



**So this is Christmas...Your guide to the festive season, 2006 style;Focus
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Behold, it's that time of year when there came wise men from the East. Well, they were hoping to come but apparently all their flights have been cancelled because of the fog. They've just been on the mobile and it's chaos at the airport.

"Still, look on the bright side," they told the BBC's reporter. "With all this gold, frankincense and myrrh we can make a fortune on eBay."

There is no doubt about it: Christmas has changed unrecognisably from its humble origins. It's complicated, fraught and, above all, a challenge.

Here are just some of the pitfalls you need to watch out for to make sure that Christmas 2006 goes with a swing. (Not that you wanted a swing: you were probably hoping for a bicycle.)

THE DRINKING

It's not just Rudolph the reindeer who'll have a shiny red nose this Christmas.

According to Mintel, the research company, the average reveller will knock back 137 units of alcohol over the 12 days of the festive season -the equivalent of 68 pints of beer or 15 bottles of wine.

That's just more than six times the safe level for men and almost 10 times the limit for women, and about half the amount that the average Church of England bishop can tuck away after evensong.

The problem of Christmas drinking is now so bad that Cardiff Cathedral has been forced to hold its midnight mass at 9pm. In previous years members of the congregation were so drunk by midnight that they thought "bring me flesh and bring me wine" from Good King Wenceslas was the call for last orders.

Police say the profile of the average drunkard moves distinctly upmarket in the weeks before Christmas. "We often find men in crumpled suits sleeping off excess booze on top of piles of bin bags or in skips and women in cocktail dresses crumpled in doorways," says Commander Chris Allison, licensing spokesman for the Association of Chief Police Officers.

In fact, things have got so bad that the Red Cross is setting up M*A*S*H-style field hospitals in town centres. At a centre in Brighton, door staff will be on duty between 10pm and 3am to direct the tottering wounded to an area where they can sober up, throw up or be treated for minor injuries. Youth workers will also be available to provide information on safe sex. There's goodwill for you.

THE EATING

Once we have sobered up for Christmas Day, we will no doubt be feeling peckish.

Just as well. According to the British Dietetic Association, we will work our way through 6,000 calories on Christmas Day alone -three times the recommended amount. More brandy butter,

anybody?

Or another helping of turkey? We now devour 10m turkeys each Christmas, although once we used to favour bustard, goose and cockerel (peacock and swan for smart folk). The man to blame for turkey is William Strickland, who introduced the bird to the British Isles in 1526. He had half a dozen to shift after picking them up at a good price from traders in America.

As you shovel it all down, you might reflect that the death rate at this time of year is 30% higher than it is in summer. Your good health!

THE PARTIES

As if Christmas parties didn't offer enough embarrassing pitfalls, here's another: your drunken antics can now be caught on camera and posted on the internet. The number of such videos has tripled this year to 150,000, according to ViralVideoChart.com, the web company.

One of the most popular videos shows a drunken woman ranting to the camera about her boss, only to discover he is standing behind her. In another, a drunken man vomits into his pint glass and then drinks it again. At one point, he dips his finger into the glass to give the contents a stir.

IT'S WHAT I ALWAYS WANTED

If you wish to be showered with expensive gifts, move to the northeast of England.

People there spend an average of Pounds 54 per present. And steer clear of the stingy southwest, where they spend just Pounds 36.

Those figures come from a survey by Parship, a dating agency which says that we will spend an average of Pounds 617 on presents. Deloitte, the consultancy firm, also did research, but obviously interviewed a more stingy cross-section of society -who will be spending an average of Pounds 378 per person (and that's after an increase of 22% on last year).

Let's not stoop to stereotyping anybody here, but it seems that the careful folk of Yorkshire will spend the least overall -Pounds 330.

If you are racking your brains to find a present for that difficult teenager, don't bother -they want a mobile phone. And if they've already got one, they want a better one. Preferably with a built-in digital television, internet access and a special infrared device for tidying bedrooms.

In a survey, three-quarters of young people between 16 and 24 said that mobile phones make good presents. When questioned further, the other 25% shrugged their shoulders and said, "Yeah, anything, whatever."

THE TREE

Between 7m-8m trees will now be dropping pine needles onto the nation's carpets.

If all these trees grew together, they would cover 10 square miles. There has been a slight tree shortage this year after a fall in imports from Denmark, where production is down after a cut in EU subsidies.

The Christmas tree was not, as popularly believed, brought to this country by Prince Albert: it was introduced to this country in the Georgian period. Queen Charlotte, the German wife of George III, decorated a tree for her family in the 1790s. But Albert did popularise the tradition when the tree at Windsor Castle was photographed for the Illustrated London News in 1848.

Victorian trees were generally displayed on tables in pots, with gifts placed unwrapped underneath. It was not until the larger Norway spruce became popular in the 1880s that trees were placed on the floor.

CARDS

Do your wrists ache after writing scores of Christmas cards? Blame Sir Henry Cole, a civil servant who in 1843 wanted to wriggle out of writing his round of seasonal letters and so asked a friend John Horsley, an artist, to design 1,000 hand-coloured lithographs with the message "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you".

This year the Post Office is expected to deliver about one billion cards.

GOING TO CHURCH

It goes without saying that the pews will be packed at Southwark cathedral this year, where Bishop Tom Butler has become something of a reluctant celebrity for his antics following a party at the Irish embassy. (Asked what he was doing throwing soft toys around in the back of a stranger's Mercedes, he replied, "I'm the bishop of Southwark, it's what I do.") The signs are that other churches will also do good business. Figures just released by the Church of England show a 6% increase in attendance at services last year -the Christmas congregation was 2.6m. Attendance at cathedral services has gone up by nearly one-third since 2000.

That's the good news. The bad news comes from those pesky Methodists. According to a survey in the Methodist Recorder, about 43% of people say they went to church last Christmas -but attendance for the Church of England amounts to just 6%.

Have all these worshippers been paying attention? Possibly not. A BBC survey has discovered that just 44% of children -aged between seven and 11 -know that Christmas celebrates the birth of Christ. The other 56% probably think it marks the birth of a new PlayStation.

SORRY, BUT THERE IS NO ESCAPE

Want to get away from it all? Tough. People have tried and failed before.

A Puritan pamphleteer called Philip Stubbes looked around him in 1583 and was furious to see that Christmas revellers were enjoying themselves. "What dicing and carding, what eating and drinking, what banqueting and feasting is then used," he complained.

By the 1640s Puritans had seized power and moved to ban Christmas, a ban that lasted until the Restoration in 1660. Parliament issued the Directory for the Publick Worship of God, which not only banned all holy days, including Christmas, but ordered that psalms be sung in tune. Even at home.

Members of the English parliament led by example: they spent Christmas Day of 1647 issuing fines to members of the gentry who had supported the king.

Elsewhere the ban was deeply unpopular. Rioters took control of Canterbury, shouted royalist slogans and put holly wreaths on their doors -surely one of the few occasions when putting up Christmas decorations was a revolutionary act.

Merry Christmas.

FAITH IS STAGING A FIGHT-BACK

Amid criticism that Christmas is nothing more than an alcohol-fuelled celebration of shopping,

church leaders have been speaking out about faith and the Christian spirit alive at this time of year

The Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams asked for people around the world to remember Christians in the Middle East. During a pilgrimage to Bethlehem with other English church leaders he said: "This Christmas, pray for the little town of Bethlehem, and spare a thought for those who have been put so much at risk by our short-sightedness and ignorance; and ask what you might do locally to raise the profile of these brave and ancient churches.

He continued: "In this so troubled, complex land ... justice and security is never something which one person claims at the expense of another or one community at the expense of another. We are here to say that security for one is security for all. For one to live under threat, whether of occupation or of terror, is a problem for all, and a pain for all."

The Archbishop of York John Sentamu spoke of how people are returning to the Christian church: "Something is bringing people back into church and I have a great hope it's because people are beginning to look past the commercial messages of Christmas.

"After decades of being bombarded with messages telling us that the way to have a really happy Christmas is to buy lots of things we don't really need, eat lots of things that aren't really that good for us and drink even more, people can see that this doesn't bring happiness of a lasting kind."

The Pope spoke of the need for God to be at the forefront of people's minds. He said that 2006 would be remembered for "the horrors of war near the Holy Land and in general the risk of a clash between cultures and religions".

He said that risk was "hovering dangerously" over the world. A secularised society that based its decisions too much on reason and logic, he said, left no room for faith and is therefore "not capable of entering in a true dialogue with religions".

He continued: "If it remains closed to questions relating to God, this will end up leading to a clash of cultures."

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