



CHRISTMAS IN THE 1940s

HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET

This booklet has been designed to help activity therapists and staff in care homes and folds encourage residents to share memories of Christmas in the past.

It contains extracts from the Northern Ireland War Memorial's Oral History Collection and facts about Christmas during the Second World War. We hope this resource brings festive memories to mind and stimulates enjoyable discussions about Christmas in the past.

P.S. This booklet covers various topics such as Presents, Food and the American GIs who came to Northern Ireland. You will notice that we have suggested times when you could pause reading to encourage discussion, when using this booklet with a small group of people.



CHRISTMAS IN THE 1940s

PRESENTS

“ At Christmas we got a new penny, and oranges in our stockings, and presents made by our father, like the doll’s house. I remember my sister on Christmas morning declaring that Santa must have smoked the Gold Flake tobacco, the same as Dad, as he had used the wrappings for covering the doll’s house furniture.”

Phyllis Kingsmore née Cottam

“ At Christmas my mother used to buy, because we didn't get Christmas presents, there were too many of us, she used to buy what they used to call a selection box and it was big box of chocolates, all different selections and that was Christmas you know. We didn't get much at all at Christmas. Well we used to hang out our Christmas stocking, hang the stockings up and we'd get an apple and an orange or something like that.”

Irene Millar

“ In the country, there were apple trees, pear trees, lots of flax fields and nettles. There was butter, eggs, chickens and a turkey which we were scared of as he chased us, but we ate him one year for Christmas Lunch. We always had a special Christmas, with a surprise stocking, which always held an orange, a chocolate penny, and paints (as my father was an artist) and small gifts. My father once made us a beautiful butterfly which floated up and down, and a doll’s house with all the furniture made out of boxes and paper from the tobacco packets he used to smoke in his pipe. I of course questioned why the furniture had the same covering as father’s pipe tobacco packets. My parents must have given a satisfactory answer to an inquisitive little child. Most of our presents were probably home-made. I once got a new rag doll and my sister Phyllis got a lovely new plastic celluloid doll, but when she sat her dolly down on a stool by the fire it just melted. We were shocked.”

Alice McChesney née Cottam



In 1941, to conserve paper, the Ministry of Supply announced that *'no retailer shall provide any paper for the packing or wrapping of goods excepting food stuffs or articles which the shopkeeper has agreed to deliver'*. This made it difficult to keep Christmas presents a surprise as it became difficult to wrap them!



CHRISTMAS IN THE 1940s

PRESENTS

WHAT DID SANTA GIVE TO CHILDREN IN THE 1940S?

Six years of war brought many changes to Christmas as restrictions and shortages took their toll. Homemade practical Christmas presents were popular:

- **Soap** was a very popular gift when soap was rationed in 1942.
- **Knitted Dolls' Clothes** made from scraps of wool and handmade furniture for a dolls house.
- **Toy Cars** made from household rubbish, such as cotton reels, match boxes, buttons and dusters.
- **Knitted Socks and Underwear**
- **Oranges** (they were very hard to get, and for some children it was the first time they had seen one)
- **Rag Bag Toys and Teddy Bears** made with scraps of fabric.
- **Card Games** such as **Blackout**, **Vacuation** and **Night Raiders**. These games could be played in an air raid shelter.
- **Homemade Tin Can telephones.**
- **Hay Boxes** – gas mask boxes lined with hay to act as a hot lunch box for food.
- **Leather Cases** made for Gas Masks and Identity Cards.
- **Flasks and Sleeping Bags** and even 'gas masks' for dolls.
- **Red Cross/RAF uniforms** for children's dress-up.
- **Homemade Sweets** like **Coconut Ice** and **Cinder Toffee**.
- **Christmas Cards** containing needles, threads and safety pins to allow people to *Make do and Mend*!
- **Stockings** marked with the CC41 utility symbol. Stockings were a popular gift to local women from American GIs based in Northern Ireland
- **Gardening Tools** to encourage people to Dig for Victory!
- **National Saving Certificates and War Bonds** (very patriotic)

CHRISTMAS IN THE 1940s

PRESENTS

“Father and mother couldn’t buy me a proper bicycle, and of course I was getting a bit older and they decided that they would buy one locally. But this bicycle didn’t arrive at Christmas. Father told me that it was flown in and the plane crashed so it would come later. When it did come the pedals were much too large for the bicycle and if you turned too quickly you would go right over the handlebars because the thing caught on the front wheel. One day, just after the war, I was cycling down the lane and the handlebars pulled out and all the ball bearings flew onto the lane and I crashed into the wall. We didn’t have very good equipment during that period.”

James Connolly Stewart

“One of the Christmases whenever we first moved up country, my Christmas present was a box of Ludo, my sister’s was snakes and ladders, but the prime thing we got was a bike which had come from cousin down in Hollywood. It had an ‘aul wrecked seat on it and my father was working in Newry and one of the boys in Newry got him a seat in Dundalk for a bicycle and that was part of our Christmas present, and you got oranges. Working with the Americans, you got two bars of chocolate, we got a bar of chocolate each and that was your Christmas.”

Frank Elliot



In wartime, finding adequate numbers of postal workers to deal with the extra letters and parcels at Christmas time became more of a problem as many permanent staff members were in the armed services. There was also less space available to carry mail on the railways, which were needed for transport of troops and munitions.

TIME TO PAUSE

and chat about Christmas presents in the past

- Did you ever receive a homemade gift?
- What was your favourite toy or game as a child?
- What treats did you find in your Christmas stocking?

CHRISTMAS IN THE 1940s

FOOD

‘ They managed. They kept the stomach, as I say we kept pigs at home, and they kept turkeys at Christmas. When I was at home my mother and father would have reared maybe twenty or thirty turkeys for the Christmas market. But we never got turkey at Christmas... all sold. The fowl man came round and he weighed them and he always talked everyday coming up to Christmas – what price is turkey’s the day? And this went on and on. Could have been half a crown, could have been two shillings and eight pence. You waited on till you got the right price. And then it come near Christmas then you had to get rid of them because they were no good to you. And they were all sold and then we’d have got, only time of the year we’d have got a roast beef or something like that. Christmas. And it was lovely. It was absolutely brilliant you know. Used to go to midnight mass down here at 12 o’clock at night. And you’d have come home and that and you’d have made sandwiches and that, had a bit of a meal. It was absolutely brilliant, so it was. It was a good time of the year. Not like now. Christmas is not Christmas now, cause from July on it’s Christmas. You’re not ready for it. When it comes to Christmas, you’re sick of it.’

Eamonn McGinn

‘ We learnt to milk the goat very young, so we did, and that’s where we got milk from. And from the hens, we would’ve got the eggs, and my mother would’ve said, right, away out and get the eggs. When it was coming up to Christmas, they’d have said, now which one of them hens or roosters (we’d some roosters too), which one of them’s gonna be for Christmas? And we’d have picked them and then my father would have just got it, wrung its neck, handed it to us and we would have plucked it, so that was it so it was.’

Robert (Bertie) Thompson

DID YOU KNOW



Turkey was unaffordable to most and when people couldn’t get turkey, they had ‘murkey’ instead, which was stuffed mutton! The word *murkey* was coined by cockney comedians Elsie and Doris Waters, whose alter egos, Gert and Daisy, were stars of the BBC radio programme *The Kitchen Front*.



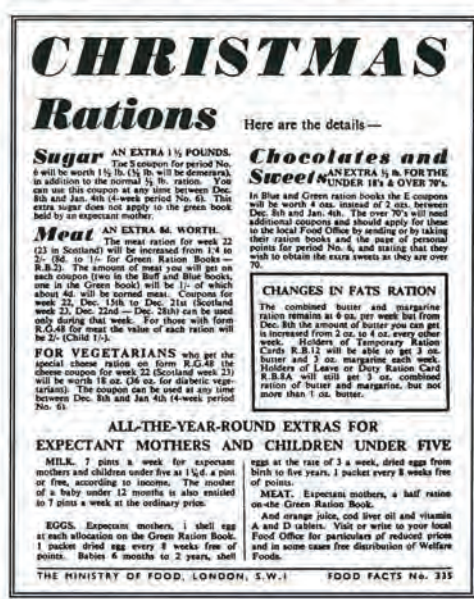
The programme came on every weekday after the 8am news and was full of household tips and suggestions on how to make food go further.

CHRISTMAS IN THE 1940s

FOOD

“You would have got your stocking at Christmas and your orange and apple if you were lucky, if mum had of been able to get any, a new penny to throw in it and a couple of wee sweets and things. But you didn’t have anything like what we have now... I just remember going and we would have had this lovely soup and I can remember getting turkey and it was a great thing because you didn’t have anything like that all year round and then we would have had maybe Christmas pudding. Granny would have made a pudding.”

Anonymous



Tea, dried fruit, and sugar rations were increased in the month before Christmas to help families create a festive meal. Most of the Christmas pudding ingredients were in short supply, so carrots and potatoes were sometimes added to the pudding recipe, mainly for moisture, but also to add sweetness and texture.

TIME TO PAUSE
and chat about
Wartime Christmas food

- Did you grow up on a farm and have you ever plucked a turkey?
- What is your favourite food at Christmas?
- Do you have fond memories of eating or cooking with Dried Eggs?

CHRISTMAS IN THE 1940s

CHRISTMAS WITH THE AMERICANS

‘I must tell you one incident that happened, Bill must have sent these American Soldiers up, about four or five of them arrived at our door and they said ‘We just wanted to come to a house that had an open fire, so we could just sit down there and open our parcels that we got from home at Christmas’. So we said ‘Okay!’ and they all came in. Unfortunately when we started to make them tea we quickly found out we hadn’t got enough cups. My sister had had a smashing time and we had to go next door to borrow cups. So, when we started to make the tea, they said ‘No! We don’t have tea’ and they had brought coffee with them, so they went to the kitchen and made themselves coffee. They just sat round the fire and we put carols on the gramophone and just had an ordinary family Christmas thing and they opened their parcels. Surprise surprise they had a lipstick for my sister and one for me, I’ll never forget it, it was Dorothy Gray and I’d never heard of Dorothy Gray before.’

Sadie Lineker



The BBC broadcast a special Christmas Day radio programme. From 1939 onwards this featured a Christmas speech by King George VI and became so popular with listeners that it became an annual event.

‘The Americans didn’t get any Christmas leave that we were aware of. Prior to Christmas we’d be expecting to hear the King speaking in his Christmas message on Christmas day. I don’t know how the chaps got hold of the idea, but they said ‘Oh yes, Roosevelt will be giving a Christmas message’ and they thought of course that we could pick it up in Ireland on the radio. Now there was absolutely no possibility of doing that in those days, these were the old days with the old radios you know, wet and dry batteries and you were lucky if you got the local broadcasting stations you know, but anyhow. Come Christmas Day the two boys arrived with a whole load of friends and our living room was packed with soldiers, American soldiers and they wanted to hear this radio speech and they listened to the King and of course they were greatly disappointed when we finally got through to them to tell them that they couldn’t, they wouldn’t hear Roosevelt speaking you know.’

Harry Williamson



Many GIs who were away from home on Christmas welcomed the chance to spend the day with British families. The Americans often brought lavish gifts of food to their hosts, which were gratefully received.

CHRISTMAS IN THE 1940s

CHRISTMAS WITH THE AMERICANS

“ I remember the Americans gave great parties, they had great parties and this was for the school children and we all would go along to these parties and this was a sort of good PR exercise I suppose for them because it made the parents more willing to be friendly with them and so on because the children loved it and so on. We did have some lovely parties I must say. I suppose we played games and were running about but I really don't remember that. They had a couple a year. When they first came, we had one and then probably had one at Christmas. I know we had a Christmas one and that was good because we got little gifts and things, mostly candy and that type of thing. They called them candy and balloons. I can't remember whether there were balloons or not. But we got to know some of the soldiers and then some of them started to come and visit and they brought my mother gifts like ham and eggs extra.”

Ida Thompson



Despite the shortage of paper, paper chains were a common Christmas decoration as very few decorations were available to buy in the shops. These were made from scraps of old newspaper which could be painted colourfully.

“ It was Christmas Eve 1942, and I was cycling home from Ballymena in the evening. Transport out of Portglenone was very limited in those days, we had no cars and the last bus from Ballymena was at 6.30pm. So if you wanted to go to the cinema in Ballymena a bicycle was the answer. There is a steep descent on the road from Ballymena, down into the Bann Valley and I loved coming down that at speed as I was almost home. But it was Christmas Eve and it was dark and I remember that in the war a bicycle also had to have a partial blackout on its light. Not very good illumination... The American I met was also on a bicycle but it had no lights on it. He was on guard duty but as it was Christmas Eve he had gone into the town to see a girlfriend. He had deserted his post temporarily and was returning unsteadily on her bicycle. He was wearing his full battle gear, he had his steel helmet and so forth and his gun and everything on. We didn't see each other and I hit him and took his front wheel off, right through and we were both sitting in the middle of the road. He was howling and his nose was bleeding and I could feel the blood dripping off my forehead. And incredible that just at that moment a car came round the corner, saw us in the middle of the road and stopped. It was driven by a family friend who packed me in the car and straight back into Portglenone where we passed the doctor on his way out on a call. Somehow we stopped him and he had me sewn up in half an hour. Ten stitches I think. The American came into see me the next day, he was so apologetic and sorry about it all, but you know these people had been in action in Italy, they'd had a tough time.”

Noel Mitchell

CHRISTMAS IN THE 1940s

CHRISTMAS WITH THE AMERICANS

TIME TO PAUSE

and chat about
spending Christmas
with the Americans

- Did you ever meet any American GIs or attend any of their parties?
- Was listening to the King's Speech an important part of your Christmas Day?
- Do you remember the Blackout?



Do you have memories of the Second World War? Maybe you would like to contribute to our Oral History Project. If you or someone you know would like to share their story, either through a written account or a telephone interview, then please get in touch with –

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The War and Me Oral History Project Coordinator

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