

THE FIRST SANTA CLAUS



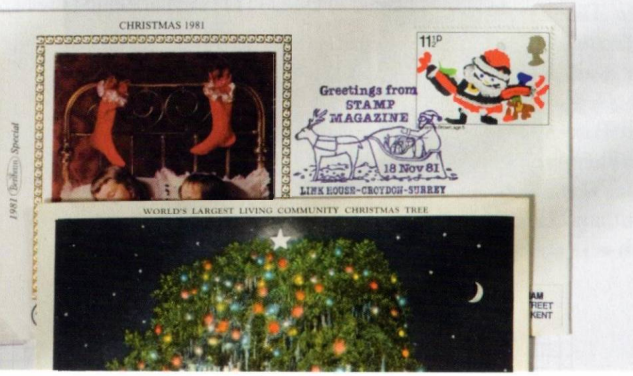
SANTA CLAUS FIRST APPEARED ILLUSTRATED, AS A "DUBBY AND PLUMP, RIGHT JOLLY OLD ELF", IN 1863 IN HARPER'S WEEKLY BY A PORTRAIT ARTIST, A 23 YEAR OLD GERMAN IMMIGRANT NAMED THOMAS MAST.



6.3. The Christmas Tree

The Christmas Tree would be collected from the countryside by the Victorian family amid much jollity and laughter. The children would enjoy bringing the tree home and there would be great excitement when they helped to decorate it with baubles and tinsel, candles and streamers, sweetmeats, toys and small gifts.

Replies from GREAT BRITAIN and AUSTRALIA
The British Postal Authorities commenced answering letters sent to Santa by children, in 1963. In 1964 a folding card was included, bearing a message written inside.



Christmas Dorothy Martin looks at the first Christmas issue of 1966, and at some of the earliest festive traditions

CHRISTMAS 2006 marks the 40th anniversary of the first Christmas stamps to be issued by Great Britain. In spite of the first request for a special Christmas stamp having been received by the Post Office in 1957, and many more during the following years due to numerous other countries producing seasonal stamps, no action was taken until Tony Benn, the Postmaster General at that time, realised that thousands of children wrote to Santa Claus every year, and as a result introduced a special 'Reply Cover' with an illustrated meter slogan reading 'Reindeerland Christmas 1963'. Unfortunately I have never been fortunate enough to find one of these covers, although I do have a 1964 cover in my collection. This slogan cancellation lasted many years, with a few slight changes in the meantime such as an added bar slug in 1967, and later without the bar slug and without buffer bars.

In 1986 an illustrated cover appeared for the first time, part of the design depicting Santa in his sleigh drawn by reindeer. The Americans popularised the idea of Santa's sleighs being drawn by eight reindeer through the poem *A Night Before Christmas*, written by Clement Moore in 1822; their names were Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner and Blitzen. Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer became a later addition to the team after a song of that name was published in 1939. Reindeer are exceptional in that both male and female have antlers. They are very strong and their hooves make them ideal for pulling sleighs bearing Santa and his sacks full of toys over the snowy roof-tops and icy land.

Christmas stamps The Postmaster General had decided that a design competition should be held amongst school children for the two stamps to be issued for Christmas 1966. Around 5000 entries were submitted and judged by eight well-known stamp designers. The winning designs were King Wenceslas by Tasveer Shemza, and Snowman by James Berry (both shown opposite, with Edward

Short, the new PMG). Ann Belshaw's Santa Claus design was used for the first day cover. The 2006 stamps also depict Santa Claus and a snowman, as well as a reindeer and a Christmas tree.

For some, Christmas is not the same without snow. They love to watch snowflakes falling from the sky, forming a fairy-like picture of their familiar surroundings. Youngsters cannot get outside quickly enough to snowball each other and make a snowman, with a carrot for its nose and buttons for the eyes, and an old scarf around its neck.

Christmas trees There are two schools of thought on the origins of the Christmas tree, the earliest dating from the 8th century when St Boniface, an English missionary in Germany, is said to have chopped down a sacred oak tree beneath which human sacrifices had been offered, and where a young fir tree miraculously appeared in its place. The Saint named the fir tree as an emblem of the new faith he had brought to Germany. Others believe that when Martin Luther was walking home one beautiful clear starry night in the 16th century, the sky so thrilled him that he uprooted a fir tree and fixed lighted candles on its branches to symbolise the starry heavens, from which Christ came to save the peoples of the world. The decorated Christmas tree was certainly an early German tradition originating through the Paradise Tree of their mystery plays c1776, in which they hung apples and lighted candles on a fir tree to represent the fruit and brightness of the Garden of Eden.

The custom spread to Scandinavian countries and to America, before eventually reaching England around 1829. There is no doubt that Prince Albert popularised the decorated Tree which was usually topped with a fairy, or a star to represent the Star of Bethlehem. In Victorian times fir trees were collected from the woods and carried home by children and their parents, who had great fun making paper chains to hang on them, and festooning them with tinsel and small gifts. ►

Origins of Santa Claus It is believed by some that Odin, chief god of the Vikings, could be the basis for the cheery, bearded generous Father Christmas; alternatively St Nicholas is more popular as the origin of Santa Claus. Nicholas was born in the 4th century in Asia Minor, to wealthy and devoutly religious parents. He became a priest and was made a Bishop when only 30 years old. He gave away all his riches and was renowned for his goodness and generosity. According to legend, he threw three purses of gold through the door of a poor nobleman who could not afford dowries for his beautiful daughters; on another occasion he dropped gold coins down a poor man's chimney, and they fell into a stocking lying on the fireside to dry. This is thought to be the origin of children hanging up their stockings to receive presents from Santa. The Bishop of Myra was eventually to become a Saint.

The mythology of Santa Claus can be traced through the Dutch immigrants who migrated to America. Holland's Sinterklaas made the transition from saintly bishop to the North American Santa Claus. In 1809, Washington Irving wrote of Santa as a tubby, jovial little fellow who flew through the air in a sleigh driven by reindeer. It took the well-known portrait drawn by Thomas Mast, a German immigrant in America, for him to become the jolly red-faced character wearing a long white beard and red-hooded cloak we all know and love today. Santa has certainly kept up-to-date with modern ideas and developments over the years, eg transport, from trains to cars, from aeroplanes to spaceships, instead of traditional sleighs drawn by reindeer. Instead of letters sent up a chimney, to postal contact or telephone, and more recently on the internet.

In modern times, the commercial Santa Claus can be found in most department stores, in a magnificently decorated grotto, much to the delight of youngsters. He also has many homes in various countries such as Iceland, Greenland and Finland, where some offer tourist attractions and facilities including sleigh rides drawn by reindeer. May he live on for ever and ever and continue to bring joy and pleasure to children all over the world ●

The first Christmas FDCs

FORTY YEARS AGO the British Post Office issued its first Christmas stamps. Public pressure had been growing for such stamps, but it was not until Anthony Wedgwood-Benn became PMG that anything materialised. Benn first thought that such stamps might carry a surcharge for charity, but it seems such notions were quickly dismissed. However, he was keen that the designs should be done by children, the winners of a competition staged through schools. He gathered leading representatives from the world of education for guidance, hoping that the stamps would be issued for 1966. The advice he received was that time prohibited a competition until 1967 at the earliest – not soon enough for Benn, who decided that the PO would hold its own competition, which attracted around 5000 entries. The issued stamps did not find universal favour; Ann Belshaw's third-place design was used for the Post Office's first day envelope.

At this time first day cover collecting was very popular, encouraged by the Post Office with 'first day of issue' cancellations and envelopes. By 1966 demand was considerable, particularly witnessed with the Battle of Hastings issue. The little Welsh village of Bethlehem was the obvious location to post covers of the new Christmas stamps, and a 'first day of issue' handstamp was provided, and has been for the day of issue of every Christmas set since, even though there is no longer a full-time post office at Bethlehem. It was quite a shock for the postmistress, accustomed to serving the occasional customer through a stable-type door. On the day of issue, 1 December, extra staff were brought in, and a room in a nearby pub was commandeered to provide space to cancel mountains of covers. Most collectors were content with the 'first day' handstamp, but the more resourceful would have used a special service so that the covers received the normal operational handstamp.

Over the years covers cancelled by operational handstamps from places with a clearly associated name such as Bethlehem, Nasareth or St Nicholas, Guildford, have commanded a premium price. Sadly, today such opportunities are virtually nil, as these small sub-offices are now no more.