

CHRISTMAS AT WINDSOR CASTLE



Christmas tree in St George's Chapel

The builder of the first castle at Windsor, William the Conqueror, celebrated his coronation on Christmas Day in 1066, but he never spent Christmas at the castle.



A likeness of William the Conqueror

Christmas Day in 1126 was a significant event for the Norman dynasty, as the English nobles swore allegiance to Matilda, daughter of Henry I and granddaughter of William the Conqueror, as heir to the throne. It was another 100 years before a Monarch spent Christmas at the Castle.

In fact, King John, who famously signed the Magna Carta at Runnymede in 1215, spent four Christmases at Windsor Castle.



A likeness of King John

Unfortunately, King John was an unpleasant and unpopular monarch, and Christmas at the castle during his rule was unlikely to have been a happy affair. A.A. Milne immortalised the King in his poem *King John's Christmas* – here is the first verse:

*King John was not a good man –
He had his little ways.
And sometimes no one spoke to him
For days and days and days.
And men who came across him,
When walking in the town,
Gave him a supercilious stare,
Or passed with noses in the air –
And bad King John stood dumbly there,
Blushing beneath his crown.*

Royal Christmas traditions really began in the 18th Century with King George III and Queen Charlotte, his German-born wife. It was George

III who set to work in restoring the castle (which had been neglected by his predecessors George I and George II).



King George III and Queen Charlotte

George was a progressive monarch with an interest in science, who cared for the land (he was known as Farmer George) and his people. He remained happily married to his queen, mother of his 15 children, for 57 years! It was in fact Queen Charlotte who introduced Christmas trees to Britain, and not Prince Albert as often thought, although it was Albert who popularised the tradition many years later.

The first Christmas trees were yew branches adorned with candles, paper flowers and sweets, which came from the German tradition of bringing a yew branch indoors to bring good luck to the household. Queen Charlotte held Christmas parties for the children of her royal servants in the Queen's Lodge at Windsor, which was her favourite place of all. The children danced around the tree and were permitted to take home with them treats from its branches.

Queen Victoria and Prince Albert spent twenty Christmases at Windsor Castle. The pair had a tree each, as did their children and the Queen's mother, the Duchess of Kent.



Queen Victoria's Christmas Tree, 1850

The couple also started the tradition of the present table, as can be seen in the image above. Unwrapped gifts were laid on tables, including paintings which Victoria and Albert were fond of giving to one another. The receipts for many of these gifts still exist. One Christmas, the children received wheelbarrows, because Prince Albert, a keen gardener, had given each child a plot of land to cultivate at Osborne House, the family's private home on the Isle of Wight!



Prince Albert's dog Eos

The picture shows Prince Albert's favourite dog, a handsome greyhound called Eos. Queen Victoria commissioned the painting for her husband. Sadly, Prince Albert died in 1861 and Victoria did not spend another Christmas at Windsor Castle until 1889, two years before her death, when she threw a grand party for the soldiers of the Anglo-Boer War.

The tree was 25 feet in height and the Queen's children acted as servants to the soldiers for the day.

A Christmas menu from 1899 shows that a boar's head was the centrepiece of the feast in those days.



The dishes were brought to the table on platters, heralded by trumpeters in a theatrical display. There is even a *Boar's Head Christmas Carol* to commemorate this auspicious event! The exotic courses included woodcock pie with 100 birds inside, salted venison, salmon and some six tons of wine!



Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret at the castle during the war

Queen Elizabeth II and her sister Princess Margaret spent many happy Christmases at Windsor Castle, where they were evacuated during the war as children. They took part in pantomimes to raise money for the War Fund by selling tickets for the shows. There is a picture of them performing their very own production entitled *Old Mother Red Riding Boots*, and another of the entire cast from Christmas 1944.



Another shows the Queen playing Aladdin to Margaret's Princess Roxana in 1943. The pantomimes were staged in the Waterloo Chamber, which is usually home to important portraits from the Royal Collection. The portraits were moved for safekeeping during the war and pictures used in the pantomime performances were hung in their place.



The Waterloo Chamber hung with pantomime art during the war

King Edward VII and Princess Alexandra acquired the Sandringham Estate in Norfolk as a wedding gift. Then Prince and Princess of Wales, they began the present royal tradition of spending Christmas at Sandringham.



The Prince and Princess of Wales by the lake, Sandringham, April 1863

Today, the Royal Family generally spends Christmas at Sandringham and they eat turkey reared on the Sandringham Estate. In the 1800s, turkey was much more expensive, so Christmas dinner in Edward and Alexandra's day would have been plum pudding served with beef, veal, fruits and spices.

At Windsor Castle, every Christmas there is a 20-foot high Nordmann Fir Christmas tree on display in St Georges Hall, along the visitor route.



The Christmas tree in St George's Hall

This type of tree is used because it does not shed its needles as quickly as other varieties. The magnificent tree is decorated with iridescent glass, mirrored ornaments and 3,000 LED lights (rather than candles). Every year the decorations are themed and the table in the State Dining Room is laid as if for a sumptuous royal banquet.



The State Dining Room

The exquisite 4,000-piece Grand Service, a silver-gilt dinner service, is used to decorate the table. The collection is made from Roman, Egyptian, and Oriental designs according to King George IV's taste.



This stunning candelabra has a base plate engraved with the Royal Coat of Arms – in reverse, so that it can be read through the mirror underneath it on the table!