

Christmas in England began in AD 596, when St Augustine landed on her shores with monks who wanted to bring Christianity to the Anglo Saxons.

The gift giver is called Father Christmas. He wears a long red or green robe, and leaves presents in stockings on Christmas Eve. The day after Christmas is called Boxing Day because boys used to go round collecting money in clay boxes. When the boxes were full, they broke them open.

The only thing people ate on the day before the Christmas feast was frumenty, a kind of porridge made from corn. Later, eggs, fruit, spice, meat and dried plums were added. The whole mixture was wrapped in a cloth and boiled. This is how plum pudding began.

In the Czech Republic, celebrations for Christmas begin with the visit of St. Nicholas on Dec. 6 and end with the visit of the Three Kings. St. Nicholas is called Svaty Mikalas and is believed to climb to earth down from heaven on a golden rope along with his companions: an angel and a whip-carrying devil.

A girl can tell her future, according to tradition, by putting a cherry twig in water on Dec. 4. If the twig blossoms before Christmas Eve, the girl will marry sometime during the year.

The famous King Wenceslas of the Christmas Carol was a real King in this country. His goodness and his beliefs in Christianity infuriated his mother, and his brother murdered him on the church steps. Before he died he asked for God's mercy for his brother's evil act. He became the patron saint of Czech Republic.

Christmas is a quiet and peaceful religious time here. They fast for one day, and have baked carp for Christmas dinner. St. Nicholas visits, and brings gifts.

At midnight, most families go to Holy Mass. Celebrations go on for three days. Czechs eat a soup made of cod roe and tempt each other with tales of a mythical golden pig.

Christmas preparations in Germany often begin on the eve of Dec. 6. People often set aside special evenings for baking spiced cakes and cookies, and making gifts and decorations. Little dolls of fruit are traditional Christmas toys.

Children leave letters on their windowsills for Christkind, a winged figure dressed in white robes and a golden crown. Sometimes the letters are decorated with glue and sprinkled with sugar to make them sparkle.

Germans make beautiful gingerbread houses and cookies. The pastry, Christbaumgeback, is a white dough that can be molded into shapes and baked for tree decorations.

In parts of Germany, people believe that the Christ Child sends a messenger in Christmas Eve. He appears as an angel in a white robe and crown, bearing gifts. The angel is called Christkind. There is also a Christmas Eve figure called Weihnachtsmann or Christmas Man, he looks like Santa Claus and also brings gifts.

Some homes in Germany have several Christmas trees. They hang up advent wreaths of holly with four red candles in the center. They light one candle each Sunday and the last on Christmas Eve. Children count the days until Christmas using an Advent calendar. They open one window each day and find a Christmas picture inside.

Christmas in Ireland lasts from Christmas Eve to the feast of the Epiphany on Jan. 6. Christmas is more religious than a time of fun. Lighted candles are placed in windows on Christmas Eve, as a guide that Joseph and Mary might be looking for shelter. The candles are usually red in color, and decorated with sprigs of holly.

Irish women bake a seed cake for each person, plus three puddings, one for each day of the

Epiphany such as Christmas, New Year's Day and the Twelfth Night. After the Christmas evening meal, bread and milk are left out and the door unlatched as a symbol of hospitality.

St. Stephen's Day, the day after Christmas, is almost as important, with football matches and meetings going on. The Wren Boys Procession is a big event. Boys go door to door with a fake wren on a stick, singing, with instruments, asking for money 'for the starving wren', that is, for their own pockets. Children often put out Christmas sacks instead of stockings.

It is tradition to leave mince pies and a bottle of Guinness out as a snack for Santa.