



BRITISH HOLIDAYS

CHRISTMAS

Of course the most known of all British holidays is Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. The word "Christmas" is derived from the words "Christ's Mass", but although Christmas is undoubtedly a Christian celebration, it is also true to say that it is an unusual combination of pagan and Christian festivities.

A Christmas tree stands in everybody's living room at Christmas, shining its good cheer around the room. Sitting on the very top of the tree is a silver star surrounded by tiny lights. All the branches are hung with silver bells, tinsel and sparkling lights. Around the

base of the tree lie the gifts wrapped up in bright colourful paper.

Every Christmas British people are sent a huge fir tree from Norway which stands in Trafalgar Square, in the centre of London, shining down on all the people who gather on Christmas Eve.

But why a fir tree? In pre-Christian times evergreens, trees that remain green throughout the year, and not only a fir tree, were worshiped in Northern Europe as symbols of eternal life. Mistletoe, hung up as a Christmas decoration, is a symbol of love and reconciliation.

MISTLETOE

Mistletoe was considered sacred by the people of ancient Britain.

The Druid priests used it in their sacrifices to the gods. It was believed to have magical properties.

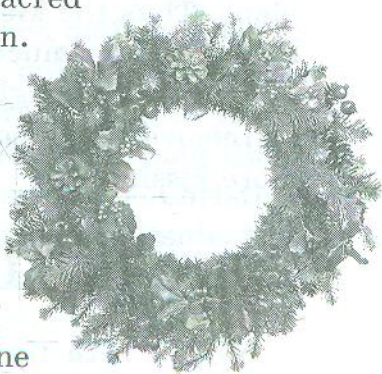
People who met under a tree bearing mistletoe were forbidden to fight, even if they were enemies, and anyone

who entered a home decorated with

mistletoe was entitled to shelter and protection.

Mistletoe may even have been part of Druidic wedding ceremonies. The Celtic people believed it had miraculous healing powers. In fact the name for mistletoe in the Celtic languages is all heal.

Mistletoe could cure diseases, render poisons



harmless, make humans and animals fertile, protect the house from ghosts and bring good luck.

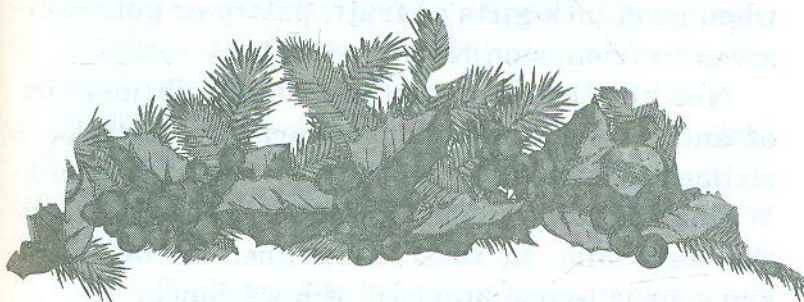
Today you can kiss anybody who is standing under mistletoe. The mistletoe's kissing tradition, according to one account, comes from the Norse myths. Friga, one of the gods, gave her son, Balda, a charm of mistletoe to protect him from the elements, but because mistletoe grows neither from the water or the earth, nor from fire or air, it grows on trees, it held the power to harm Balda. One of the other god's arrows made of mistletoe struck Balda down, and his mother cried tears of white berries. She brought her son back to life, and vowed to kiss anyone who rested beneath the plant. Thus the kissing tradition began. There is a limit to how much you can kiss under one sprig of mistletoe though. For each kiss a berry must be removed and once all the berries are gone - no more kissing!

THE HOLLY AND THE IVY

Holly, with its dark green spiky leaves and red berries, was also believed to have magical powers and the ability to drive demons away. In old England, unmarried women were supposed to tie a sprig of holly to their beds, to guard them against ghosts and devils. In the medieval times, when people were genuinely afraid of ghosts and demons, supernatural creatures were

believed to be especially active at Christmas time.

Christmas came in the middle of winter, when the nights were very long, dark and cold. The voices of ghosts and demons, witches, goblins and werewolves could be heard screaming out in the winter winds and storms. So the magical powers



of mistletoe and holly were taken quite seriously. In Roman times ivy was the ancient symbol of Bakus, the god of wine and revelry. Due to its association with pagan festivals, for a long time, ivy was banned from the inside of Christian homes, and used only to decorate the outside. Not so any more. Its green has become part of the traditional Christmas.

OTHER CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS

Along with a tree, and bits of tree, holly, ivy and mistletoe, a lot of other materials are used to decorate the house at Christmas. You will