

## **Christmas 1940.**

This was the first war-time Christmas when rationing was in force. It was also when many British cities had experienced bombing during the autumn and some were to continue experiencing it immediately after the festivities. Up until Christmas 1940, 24,000 civilians had been killed so far. The Nazis decided not to bomb over the Christmas period briefly allowing people some respite to enjoy the festive season.

The rationing of food which had started in January 1940 meant that by December 1940 the weekly allowance for bacon was 4 ounces, (125grams), and 6ozs (187.5g) of butter or margarine. In the run up to Christmas however the government did double the tea ration and increased the sugar ration to 12ozs per person. Fortunately wines and spirits were not rationed and in plentiful supply. French goods and foods however were not available nor were imported fruits or nuts.

People were nevertheless determined to enjoy their Christmas, despite the government concerned about overspending on consumer goods to the detriment of the war effort. Hence a poster from the National Savings Committee tried to discourage this frivolous spending, and instead buy War Bonds.

Christmas cards were still sent by many despite paper shortages which by now were becoming apparent. There was also a shortage of postal workers available to deliver these cards, many of the permanent staff now in the forces. Also there was less space to carry post on the railways since this was needed to transport troops or munitions meant many cards were not delivered the next

day so many people would deliver their cards by hand. (All mail was sent first class then).

The shortage of wrapping paper meant presents had to be wrapped in brown paper, and people had to make do with old decorations from previous Christmases or make new ones by hand, often from newspaper which could be painted or crayoned. Home made presents were also popular in addition to second hand ones, creating an atmosphere of mend and make do.

The Blitz had made many people homeless thus The Red Cross and other organisations set up canteens providing food and drinks over this period. One such shelter was in the crypt of St. Martin-in-the Fields church in central London. These canteens were also used by workers on ARP duties such as firewatchers who still had to work over the Christmas period. The people worst hit by the bombing often spent their Christmas in an air raid shelter. It is not surprising therefore that small Christmas trees were in great demand that year since only they could fit into the shelters with low ceilings. Large trees were impractical since if festooned with lights they would emit too much light and break the blackout regulations.

Practical presents were popular this year especially connected with gardening and cooking such as tools, bottling jars and even seeds. There were fewer toys for children since many former toy factories were now turning out munitions, even so, what few toys were available tended to be war orientated, such as planes, tanks and uniforms. Air raid friendly presents such as flasks and sleeping bags were also popular. The most popular present of Christmas 1940 however was soap.

In the kitchen, unlike 1939 turkeys were unavailable this year, or so expensive that most families were unable to afford one. Rationing meant that a family of four with their weekly coupons was unlikely to even be able to buy a small chicken. Some people however reared their own chickens or rabbits. Many families also hoarded food weeks before ready for the big day. The lack of imported fruits or nuts meant the Christmas cake was unlikely to have marzipan on it nor the pudding to have dried fruit in it. Both were often bulked up with breadcrumbs or even grated carrot. The Ministry of Food tried to be helpful by suggesting that decorations for either could be made by dipping holly or evergreen leaves into a strong solution of Epsom Salts, and when it was dry it 'would be beautifully frosted'.

As a result of severe transport problems the pre-war football league was suspended, instead it was replaced by regional football leagues thus alleviating the need for football teams to travel long distances. Two famous football players of the time, Tommy Lawton and Ken Shackleton each played for two teams on Christmas Day 1940 since many of their colleagues had been called up into the Services. Tommy Lawton played for Everton and then Tranmere, whilst Ken Shackleton played for Bradford and Bradford City. Brighton Hove Albion were away to Norwich City on this day in 1940, unfortunately they only had 5 players. Their team was supplemented by Norwich's reserves and it's supporters. Norwich City won 18-0.

On Christmas Day 1940 church services took place all over the country as normal, however church bells were not rung since they would only be used if an invasion was taking place. The wireless had also become an

important part of the festivities for many people, for example the King's speech, which after its success in 1940 thereafter became an annual event. There was also a selection of variety shows broadcast along with a sermon from the ruins of Coventry Cathedral, all from the BBC Home Service.

Looking back the deprivations of war were really apparent in Christmas 1940 which affected everyone old and young. Yet historians have concluded that for many people it was a positive experience being a return to a simpler celebration without the pressure of commercialisation. Their resolve to enjoy the next Christmas however would be tested as clothing became rationed and some food allowances were cut during 1941.