Christmas wreaths and Christmas trees, remind us of the true meaning of this magical time of the year. They're a reminder to slow down and partake in the spirit of the season. I hope you may share in the peace and joy during the holidays. As your Member of Parliament, I wish you and your loved ones a very Merry Christmas!