

Special feature

The festive season is upon us again, bringing with it the many customs and traditions that characterise this time of year, one of which is of course the Christmas tree.

Christmas would simply not be complete without the tradition of bringing evergreens into our homes and decorating them; in Britain alone, around seven million Christmas trees are sold each year. For Christians, the evergreen Christmas tree is a powerful emblem of their faith, as it represents everlasting life through Christ. However, probing into the origins of this tradition reveals a mixture of fact and legend dating back to long before the dawn of the Christian era.

It may have been Martin Luther in the 16th century who was the first person to actually decorate an evergreen tree for Christmas. It is said that Luther was walking through the forest one night before Christmas, when he noticed the stars shining through the branches of the trees. He was so inspired by this sight that he cut down a small fir tree to take home to his children, and decorated it with small candles. Whether this tale is true or not, the first Christmas tree as we know it today was nevertheless documented to be in Germany, in 1521, and from the mid-seventeenth century onwards, the tradition of the Christmas tree steadily grew in popularity. Here in Britain, the Christmas tree was first introduced in 1841 when Prince Albert set up a tree in Windsor Castle, and the tradition soon became highly fashion-



The Christmas Tree

able in British society.

However, the practice of bringing evergreens into the home for a winter festival was not exclusively a Christian idea, and in fact has its origins in pagan tradition, where evergreens have symbolised rebirth since ancient times.

In particular, pre-Christians used to bring evergreens into the home at this time of year, the winter solstice, to overcome the forces of nature and evil spirits, so that the warmth and light would return once more. In ancient Rome too, it was traditional to deck homes with greenery during

the kalends of January.

Legend has it that the tradition of the evergreen tree passed from pagan tradition to Christian tradition in the 8th century due to Saint Boniface who, when walking through the forest, came upon a group of pagans worshipping an oak tree and making preparations to sacrifice a child as part of the ritual.

In order to prevent this, Boniface is claimed to have cut down the oak tree, and miraculously a fir tree is said to have sprung up in its place.

Awe-struck by this apparent demonstration of God's judgement, the pagans instantly converted to Christianity, and they resolved to appropriate the fir tree, that was already an important symbol in pagan tradition, as a Christian symbol of everlasting life.

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