ALL OUR CHRISTMASSES

Memories of Christmas Past
ALL OUR CHRISTMAS MEMORIES

A BOOK OF CHRISTMAS MEMORIES

BY GREENWICH PENSIONERS

Compiled by Age Exchange Theatre Company
in association with Thameside Adult Institute Reminiscence Class
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All Our Christmases

Christmas, in our house, started around October. The mincemeat was made, and the pickles pickled. The ingredients for the cakes and puddings — currants, sultanas, raisins, peel — were being got together. My mother would make four cakes, three of which were given to close friends as a Christmas gift, and two puddings; one for the Christmas dinner, and the other to be eaten at the end of January on my father's birthday. During the making of the puddings, each member of the family had to stir the mixture nine times for luck. Whether this was just a superstition peculiar to us, or some sort of ancient folklore, I don't know.

At the beginning of December, things really began to get under way; paper chains were made by us children; cards were bought and written ready to be sent off. Mother toured the butchers' shops to see which one had the best-looking turkeys. In those days, there were no such things as frozen ones. The turkeys hung in rows in the front of the shops and around the walls inside. When it had been decided which shop had the prime birds then, with a certain amount of consultation between mother and the butcher, was one ordered. Fruit and nuts were bought. The Christmas tree came from the greengrocer too. Even a bottle of whisky, and of port, and also, I believe, sherry, was managed.

The day before Christmas Day itself saw the sausage rolls and mince pies being made, the giblets being simmered for the gravy, the stuffing being made and the turkey got ready for the oven.

Christmas morning we were awake early to see what Father Christmas had brought us. A pillow case was left at the foot of the bed, in which we found an apple, an orange, a banana, some nuts, and a couple of new pennies, as well as the presents we'd been given.

During Christmas morning, the man of the neighbouring families made a round of visits, having a drink at each house, while the wives cooked the dinners. In the afternoon, the grown-ups snoozed, while the children played quietly. When evening came, we went off to a neighbour's house for a jolly party which lasted into the early hours of Boxing Day morning.

Boxing Day was an anti-climax, Christmas Day was over for that year, and it was a long time before the next one. We finished off the festivities, though, with another party in the evening.

Becky Jennings
Christmas Eve

Christmas Eve was a very exciting occasion with us children anticipating hanging up a pillow-slip and awaiting a visit from Father Xmas. In our case the duties were performed by Dad and our Uncle Harry. We were nearly always awake when the time came, and as my brother and I shared a room when we were very young we had to stifle giggles especially when Uncle Harry stubbed his toe on the bed as he only had socks on to creep in. He swore and Dad hushed him.

The Salvation Army used to come round, and we heard them playing ‘Away in a Manger’. Marilyn was about four I suppose. We looked out of the window and the Salvation Army had got one man dressed up as Father Christmas with his sack on his back. So we woke her up. We said: “Marilyn, Marilyn, look. There’s Father Christmas and there’s a band with him playing ‘Away in a Manger’”. We got her to the window, and she stayed there till they finished, but she never remembered it. She couldn’t have woken up properly. To this day she doesn’t remember. And it was such a lovely idea.

You could always more or less rely on having snow at Christmas. The carol singers were lovely. They used to come and stand round where there was a lamp post and we joined them, and everybody would be up till 12 o’clock at night. We all went out there and then we used to sing, ‘The bells are ringing the old year out and the New Year in’.” That was the New Year of course, but we didn’t have it for Christmas Day. We used to come round singing before Christmas; the Salvation Army band that was — it was a lovely band it was.

Christmas was a magic time. We used to walk about in hushed silence wondering what we were going to get. We used to hang our heads over the bannister — we were so excited.

I can remember one Christmas, late one Christmas Eve, very late — I went down ‘Noble’s’ — they had a big toy store on the Broadway — my husband went down there and bought my daughter a monkey . . . a stuffed one. That’s late, very late on Xmas Eve. You could go anywhere at the last minute.

Another thing I can remember, we kept a few chickens in the back garden, as did one or 2 other neighbours and it was this half brother’s job to kill the chicken. Then, of course, we children were despatched to the park, as the chicken killing went on. We helped to pluck, and then my brother would chase me round with one of the claws.

One Christmas my father left lots of fruit in the drawers upstairs and one day my sister and I went upstairs to sneak a look at them. We couldn’t see properly and my sister said “Ere, get a light, Else” Well, we heard someone downstairs and we shut the drawer but the light had fallen inside. The whole chest of drawers caught fire and the fire brigade had to be called. The whole street came out to watch. When they found out it was me, they gave me a real good telling off. The fireman said “You must never ever do that again”. But I was upset because all the apples and oranges had gone west!

We were made to go to sleep for Father Christmas to come. We used to have one eye open and one shut, and we used to see Mum or Dad come in — we used to nudge one another and say “They’re coming” and then in the morning they’d say “Did you see Father Christmas last night?” and you’d say “Yes, it was Dad”. We were well behaved. We didn’t open our presents till morning. I had a fairy doll once with a dress and frills and all that.

Well yes, I can remember when we were kids, and we was all put to bed when we were young, and when our parents thought we was asleep, they’d nip upstairs and fill our stockings up with a new penny and a piece of coal and lots of oranges and a few sweets and I suppose we were lucky — we didn’t get much, but that was our Christmas present. Of course we wasn’t asleep, we were awake, but we made out we were asleep and when they turned their backs we sat up in bed and took down our stockings to see what we had.

We all had to have a black stocking and they were new ones, and we had to give them to my Mother and my Father used to hang them up in the back bedroom, and he used to say, “Now who wants the key, so as you know that Father Xmas comes down the chimney?” And of course we wondered see how he used to get down the chimney, and course, when we got older we knew what the key was for.
Shops would have decorations and that but not Christmas trees really; white stuff on the windows, cotton wool. We used to get cotton wool and stick it on our windows. We didn’t have wreaths and that like they do now; it wasn’t so commercialised as it is now. But you could go down the market and get everything so very cheap — oranges at 3 a penny, of course they were blood oranges you know, little ones. And you knew at Christmas time you could go shopping till around 10 o’clock at night, till midnight even. You had the oil gas flares in the streets, naked gas flares. The butchers shops were open right up until midnight and if you waited long enough you got your meat much cheaper because they wanted to get rid of it, like. There wasn’t all these deep-freezers then so they had to get rid of it. About a fortnight before Christmas the butchers used to have rows of turkeys hanging up high and then you knew Christmas was coming and it was really quite exciting. But the people who were very poor and couldn’t afford to buy a turkey like that, the butchers or poulterers used to auction them off on Christmas Eve, because they couldn’t keep them, so they used to sell them and poor people with large families used to go to these auctions. Sometimes they’d get a turkey for sixpence.

We believed in Father Christmas when we were little — if your father and mother said something you believed them and they used to keep that up for quite some time, till we were about eleven or twelve, I suppose. And of course that was all brought to mind by the other children at school, they used to disillusion us. They used to say, ‘No, there’s no such thing’. I used to try and stay awake, but I could never stay awake long enough, I always fell asleep. Our fireplaces was always cleared out to make room for Father Christmas, we always had fireplaces, even up in our bedrooms, and that was all cleared up, all tidied and made nice for Father Christmas to come down. How he got down that little hole with his sack, we never thought to ask; until the kids saw Father Christmas getting into bed with their mother! Our father would dress up if he could borrow the things; but when you get older your mind sort of started ticking over. Then that song came out, ‘I saw Mummy kissing Santa Claus, underneath the mistletoe.’

We used to get mistletoe and holly, course it all used to grow wild then, you used to go anywhere to find it, up in the woods, and on all the commons. It was unheard of to buy it, you just couldn’t afford it.

Mother would be busy doing the decorations — that would all be kept a secret. We didn’t see that till the morning. Then there was our stockings, special Christmas stockings, with a Father Christmas on it, those net ones, you can buy now. There was funny bits in those, you know, little toy bits — but our own was a pillow slip. There would be something to wear in it, a pencil box for school, a scribble pad, probably paint brushes and a couple of little tubes of paint. There would be an apple, a tangerine, a proper tangerine, and an orange. A few nuts, grapes and chocolate money wrapped up in gold paper, and a big coin wrapped up in silver paper, a sugar mouse. We weren’t allowed to wake too early in the morning so if Mother or Dad heard us we’d get reprimanded, were weren’t allowed to disturb early.

At Christmas time we used to get nuts and apples and oranges and a walking stick made of hundreds and thousands — two white sugar mice. And it always used to be “Put up your stocking, but don’t you dare wake up till the morning”.

This particular Christmas the kids woke up and I wasn’t in that room then, we were spread out, and my Mother said “Whatever are those kids doing?” My Father said “Get back to sleep! What are you doing up there?” He jumped out of the bed, he was so annoyed, and he ran up the stairs, and he opened the door, and all the kids were on the bed sitting up with the presents in their laps, and as he ran in, they’d eaten all the nuts, and the shells were all on the floor and he had nothing on his feet. And I can tell you the air went blue!

Christmas Present — Rocking Horse for Sale: cheap, 50s. — 19s. Trundleys Rd.

Christmas and New Year Cards for Sweethearts and Friends. — A large selection at Pedler’s, London-st, Greenwich.

I remember that we were told not to open our eyes when Father Christmas came, in case he didn’t leave us anything. I remember hearing the thump, thump thump of footsteps coming, Father Christmas dragging along a doll’s bed, and I was getting all excited about it.
Decorations

I think what mainly sticks in my mind is the arrangements of tinsel. My Mother had what is known as an eperne in the middle of the room — this is a glass dish quite wide, and coming from it three or four trumpets of glass in which you usually put artificial flowers, that sort of thing. The dish at the bottom is large enough to put apples or oranges in. We had a central light fitting and from this, came strips of tinsel to the eperne, and then paper chains to the corners of the room. In those days you made your own paper chains, they were sold at a penny a packet, strips of paper and some of them were silver and gold strips. I can't remember having a Christmas tree; I think this eperne was our central decoration.

I can remember making the Christmas chains, with bits of paper and flour and water paste. As children we didn't put them up. We made them and they were piled in the front room, and we didn't see the decorations till Christmas morning. I had a half brother who was a lot older than us six children were, he and my parents used to put up the decorations, and decorate the tree after we were in bed.

You made your own streamers — you used to buy the coloured strips and make flour and water paste, and then put one loop in the other. We used to hang them all round the pictures on the walls.

... We used to get a proper little tree didn't we? 6d in Woolworths — and then we used to make our paper chains — never bought chains. We used to buy the crepe paper and decorate the room... mistletoe... we used to go and pinch that out of somebody's garden... and holly, they used to go all around the lanes... we didn't know any other way than that’’.

The only Christmas that sticks in my mind I should think about 1896. I was quite young. We used to go to Sunday school, and every Christmas we used to have to take a mug... we had tea, we had a bun and cake and that. But in the hall there was a day school attached to the Church and every Christmas we used to go there. At Christmas there was a huge tree right up to the ceiling, and there — there used to be a lovely fairy on the top and I used to long for that fairy doll cos we were so poor we couldn't afford anything. We all had to assemble in the hall. And of course all the “Ohs and Ooohs” when you came in, we never see such a thing. And we all had to form a ring and we danced all round this tree and “What is this I see before me? O, it is a Christmas Tree!” I can't remember exactly what went on after that was said of “toys for Ginny, toys for Bill”, something like that, but all I can remember is “What is this I see before me? O, it is Christmas Tree!”

It was way back in the gas light days so the tree was decorated with tiny candles on tin plates. I distinctly remember those little tin plates because they detracted from the magic of the occasion. I have a hazy recollection of a lot of grown up people who were thoroughly enjoying this Christmas tree — and yet — it was supposed to be for me. Naturally I wanted to touch this strange object with its twinkling fairy lights, but was abruptly recalled to reality hearing those words “Don't let that child touch the tree!” I suppose that is when I had my first misgivings regarding the sanity of adults.

I can also remember becoming very confused over Santa and Jesus Christ, from whence emerged a kind of Holy Christian Fairy!”

We made stars, if you could get that coloured paper and stick it onto cardboard.

We used to have candles and packets of chains, strips of paper. You used to buy a bundle of strips of coloured papers and make your own chains with flour and water and hang them up. That was the only sort of paper chain we had — you were very rich if you got the bell in the middle of the room, the lantern thing you know — sometimes we used to make those ourselves out of wrapping papers and that. And paper hats; we used to get a newspaper and fold it over — you'd either be Napoleon or you'd be Nelson or somebody like that — that was the only thing we could do; I think everything was self-made then.

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Commenting Boxing Day Thursday
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Every Evening at 7.00 p.m.
Matinees Daily until further notice at 2.30 p.m.

Charles Henry, Gilbert Brown and Leon Selberg

Present

A SUPERB XMAS PANTOMIME

'CINDERELLA'

(AND HER FAIRY SLIPPER)

Oest Includes

CHARLES AUSTIN

CLARICE MAYNE  RONA RAY

SPECIAL NOTE! EVENING PERFORMANCE commences at 7.45 p.m.
A Merry Christmas

One time my Father came home from the pub on Christmas Eve, we always used to wait up for him because he used to tell us ghost stories. Anyway, this particular time he was fairly drunk, and as he came in he noticed that the Christmas pudding was on the boil. (We used to have to boil them for 12 hours in those days.) It was wrapped up in a big white rag and it smelt delicious. My Dad said, "Is it done?" And we said "No, it's not quite cooked yet". He said "Where's your Mother?" We said "Oh, she's gone for a Christmas drink up the road".

He laughed and said "Oh, we'll pull the pudding out, shall we?" So he put the pudding down on a plate, and started to undo the rag. And as he was undoing it, parts of the pudding started to come away, so he got a knife and cut round the edges and gave us all a big slice each. Then he tied it back up again and popped it back into the pot! Then he realised that there were 7 of us children and not much of the pudding left, and in his drunken state, he had put the holly inside the bag as well. And the next day my Mother couldn't understand what had happened. When she asked us, we said "It's the mice". She said "Mice couldn't get in there. Now you're all telling fibs. Come on, out with it, what happened?" At this point my Father came down and explained rather apologetically "Well, you wasn't at home and I had to do something to keep 'em quiet. Though I do say" he added "It's the finest hot pudding we've ever had in this house!"

I remember this occasion one Christmas. Two doors along Mrs. Read, she was a war widow. She lost her husband in the first World War at sea, on H.M.S. Hood which got blown up. My Father suddenly said one Christmas "Go and get Mrs. Read" so one of the family went to get her and managed to coax her along, and as she came in Dad said, "Come in, gal. You mustn't be in all on your own!" And he gave her a very stiff gin in an half pint glass, (bearing in mind we never had the finesses of having different glasses for different drinks in those days).

I think she drank some of it, but I can't remember if she got drunk. But if she'd drunk that lot, she'd've keeled over!

The only time I heard my Mother sing was when she'd had a bloody good row and a few drinks and then we'd get it. We knew then that the ideal thing was to keep very quiet and to get out because she used to sing 'The bird in a gilded cage'. If Mum started that we knew trouble would happen.

Round about Christmas time the landlords used to give out clay pipes. Nosegay they used to smoke, 'Afrikander' too. The smell used to be horrible. Smelt like manure.

I had a large chicken in a raffle, and on our way home James and I stopped at many hostelries to celebrate. Each round we bought, we included the bird, and bought it a pint. Our last port of call was at my Village local, and Jimmy and I, holding a wing apiece, poured several pints down the chicken's gullet. We took my wife over to the pub the following day, and the barmaid drew her aside, and asked her how the chicken tasted. She then divulged how Jimmy and I were trying the previous day to get the chicken drunk.

Christmas Eve 1940 I went up with the chappie who became the bestman at my wedding but he was also known as an authority on what to drink, and what not to drink, up to a place called the Horse and Groom, Whitcomb Street, which is only a stone's throw from Nelson's Column. We started off with two ½'s out of the barrel at 1/3d a ½ pint and when beer was only 4d per pint, you may imagine that what came out of the barrel was pretty good anyway. I complained that it was a bit smoky, and I wanted something to clear my head, so Harry said "Oh well then, we'll have a round of high balls" — this was Irish Whiskey, dry ginger and ice. We had a couple of rounds of those — that cleared our heads. Then Harry said "It's about time we pushed the boat out", so he ordered drambuie and brandies. Now we consumed these, and Harry, who ordered them, said to the lady who served behind the counter: "And what are you going to have? It's Christmas". So she said "There's one drambuie in the bottle, I won't have brandy, I'll just have that." So when she finished she turned to us and said: "Now what are you boys going to have?" Harry, just a bit nonplussed, three of us and one of her you see, said "Well I'll leave it to you, you know what we've had and what we can take." She eyed the three of us up and down, and she was pouring the drinks for us when her son came out from the back and said "What are you giving them?" So she said, "Oh port and brandy". He said "You'll have them pass out." So she eyed us up and down again, each one of us and said: "No, not here anyway." So we got our port and brandies. Now we came back home on the train, and we watched several youngsters who'd probably had all of 2 pints of beer, very red and flushed and making themselves a general nuisance, and we felt benevolent and took not much notice of them. The thing that struck me the following day, is that I didn't have so much as a headache. It must have been a marvellous combination of drinks for it to have had no effect.
Every Christmas we had a friend of the family’s come to stay. One year he brought a duck with him and asked my Mother if she would like to cook it for him. She said yes, and popped it in the oven. She then put it in the market. Anyway my Dad came home, drunk again, and said: “Now kids, we mustn’t touch the pudding. We had a row last year about that. Is there any meat there?” “No, no, Dad” “What’s in this tray here then?” “Looks like a duck!” “Oh, well, it seems a real pity to waste a duck like this” he said, and gave us all a huge piece. It was about 3 a.m. in the morning and we sat up listening to my Father’s stories and by and by we completely finished the duck. Anyway, Bill came down said “What’s going on here then”, but before anyone could say anything, he saw the bones of the duck.

“What’s happened to my duck?”
“We’ve eaten it”.
Then he got very angry but my Father said “Well it’s no use getting angry, I gave it to them”.
So he hit my Father smack in the eye! Anyway that started it, they had a huge fight. We thought the whole thing was hilarious.

One Christmas I remember there was an awful to-do between a brother and sister. They were both married, but neither had spoken to the other for 3 years, even though they lived in the same block. Anyway, one night over Christmas, the brother got blind drunk and went to the wrong flat — his sister’s. In those days we used to put our ash in a bucket and take it out for the dustman. Well, as the sister was coming out of the door with a bucket filled to the brim with ash, her brother drunkenly slipped and the ash went all over her! My God, you’ve never heard such a slanging match. If they hadn’t talked for 3 years, they certainly made up for it then!

My younger brothers and sisters had their presents brought up, by my Father. As he was going up the stairs he was a bit drunk so he kept dropping them, and my Mother was behind him and she said “You rotter! You rotter!” That used to happen a lot.

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For goodness sake hang on to
Gilbey's SPEY ROYAL Whisky
"Well, let's go and have one!"
W. & A. Gilbey, Ltd. Distillers, Glen Spey, Strathmill and Knockando, N.B.

On Christmas Day the pubs used to be open all day, and the men used to go and have a pint or two and then come back for dinner. Well, one year the husband of one of my neighbours didn’t come back for hours, so she got the pram with her little baby in it, and took it into the pub.
And on top of the pram was his Christmas Dinner!
“There” she said “You can eat it here seeing as you couldn’t be bothered to come back for it!”
Everyone in the pub burst out laughing, and he didn’t half look a fool!

One Christmas stood out in my memory, just before I married. I went to a Christmas Eve party at the Director General. We all had too much to drink, but fortunately a friend of mine owned a ladies hairdressing salon opposite the pub, and I spent the small hours in the shop, sitting in a barber’s chair.

I remember my husband telling me about his Father, and as you say at Christmas they always got tiddly, but this time he’d been to the market to get the Christmas turkey, chicken or whatever and he came home late at night when business was more or less finished for the night, and everyone was in bed. And he says to the chicken, “Get up these stairs” and he throws the chicken, and it didn’t land where he wanted it to land and he said “I told you to get up those stairs”!
All of a sudden a voice behind him says “I’ll help you, mate” and he throws it further, you see.
Well apparently the saying is that they both fell asleep on the stairs and the following morning the fella turned out to be the local policeman!
Every Christmas we had a friend of the family's come to stay. One year he brought a duck with him and asked my Mother if she would like to cook it for him. She said, yes, and popped it in the oven. She then put in into the pantry. Anyway my Dad came home, drunk again, and said: "Now kids, we mustn't touch the pudding. We had a row last year about that. Is there any meat there?" "No, no, Dad" "What's in this tray here then?" "Looks like a duck" "Oh, well, it seems a real pity to waste a duck like this" he said, and gave us all a huge piece. It was about 3 a.m. in the morning and we sat up listening to my Father's stories and by and by we completely finished the duck. Anyway, Bill came down said "What's going on here then", but before anyone could say anything, he saw the bones of the duck.
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Well apparently the saying is that they both fell asleep on the stairs and the following morning the fella turned out to be the local policeman!
Christmas Morning and Presents

We woke after a very short nap at dawn and unpacked our pillow-cases very excitedly. In the bottom of the pillow-case was always an orange and a piece of coal (for luck).

We spent Christmas morning playing with our presents and eating sweets.

Christmas morning we were awake early to see what Father Christmas had brought us. A pillow case was left at the foot of the bed, in which we found an apple, an orange, a banana, some nuts, and a couple of new pennies, as well as the presents we'd been given.

We had a black stocking and we had a bit of coal — I don't know whether I was meant to light the fire that day or not, but I don't remember doing it — it was just traditional. And I used to have mostly clothes, but nowadays that's done every week, isn't it. That people have clothes or something — but it was something really special then. It was a way of getting rigged out at Christmas. I remember them little Liberty bodices that used to go round you and button up down the front. And we always had a pretty dress at Christmas or something like that and they were normally velvet, and then the normal stocking with a few nuts and oranges. And I might have a skipping rope, because of course they were things we always had in those days, with wooden handles. We'd be skipping out in the street as well, even Christmas time when it was cold, and we used to skip up and down show off our skipping ropes. By that time quite often our knickers was down our legs, they used to fall down when we was skipping. It used to shake them down, but we didn't stop.

We used to have little wooden dolls with black heads and a frock — you just made a hole in the neck — I remember that. The wooden dolls you bought and you made the clothes out of anything you could get hold of — I was the youngest girl and I was made a fuss of.

... I remember I used to have, like — what you'er see being made now — pegs you know? the old fashioned pegs made into a little doll — yeah — we used to get them Xmas! I was happy with a hoop a whip and a top, hop scotch and they used to cost you about 2d or 3d ... what was it? alley gogs — not gcb stoppers — 5 stones. Where I lived you knew, Silvertown I don't know if you know it, there used to be like a pub called The Granian Boy we used to sit outside there before Xmas and we used to have grottoes — do you remember them 2d for the grotto? It was, like any old ornaments your Mum got — and you'd stick it on a tray like they made Jesus and Xmas and all that, only we'd make what we called grottoes. We used to make the edgings; break off a bit of branches and it was always when they come out; it wasn't when they was going in, I mean when they came out they'd had one over the eight, you know ... spent it on sweets, or even buy a present. I thought it was wonderful to be able to buy some little present for Mum, you know.

I was the youngest girl — I was fortunate, my sister was older than me and she always used to have a dress made for me. She'd buy the material and get someone to make it for me. I had a red velvet one. One Christmas I had a real china coffee set.

At Christmas time we used to get nuts and apples and oranges and a walking stick made of hundreds and thousands — two white sugar mice. And it always used to be "Put up your stocking, but don't you dare wake up till the morning".

This particular Christmas the kids woke up and I wasn't in that room then, we were spread out, and my Mother said "Whatever are those kids doing?" My Father said "Get back to sleep! what are you doing up there?" He jumped out of the bed, he was so annoyed, and he ran up the stairs, and he opened the door, and all the kids were on the bed sitting up with the presents in their laps, and as he ran in, they'd eaten all the nuts, and the shells were all on the floor and he had nothing on his feet. And I can tell you the air went blue!

We used to make Christmas cards and stick things on them, for our parents; but they weren't so popular then, I don't remember them being so important. You never thought of sending cards to relatives then.

I got a Hornby train set, only a small one, you must have a Hornby train set! An oval track, one engine, two carriages and a guards van, nothing very elaborate. Schoolboys Own Annual, or Champion Annual, which I think was better.

Then there was Grannie's parcel, we use to anxiously watch out for the postman, my Grannie lived down in the country and sent us this big parcel. For me it always contained a new dress; she used to make me a new party dress at Christmas.

Presented used to be books, clothes, embroidery sets, manicure sets — I always got a bottle of cheap perfume, "Johnny Bull" I think it was called, very highly powered, you know, from my older brother — I think he he was trying to acknowledge that I was a girl amongst all the boys.
Talking of Christmas presents, boys always had 'Meccano', or 'Cliptico' for younger children, which clipped together. 'Meccano' ran from something about £1 up to as much as £10 for a really big outfit — you could build a Forth Bridge from one of those. The other things we got were Happy Family cards, not playing cards. Also a little ball-bearing type of thing, usually a little round container with a glass front to it, and there would be something like a Maze inside. You had to get the little silver ball to run from one side to the other. Those I think are still going today, made in plastic, but much more complicated. With my Meccano I made a steam driven crane. I had a Warman steam engine, this was operated with a little methylated spirit lamp which was underneath the boiler. You sat there and waited and eventually it got hot enough and started to turn the wheel, which in turn was coupled to the crane with a hand. The trouble was the weight I tried to lift with the crane was sufficient to overturn the crane, then the meths ran out and caught fire — I wasn't very popular. I did have soldiers which I think is more or less as today, where they have their 'action' men, which are a lot more expensive. All the parts for Meccano were sold separately. The shops that dealt with this, used to have a glass case with all the various pieces, and various wheels, rubber tyred wheels and so on in it. If you got the yen to do something, you probably spent all your pocket money for about 3 months to achieve this.

**Meccano.** The new coloured models in stock. Sets from 3/6 upwards. Full range of all spare parts.

We shopped at Woolworths. Everything for 6 pence. Do you remember the Phulmana cards? They were little scented cards with some exotic picture on. They had a very musky smell. They only cost a copper or two. We only bought very small presents because we didn't have a lot of money. My brother liked photography and I used to buy him a packet of those adhesive corners. And pipe cleaners for Dad. My eldest brother gave my Mother a packet of sait, bless his heart. I suppose he thought it would be useful.

Presents were not so expensive as those of to-day. My father sometimes made toys. I recall for my brothers he made large wooden engines, a horse on wheels, both large enough and strong enough for them to sit in and ride. He was quite ingenious. He made me a beautiful doll's house with a "Tudor type" frontage. He achieved this by covering the surface with glue, then shaking sawdust over, painted white and inserting mock beams, and I remember for the ash-can to go with the stove he used a small oxo tin, cutting the lid in half and fixing it to the bottom, and painting it black. This not only was cheaper, but the toys were extremely strong.

Drums and trumpets were other gifts (noisy, but somehow no one minded) and of course the soldiers, cowboy and Indian models, and a fort.

There was always the parcel from my grandmother, usually books for the boys, but in latter years I invariably got a work-box, really lovely wooden polished boxes with a tray for cottons, needles, silks, etc., which lifted out, leaving room underneath for any work on hand. When I was younger there were dolls, and, she always sent us clothes, usually warm underclothes for my mother.

Another present I remember, round about 1931, was an embroidery set from my brother, this was a set of rubber stamps with various designs, such as birds and baskets of flowers, the set included silks and a stamp pad. The idea was that one could make up one's own design. This gave me hours of leisure. I still have one of the stamps!

From about the age of nine or ten I used to run messages for our next door neighbour for which she gave me the odd penny or two pence, so I used to save up and buy presents for the family (from Woolworths of course . . . one could get a small gramophone record for 6d)

We had apples, oranges, a few nuts, some cheap sweets, marbles all little tiny things that only cost hardly anything. They put in as many as they could to make it look a lot. And you always had a sugar mouse — all cheap things. And you had a new coin — a half penny — when you got any money like that you hid it. There was quite a crowd of us, and if you had any money lying around, you picked it up quick, or your sisters and brothers would 'borrow' it. You put it down your pocket or tied it in the corner of your handkerchief. Everything else you shared out round, you all got the same.
"My Christmases were not quite so good because we were in business. My Father and brothers had the horse and the cart to deliver the parcels then. They used to hire that horse and cart to deliver. We didn’t have our Christmas till later in the evening so we could all be together. But I still had a stocking filled with some things . . . some nuts in the toe and there was chocolate and any little toys that were going. I had a lovely toy doll and pram one year . . . I wasn’t very motherly at that time I used to let the other children play with it”.

We didn’t have stockings. We used to have parcels on the end of our bed. It was terrible because you would wake up and feel, but you weren’t allowed to put any lights on yet. As we got older my Mother thought it was all a bit much, so we had 2 or 3 presents upstairs and the rest put in various points around the room, and we weren’t allowed to open them till we had our breakfast.

My favourite toy was a 2/6 1/2d shop, with two bottles full of sweets, and scales, and then when they were gone my Mother used to fill them with rice and raisins.

My Grandmother called me. “Come here I’ve got something for you,” and I went up. It was a great toy doll like that but it was all undressed; it had a straw body and a wax face, and all the rest was sawdust, filled with sawdust and all with straw. I went back home and showed my Mother, we were only about 6 doors away. She gave me a shawl to wrap round it and I sat down in front of the fire and ‘sat it up’ and put it to sleep, singing to it in a way. Then I looked and I screamed, ‘Mummy, quick come ’ere,” she said “What,” and I said “Look at my dolly” . . . and it had all melted, all melted all on the shawl and everything . . . It was a big one ‘cos my Mother was going to dress it, see for Christmas.

I can’t remember presents . . . didn’t have the money to buy them. Well, a friend of where Bet worked — she worked in a factory — and he made — do you remember the wooden Indian he made — they got the wood from somewhere and they made this big Indian man. It was as big as this table — to give to David for Xmas. Bob brought him home — he had a fort made in the army and he brought it all the way home from — I think he was up in Newcastle, and then he didn’t play with it. They’re the things that sticks out in my mind . . .

I remember Dad saving up to get us a gramophone, but he was saving up cigarette coupons, Ardath cigarettes. He nearly smoked himself to death trying to get enough coupons, as he’d promised us a gramophone, you know, a windup one. He was really smoking till he dropped. We got it!

I remember one year, I thought I wasn’t getting many presents and I was feeling very upset about it. My Father had been very busy building a rabbit hutch outside and I didn’t take much notice of this. And I saw this very small pile of presents and I began to feel terribly sorry for myself. Then came this colossal doll’s house which he’d made. It transpired that this was what he’d been building, I hadn’t a clue that that was going on. It was so big that when we moved we had to get it out through a window.

Do you remember the large decorated tins of biscuits? If you put 2 or 3 together you got a model fort.

We used to wear a white blouse with a sailor collar and a pair of short trousers, well actually they were long only as you got taller they got shorter. That was our best Sunday suit — we never wore that any other time, only on Sundays and Christmas Day and we used to have straw boaters.

We were a big family, there was eight of us children. Christmas Day was a day when your parents said everybody had to be there. You could do what you liked after Christmas dinner but we all had to have that together. On Boxing Day we carried on just the same but if you wanted to go out on Boxing Day, you could. But Christmas Day was special. I think that was the same with every family.

A cousin brought me a beautiful doll and all the clothes were hand made — night dress and everything — really a beautiful doll, I called her name Molly. We had Christmas pudding with money in it. We always had to save it. I used to like painting, and used to spend Christmas afternoon painting, Christmas cards, holly and so on.

We used to hang black stockings up and find a newly minted penny in there in the morning. We had an apple and an orange, a bit of coal, some chestnuts. We had a new white pinafore every Christmas, and we used to go and show them off to other children in the Street.
I remember I was getting dressed, and I couldn’t find my socks and I looked under the bed and to my surprise I found a pound note under there. Well, I put that in my pocket and went off to school. I called in at Jo-Ann’s, a shop in Blackwall Lane that was a stationer, and they had those torches which had slides on the top. They were 1/3d each, complete with battery, so I bought 3, one for me, one for Frankie and Ronnie my 2 cousins.

I bought ½lb slab of Peter’s chocolate, and gave some to Frankie and Ronnie. Anyway, I was caught in school eating and the teacher confiscated them. I got them back later, though.

What I didn’t know was that Frankie and Ronnie had been home and told my sister-in-law where they got the torches from. So, whilst I’m playing in the street she’s made a visit to my home, and the truth is out. The pound note, it transpired belonged to my brother who’d missed it some weeks earlier and assumed he’d lost it elsewhere. My Father said to my brother Charlie: “Give him a bloody good hiding” and Charlie said: “I’ve got a better punishment for him. He’s had his Christmas presents. He won’t get anything else”. I was ordered to bed straight away. I’d rather have had the good hiding and got it over with.

By the time Christmas came, I really believed I was going to get nothing, but I did. The proverbial stocking was full up with toffees, apples and oranges. I got an ‘O’ shaped meccano set, from my brother Charlie.

Going back to presents, the pencil box that swivelled open at the top, or the Japanese one with the sliding back roller lid, brightly coloured like a shutter. Also “Girls Crystal” was a book, and also a magazine, paint boxes — otherwise it would have been underwear, which was strictly necessary or socks which were always wearing out. They were wrapped in decorated paper, but not as lavish as now.

At the age of five just before I was due to go to school, I was scalded from my toes to my stomach, and I spent a year in bed, which included the Christmas. What I particularly wanted was a Jack-in-a-box, and I got a Jack-in-a-box, only when I opened it, it was like a monkey’s head and it popped up only about 2 inches, and I had wanted one like in the comics, that came up high — and I was most disappointed.
Christmas Fayre

We used to take our meat to the bakers because it was too big for the oven. The food was tastier then. Pig's fry — liver with fat round it. It was lovely. Bottle of whisky 12/6. There were chitlings too — pig's insides! Chicken, H-Bone of Beef 4d a pound. We used to give a shilling a week into a fund and then draw it out. Loan Clubs or Slate Clubs they were called, many a time someone ran off with the money!

Another thing Mother did, I would love to have the recipe, was Ginger Wine. She made it from her own recipe from things she bought from Boots and sugar. It was made in one of those wasstand bowls, it was made by the gallon in that, and that would be our drink and it was beautiful.

I do remember that there was a butcher in the High street — he was more a lass a benefactor to the poor people in that area. We used to pay six pence a week from early June to December and at the end of the year that bought an H-bone of beef — six pence a week worked out at about 14/6 or 15/-). Sometimes we got as a supper a small turkey and an H-bone of beef.

You'll Thoroughly Enjoy YOUR XMAS DINNER— if you buy at the R.A.C.S

CHOICEST FARE—KEENEST PRICES

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Fresh poultry was all you got in those days. Ours were usually drawn by an uncle who came to stay, as Dad didn't relish the job.

Dripping — there used to be lots over and the kids used to make themselves sick on it! We used to have Nestles' Milk on our bread, or a sauce sandwich.

I remember having cake at Christmas and it had plenty of spice and flavour. It was years later that I discovered that it was bread pudding or currant duff. If you got one of them you were dead lucky.

My mother used to make the lemonade wine-elderberry and dandelion... parsnip, rhubarb. She never used to have any herself... not when we were kids. I don't think we used to have a bottle of lemonade.

Every year the parents used to send the kids to get a jug full of ale, and this particular Christmas the youngest went. Well, after a while he came back and said "I'm sorry, Ma, I've broken the jug", but instead of the jug, all he had in his hand was the handle.

Our best days was Christmas Day I think; we had the left-overs on Boxing Day — the joint and the vegetables and all that, bubble and squeak and pickles — course my father made his own pickles so we were lucky then.

Sometimes you'd ask your neighbours in to come and have a drink at Christmas, if you were lucky, mostly beer. You did used to hear of people getting drunk Christmas Day — it was good stuff then, beer was beer — it was good and strong. The children used to get one of those big hard-looking biscuits — arrowroot biscuits, they'd give you, that with a glass of lemonade and say, "We won't be a moment, we're just going out for a drink."

For a half a crown we used to be able to get a big quart bottle of Tarragona port, and then they used to buy a small barrel of beer and you used to have a lovely party with that.