



The Hundred Parishes

An introductory article about CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

As Christmas approaches, we anticipate seasonal celebrations to brighten the shortest days of the year. The ancient tradition of decking our houses with garlands of fresh green holly branches reminds us of the continuity of life, bringing us cheer when the days are short. To bring the outdoors inside provides us with a timely reminder that we rely on this vital greenness to revive our sprits when the days are short and gloomy.

On reaching the age of 20, female holly trees bear red berries on branches covered with prickly shiny green leaves which can be cut to make decorative wreaths. Such wreaths featured in midwinter Celtic and Roman celebrations as symbols of good fortune, a tradition that continues today, largely thanks to the intervention of a local man, William Winstanley (1628 – 1698).



During the Commonwealth, which lasted from 1649 to 1660, the Puritans under Oliver Cromwell proclaimed that it was illegal to celebrate Christmas, banning frivolities and feasting on mince pies. William Winstanley, who lived in Quendon, believed in celebrating Christmas as a time for sharing joy, fun and good fortune with others. After restoration of the monarchy in 1660, using his influence as a writer, Winstanley encouraged a return to the seasonal merrymaking which we still enjoy today. Our website <http://www.hundredparishes.org.uk/> has more information about Winstanley under the People section.

Holly trees were frequently planted near houses to ward off a lightning strike; interestingly, scientific research has revealed its spiky leaves can act as miniature lightning conductors! Holly also grows in hedges or as a shrub in woods where its berries provide nourishment for blackbirds, thrushes and wood mice. Its dense branches provide secure nesting sites. Deer and rabbits will eat its nutritious leaves.

Today, many homeowners plant variegated forms of holly to provide interest in their gardens and they can select a mixture of foliage to make seasonal decorations.

Yew – shown on the right - is another evergreen with red-coloured fruits (loved by birds and squirrels), but as its leaves are poisonous it is less suitable for indoor decorations.



Mistletoe has also become a symbol for the Christmas festive season.



Large clusters of pale green mistletoe are revealed in November as the leaves fall from the branches of apple, hawthorn, lime and poplar trees. Mistletoe is a semi-parasitic plant, taking water and some nourishment from the host tree.

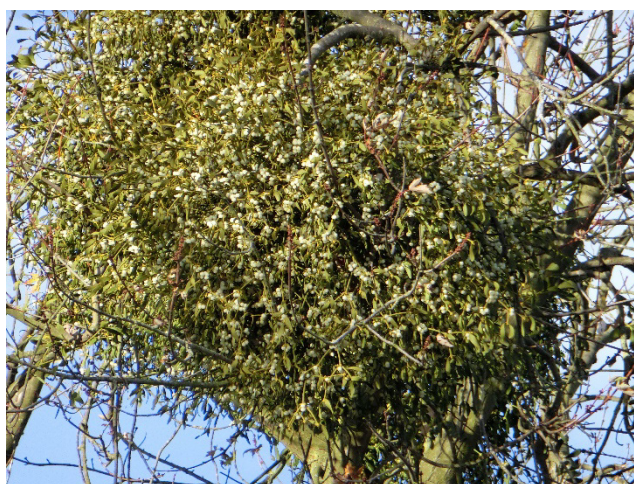
Clumps producing the sticky white berries are often guarded by Mistle Thrushes as the berries attract other species eager to eat them. The seeds are spread from tree to tree as the birds try to remove the sticky flesh from their beaks and wipe them on a suitable branch.

Germination is slow, but once established the clumps grow larger year on year and in some cases seem to overwhelm the host tree.

As a plant which is sensitive to the chill of winter, mistletoe has quickly become established in the eastern regions of England as our winters are tending to become warmer. Festoons of mistletoe on suitable trees can be seen in parts of our local area including Hatfield Forest, Much Hadham, Saffron Walden, Quendon, Newport and other villages. The bunches seem to get bigger each year.

There are many seasonal traditions associated with this intriguing plant. It was once thought to have magical powers, especially if found growing on Oaks. Within many European cultures its evergreen boughs were used to symbolise eternal life.

Mistletoe and holly were used to decorate houses during the time of the winter solstice to remind people that the circle of life would continue. Mistletoe came to symbolise good luck and love in life.



This article, last updated 18 September 2023, was downloaded from www.hundredparishes.org.uk. Copyright rests with The Hundred Parishes Society. The article may be copied and passed on freely but may not be reproduced for commercial purposes.

Any comments or suggestions for improvement may be submitted by using the Feedback form on the website. The website has many short articles on various aspects of The Hundred Parishes, as well as introductions to individual parishes and to a number of local celebrities, and an extensive What's On section. More than a hundred walk route descriptions can be freely downloaded, with each of the hundred parishes featuring in at least one walk.