

Review of Dr Geri Parlbys 'Saints, Snakes and Pawnbrokers' Thursday 9th December 2021 in Exmouth Pavilion.



Geri delivered a fascinating, informative and entertaining talk, full of illustrations taking us through the many different traditions associated with the festival of Christmas. Our attention was held from start to finish with the variety of material and associated stories used by Geri, clearly involving an incredible amount of research. With so many Christmas myths and traditions we could have been overwhelmed with information but not so as Geri had selected her material very well, choosing the unusual, the intriguing, the familiar as well as the unfamiliar and introducing each section with pertinent illustrations and well-chosen words.

Thus with mistletoe which we associate with kissing underneath, Geri explained there are around 1500 species of mistletoe around the world, growing parasitically on trees. In France apparently mistletoe is seen as a good luck charm which people often give to friends as a New Year's gift to wish them luck for the coming year ahead.

Having Christmas trees indoors is something that we become familiar with from a very young age but it was not always so. The tradition is believed to have started in sixteenth century Germany and is associated with the German preacher Martin Luther. Apparently as the story goes, one night before Christmas, Luther was walking through a pine forest and thought how beautiful the trees looked with the stars shining through the tree branches. So it was that he brought a tree into his house and decorated it with candles to represent the stars.

As Geri explained Queen Victoria is sometimes credited with starting the tradition of indoor Christmas trees. However, it would seem that the honour should more likely be associated with Queen Charlotte the German wife of King George III. A special occasion with family gathered around the tree with sweetmeats, toys and wax candles.

Terminology is all important when considering the different traditions for rewarding children's good behaviour at Christmas time. We learnt that Saint Nicholas born in 270 AD in what is now the country of Turkey is the patron saint of pawnbrokers. Tradition has it that he was dedicated to helping others and generous in giving. The name we know as Santa Claus evolved from Saint Nicholas's Dutch nickname, Sinter Klaas, a shortened form of Sint Nikolaas.

We discovered that the red clothing we associate with Father Christmas wasn't always so being depicted in seventeenth century illustrations as green. The reindeer pulled sled is thought to have originated from Scandinavia and 'Rudolph' the red nosed leader was an American advertising creation.

Unfortunately as we heard not all is merry, happy and peaceful at Christmas time in a number of European countries and parts of the USA as there are some very dark traditions such as the goat-demon Krampus who punishes naughty children, beating them with his birch stick and licking them with his snake tongue.

However, we ended on a high thanking Geri for an excellent talk and extending warm wishes to all our members for a very Happy Christmas.

Review and photo by Christine Chittock, Chair and Speakers' Coordinator