# A "Chronicle" of Christmas in Dover

**Ann Tomalak**

Many of us have family stories of Christmas celebrations in Dover in the last century. Family members might have gone to the Old People's Dinner in the Town Hall, or a children's party there, or even the Boxing Day pantomime. Most organisations, from churches to sports and social clubs and mutual societies, put on some kind of festive gathering for members and their families. Through December and well into January entertainments, amateur and professional, happened all over town. There were football matches on Christmas and Boxing Day mornings, or families could skate at the rink on the Promenade pier, accompanied by a live orchestra. Newspapers such as the Dover & County Chronicle give us a taste of Christmases past.

We may be able to take a break from Christmas Eve to New Year, but for some centuries Christmas was a single day. In the Middle Ages, the Twelve Days of Christmas gave a mid-winter respite to most people, the richer inviting their workers and neighbours to share in their fun and feasting, often to excess. After the Reformation, Christmas became more muted, with the Puritans banning anything whatsoever that might make the day seem special. Other denominations marked Christmas Day only, with a strong emphasis on religious observance.

Christmas Day became a legal holiday again in 1660, with the return of King Charles II, but only in England. Many weddings were celebrated since people weren't at work. By the nineteenth century, Dickens and other authors were emphasising the charitable side of Christmas, helping the needy and poor, gift-giving, plus a family meal and entertainment, with a focus on children. Father Christmas became a "thing" and the Christmas tree was introduced from Germany. (Boxing Day only became a bank holiday in 1871; New Year's Day was officially added in 1974, within living memory.)

In 1852, the Chronicle was published as usual on Saturday, 25th December. A brief paragraph on p.3 acknowledges the day, indicating that the "national meal" then was beef and plum pudding, though some turkeys had been imported from France. But the main articles are on the Condition of Women, plus national and overseas news, parliamentary reports and a long obituary of Thomas Moore, the Irish poet. As was the custom, the front page consisted entirely of advertising, though only a wine merchant offers Christmas merchandise. The back page has a short Christmas poem among the market prices, timetables for trains and the Dover to Calais packet, and high-water times.

By 1875, the Chronicle, again published on Christmas Day as it was a Saturday, was a little more excited about the holiday, though with a bah-humbug twist, predicting that within a generation Christmas "with all its tomfooleries" would be a thing of the past. The paper decried "meaningless buffoonery, excessive revelry" and "Christmas boxes", while encouraging Christmas trees and carol-singing – though not to collect money to be spent on "lawless pleasures". The "more opulent" were asked to be charitable to the "really deserving and even the worthless"! This time ads for ball and evening gowns, Christmas and New Year cards, tobacco products and other novelties suitable as

gifts, plus seasonal foods and drinks, interspersed the more mundane items.

The idea of travelling some distance to visit family and friends was promoted by the railway companies surprisingly early. In 1886, the Chronicle published special arrangements including extra trains and the extension of return tickets to cover the whole period from December 23rd to 30th. Even the cheapest Saturday to Monday tickets were stretched from Friday to Tuesday. The notice makes clear that trains would run on Christmas Day!

Those who couldn't meet up in person made good use of the mail. In late November 1908, 80 sacks of Christmas mail left Dover for New Zealand; some 12,000 letters and 5,000 books and newspapers. In 1906 Robert J Dickie patented the first dispensing machine, which made it possible to buy stamps at any time of the day or night. In 1925, there was only one postal delivery on Christmas Day rather than the usual four, (last posting time for local delivery: 9.45pm on Christmas Eve)!

In 1889, the Chronicle published a 16-page Christmas "supplement" on 21st December. Not a themed supplement as we know it, it consisted of Christmassy items tucked among the usual news, reports and notices. There were lots of ads for food, drink and gift suggestions – including several for cosaques (pronounced "cossacks") which were, apparently, cracker bonbons - the latest fad? The High School for Girls, then on Maison Dieu Road, had put on an extraordinary end-of-term entertainment with musical items and recitations in German, French and English. There was also a street-by-street review of Dover shops, including their festive window displays and additional goods available through the Christmas season. It is noticeable how many butchers the town supported, and the range of poultry on offer. Entertainment at the Town Hall included a shorthand demonstration(!), and two hunts were advertised for Boxing Day.

By 1913, "Katie" was complaining in the Chronicle that the shop windows were dressed for Christmas mid-way through November and also that young children were sent around to collect for charity, thus teaching them to beg. It was a month of numerous bazaars and sales-of-work, providing many home-made gifts and food items, which annoyed the town's traders who felt they were losing customers.

Many of us remember past Christmas Days when nothing at all happened; no public transport, no shops open or places of entertainment, nowhere for a traveller to find shelter and a meal. But it was not ever thus. Apart from the essential jobs like feeding animals, nursing the sick and cooking meals, many poorer people were prepared to do their usual work. While shops in the town sometimes advertised extended closures, usually Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day, for others it was business as usual. At the Spring Quarter Sessions of 1845 (Chronicle, 5th April 1845, p.3), Edward Larkies was convicted of stealing a box of cigars wrapped in a handkerchief and sentenced to twelve months' hard labour. But this crime took place on Christmas Day and the testimony shows several people hard at work. William Chidwick, a tobacconist in Deal, decided to send his brother, Edward, in Margate, also a tobacconist, 4lb of cigars, and so took them to Elizabeth Moon, whose husband drove the coach from Dover to Margate, even on Christmas Day. Mr Moon's assistant, William Beney, duly delivered them to Jane Chidwick, Edward's wife, at their shop. Almost

immediately, Larkies came to collect the box, saying Mr Moon had sent him, so Mrs Chidwick handed it over, thinking it delivered by mistake. Beney later saw Larkies with the box in its distinctive red handkerchief, and was promised a beer when the goods were sold – a bribe to keep quiet? Larkies claimed he had bought the cigars and even produced a fake bill, but the Court declared him guilty.

As for other crime, in January 1906 two men appeared before the Petty Sessions, charged with trespass to poach rabbits with ferrets on Christmas morning. The court took a lenient view of their "work" and dismissed the case.

Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, efforts to decorate homes and public spaces grew. In the hospital, the wards and entrance were made festive with evergreens, holly and bright paper flowers every year. The barracks were similarly decorated, the soldiers in friendly competition for best dressed room. They were relieved of non-essential duties on Christmas day and given a hearty meal. Even the Workhouse was decorated, carols were sung and a decent meal provided. In 1895, the 441 inmates consumed 560 pounds of beef, plus 370 pounds of pudding. Everyone got fresh and dried fruits, sweets and biscuits, plus gifts of tea, sugar and tobacco for the older people, and a bright threepenny bit for each child. Similarly, local people provided generously for the Gordon Boys' Orphanage: festive food and drink galore, plus clothing and 6d for each boy.

The weather was always worth comment. In 1900 there was a collision in the Channel, thanks to dense fog. Other years saw heavy snow, gales or unseasonably warm weather. On 2nd January 1902, a letter to the Editor of the Chronicle complained that the temperature inside Christ Church on Christmas Day was only 40°F, "dangerous for old people and invalids", while at St Mary's, who did things properly, it was 60°F!

On Saturday, 25th December 1915, the Chronicle was obviously weighed down by the war, but determined to stay cheerful, looking back to more pleasant times while telling readers that the true spirit of Christmas was sacrifice. Yet a programme of festive entertainments was planned in various halls around town. There were a few ads for Christmas gift suggestions, but also for winter clothing – perhaps to send to the Front, along with a home-made pudding? A Christmas sermon vied for space with local and national news, always returning to the war. With so many men called up for military service, Dover's Head Post Office advertised for "intelligent female clerks". The Mayoress's Christmas collection was for destitute Serbian and Belgian women and children; allies "who have kept the war from our doors".

Most people stayed close to home before travel became easier, but some preferred life on the road. Thus, at Christmas 1939 we see G. C. Taylor of Dover signing a joint letter of thanks for 'kindly' gifts received from the Master of Watts' Charity in Rochester, otherwise known as the Six Poor Travellers' House. (Medway Archives CHW/A02/37/003.) [Six months later, as the war progressed, the house closed since casual travellers were prevented from entering the protected area around the south coast. It never re-opened, except as a museum.]

The Chronicle ceased publication in 1927. More recent Christmases are recorded in the Dover Express (to 1999) and increasingly resemble our modern festivities.