

Story behind Nativity scenes

This month, with Christmas approaching, our local historian Ruth E. Richardson, turns her attention to the traditional crib scene.

The Christmas Tree is decorated, the cake is scrumptious, the food and drink are bought. This, the secular side of Christmas, is great fun, originating long before the Romans who called the celebrations Saturnalia. At first, many Christians frowned upon such festivities but soon they decided to adopt the festivals people enjoyed and, sensibly, turned them into Christian festivals too.

No one knew when Jesus was actually born and for years Christians did not think this as important as his Crucifixion and Resurrection. The date of Jesus' Crucifixion, worked out from Biblical evidence, was widely believed to have been the same date that he was conceived, March 25th. Therefore, Jesus' birth would be nine months later than his conception, on December 25th. Happily, this coincided with the Feast of Sol Invictus, the Sun. So, in this way, Christ became part of the existing celebrations that people looked forward to and enjoyed.

The first reference to 25th December being the 'birth of Christ in Bethlehem, Judea' is in part six of a Roman almanac, the *Chronography of 354*, commissioned by Valentius, a wealthy Christian. Clearly 25th December was already an accepted Christian festival. It took another 683 years before the name Christ Mass was first recorded, in Old English. Interestingly, the abbreviation Xmas is the same, the X (chi) simply being the first part of the word Christ in Greek.

It was Saint Francis of Assisi who introduced the nativity crib as we know it today. The ox and donkey (ass) were associated with Jesus' birth from at least 380 AD when they were depicted in the Saint Sebastian Catacombs in Rome. After a visit to the Holy Land, Saint Francis, in 1293, decided to produce a 'living' tableaux showing Jesus 'bedded in a manger on hay between a donkey and an ox'. Local people brought candles and torches and Saint Francis led them in a Solemn Mass. He wanted to emphasise the Christian aspect of the festival over the secular jollity...and it worked! The celebration was so popular and appealing that depicting the Nativity in this way soon spread. Tableaux with people and animals continued to be used but eventually statues predominated instead.

I treasure my crib which was bought for me when I was a child. It is always the central piece for our Christmas. Most Churches and many other places also have Nativity scenes. There is a lovely one made by local schools in Hereford Cathedral. Traditionally, the crib shows the shepherds and animals, with Mary and Joseph. Jesus is placed in the manger on Christmas night. Then, in the past, the secular partying took over until Twelfth Night, the night of the 5th-6th January. Now, this is when we take down the decorations. Then, in the past, on the 6th January, Epiphany, or old Christmas day, the Kings and camels were added to the crib - and everyone went back to work. My best wishes for a lovely Christmas and New Year.

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