



## Project Britain

### British Christmas Traditions by Mandy Barrow

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## Boxing Day

Woodlands Junior School is in the south-east corner of England

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### When is Boxing Day?

In Britain, Boxing Day is usually celebrated on the following day after Christmas Day, which is 26 December. However, strictly speaking, Boxing Day is the first weekday after Christmas (see definition in the Oxford English Dictionary).

Like Christmas Day, Boxing Day is a **public holiday**. This means it is typically a non working day in the whole of Britain. When Boxing Day falls on a Saturday or Sunday the following Monday is the public holiday. © copyright of projectbritain.com

### Why is 26 December called Boxing Day?

Traditionally, 26 December was the day to open the Christmas Box to share the contents with the poor. © copyright of projectbritain.com

### What is a Christmas Box?

The Christmas box was a wooden or clay container where people placed gifts. © copyright of projectbritain.com

### History of Boxing Day - Boxing Day origins

Through our research for this page, we have discovered that Christmas Boxes were used in different ways:

#### To protect ships

During the Age of Exploration, when great sailing ships were setting off to discover new land, A Christmas Box was used as a good luck device. It was a small container placed on each ship



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while it was still in port. It was put there by a priest, and those crewmen who wanted to ensure a safe return would drop money into the box. It was then sealed up and kept on board for the entire voyage. © copyright of projectbritain.com

If the ship came home safely, the box was handed over to the priest in the exchange for the saying of a Mass of thanks for the success of the voyage. The Priest would keep the box sealed until Christmas when he would open it to share the contents with the poor.

### To help the poor

An 'Alms Box' was placed in every church on Christmas Day, into which worshippers placed a gift for the poor of the parish. These boxes were always opened the day after Christmas, which is why that day became known as Boxing Day.



### A present for the workers

Many poorly paid workers were required to work on Christmas Day and took the following day off to visit their families. As they prepared to leave, their employers would present them with Christmas boxes. copyright of projectbritain.com

During the late 18th century, Lords and Ladies of the manor would "box up" their leftover food, or sometimes gifts and distribute them the day after Christmas to tenants who lived and worked on their lands.

### And the tradition still continues today .....

The tradition of giving money to workers still continues today. It is customary for householders to give small gifts or monetary tips to regular visiting trades people (the milkman, dustman, coalman, paper boy etc.) and, in some work places, for employers to give a Christmas bonus to employees.



Schools across the country gather together gifts to be put in Christmas Boxes that are sent to poorer countries.

#### Interesting Christmas Fact

The Christmas boxes were made from clay and were necessarily made in the shape of a box. They were often

hollow clay balls with a slit in the top.



## St Stephen's Day

Boxing Day is also known as St. Stephen's Day (when Good King Wenceslas looked out).

'Good King Wenceslas looked out,  
On the Feast of Stephen.....'

## Who was St Stephen?

Stephen lived in Rome and was the first man to be killed for believing in the teachings of Jesus. His story is told in the Acts of the Apostles 6: 1 to 8: 2.

Some people claim that he shares this day with another St Stephen, who came from Sweden. St Stephen of Sweden is the patron saint of horses.

Boxing Day has long be associated with outdoor sports, especially horse racing and hunting.



## What happens on Boxing Day in England?

[Follow this link to read about other events in England, Wales and Scotland](#)

## Boxing Day Hunts

Traditionally Boxing Day was a day for fox hunting. Horse riders dressed in red and white riding gear, accompanied by a number of dogs called foxhounds, chased the fox through the countryside in the hope of tiring it out.



Eventually the hunters hope the fox will be so tired that the dogs will be able to catch it and kill it.

## Fox Hunting Today

Many animal welfare campaigners object to fox hunting saying it is cruel to kill a fox in this way, while many participants view it as a crucial part of rural history in England, vital for conservation, and a

method of pest control.

In November 2004, MPs voted to ban hunting with dogs in England and Wales. As from 18 February 2005 hunting with dogs became a criminal offence (although it is still legal to exercise hounds, chase a scent and flush out foxes to be shot).

It is still traditional to see horse riders dressed in red and white riding gear, accompanied by a number of dogs called foxhounds. However, today instead of chasing a fox they chase a human runner. No living thing is killed.

## Family Time

Traditionally, Boxing Day is the day when families get together. It is a day of watching sports and playing board games with the family.



Boxing Day Tea

Many families will go on walks in the countryside together on Boxing day.

## Shopping

In recent times, some shops have broken from tradition and started opening on Boxing Day to start the New Year sales. Hundreds of people now spend Boxing Day morning in queues outside shops, waiting to be the first to dive for the sales racks as the doors opened.

## Hunting of the Wren



It is unlucky to kill a wren on any day apart from Boxing Day. Hunting of the Wren on Boxing Day **was** once a popular activity in England.

Groups of young boys know as 'Wren boys' would hunt a wren and then tie the dead bird to the top of a pole, decorated with holly sprigs and ribbons. With blackened faces, the group would sing at houses in hopes for coins, gifts or food.

*"The wren, the wren, the king of all birds  
On St Stephen's Day was caught in the furze,  
We hunted him far and hunted him near  
And found him under the bushes here.  
Hurrah, my boys, hurrah!  
Hurrah, my boys, hurrah!  
Knock at the knocker and ring at the bell,  
And give us a copper for singing so well."*

Those that gave money to the boys would receive a feather from the wren as thanks. The collected money was then used to host a village dance.

This odd ritual was not restricted to England. It was prevalent in some continental countries on Boxing Day as well as the Isle of Man, Wales and Ireland.

The following information has been very kindly provided by Eoghan, Peter and Feidhlim Deering, Ireland.

## Christmas in Ireland

**In Ireland, 26th December is known as "St Stephen's Day" rather than "Boxing Day", and is famous for its "Wren Boys".**

Many years ago the Wren Boys would go out on St Stephen's Day, catch a wren and kill it by throwing stones at it, just as St Stephen was stoned to death. Then they would blacken their faces with burnt cork, tie the dead wren to a pole and parade around the town with it, knocking at all the houses for money.

Nowadays the "Wren Boys" just go round our town in fancy dress (usually the men wear women's dresses and wigs), carrying a stuffed bird in a cage, singing carols and collecting money for charity.

Our town also has a famous fox hunt on St Stephen's Day. Some people think this is just as cruel as stoning a wren, but in Ireland it hasn't been banned yet.

Learn about England and the other countries in Britain  
from the children who live in there

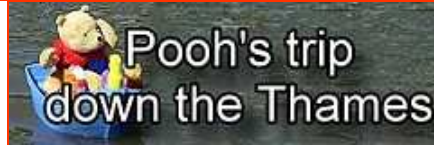


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Mandy is the creator of the Woodlands Resources section of the Woodlands Junior website. The two websites [projectbritain.com](http://projectbritain.com) and [primaryhomeworkhelp.co.uk](http://primaryhomeworkhelp.co.uk) are the new homes for the Woodlands Resources.

Mandy left Woodlands in 2003 to work in Kent schools as an ICT Consultatant. She now teaches computers at [The Granville School](#) and [St. John's Primary School](#) in Sevenoaks Kent.