

Christmas in Norwich

by Kathryn Downes



Mistletoe and mince pies are part of the traditional festivities here in the UK. Families celebrate traditions old and new to welcome in the season of goodwill and see out the old year.

As always, Christmas seems to creep up on the staff here at NILE. While we are busy finalising records for 2009 and preparing to welcome new teachers in 2010, the nights have got longer, the temperature has dropped and after a five-year wait, we may have the White Christmas that the English dream of.

So what traditions do the NILE staff have and what celebrations are happening across this fine city?

The teams at NILE are drawn from all corners of the world, and some staff started their Christmas breaks early, having already flown to Moscow and Madrid. Others are planning to celebrate with family in Greece and elsewhere, and some will be welcoming loved ones to their homes.

Officially, Christmas celebrations begin on 1 December, when children open their Advent calendars, marking the number of days until Christmas Eve.

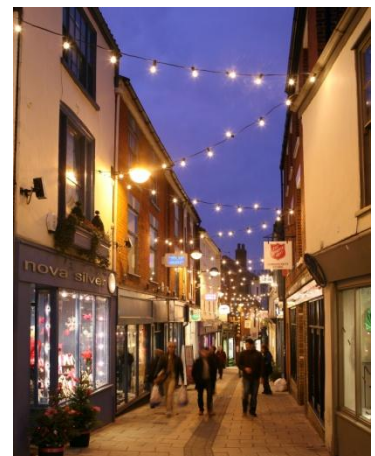
Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are the two most important days of Christmas, but festive celebrations begin in late November in Norwich. Homes are decorated with lights and a Christmas tree. Orders are placed with butchers for the traditional 'turkey and trimmings', which will include chipolatas /tʃɪpələ:tɔz/ (a long, thin sausage), traditionally wrapped in bacon.

The feast itself will include lots of vegetables, including roast potatoes, parsnips, carrots, Brussels sprouts (a tiny cabbage which you either love or hate!), stuffing (sausage meat mixed with herbs and breadcrumbs then cooked inside the turkey) and more.

Christmas in the UK is heavily characterised by food. The shops are full of Christmas cakes made from dried fruit, Christmas puddings, mulled wine and, in recent years, we have adopted more and more of the foods from other parts of Europe, including stolen from Germany, panettone from Italy, chocolate-covered plums from Poland and many others.

The first few weeks of celebration across the city are filled with a party atmosphere, as shopping centres and shops invite local celebrities to turn on the Christmas lights. The lights come in all shapes and sizes and create a twinkling, magical atmosphere.

Historic buildings and churches offer Christmas markets and celebrate



with themed events, including Polish Christmas Markets, the [Twelve Days of Christmas](#) , a Victorian Christmas, classical concerts and more, which pack hectic Christmas calendars. The buildings are bedecked with foliage and decorations drawing their inspiration from years gone by.

The spirit of community is very strong at this time of year and those celebrating a traditional Christmas will often attend a carol service, perhaps linger over a glass of mulled wine and a mince pie with friends. The lead-up to Christmas Eve is truly magical and is all about friends and family coming together.

Norwich really comes alive at Christmas. The streets bustle with shoppers and street performers, and you can hear brass bands booming out Christmas carols. The Forum is at the heart of the city and has in recent years played host to an ice skating rink and street performers. This year we have a fantastic Christmas tree as tall as the Forum itself (I can confirm that this is absolutely true, having peeked across the turrets of St John's Cathedral one Friday evening and seen the wondrous skyline – with the Christmas tree= just peeping above the Forum!).



As a frosty winter starts to take hold here in mid-December, local artists celebrate the cold with an ice sculpture trail. Previous themes have included the Nativity and this year it will be characters of Norwich. Visitors can wander amongst the sculptures and learn a little more of the history of Norwich through 'ice art'.

As Christmas Eve dawns on 24 December, last-minute preparations will be underway. Usually, offices and other businesses will close earlier to allow people time to travel home and finish last-minute plans for the next day. As evening approaches, Norwich starts to fall very quiet as people make their way home to their families or to evening service. We are spoilt for choice here in Norwich as we have a church for every Sunday and two Cathedrals.

Children will usually be sent to bed early with the promise of Father Christmas arriving at any moment to leave them presents for the next day. He will never arrive when the children are awake and will usually leave a gift in their Christmas stocking and more under the tree. Father Christmas is also likely to feel very full after Christmas Eve, as a mince pie, a drink and a carrot are left out to thank Father Christmas and his reindeer for the gifts.

On 25 December children will usually wake up very early and open a present. Family and friends will then gather together to exchange gifts and to eat the main feast in the early afternoon. The turkey will be served and this is followed by the infamous Christmas pudding, which is made from dried fruit. In Victorian times the pudding would have had a shilling hidden inside. The hiding of the shilling has become rather dangerous these days as the nearest thing we have is a five pence piece which is small enough to choke on!

By the end of the day, people will gather in their homes and make plans to meet friends on Boxing Day (traditionally named after the charity boxes that were opened on this day to provide money for the poor). In my family, we go out as a family on Boxing Day and eat lots of the remaining turkey!

After Christmas, thoughts turn to New Year and across Norwich parties will be happening to see in 2010 in style. This is the time when everyone attends parties and the pubs and bars fill up with people celebrating. A countdown will begin just before midnight as the clock strikes twelve there will be cries of Happy New Year, party-poppers being let off and people traditionally kissing to welcome in the New Year. This will be swiftly followed by a rendition of Robbie Burns' song 'Auld Lang Syne'. Celebrations will normally continue into the early hours of morning.

Finally the celebrations come to an end when the decorations are taken down on 12th Night. If you fail to take your decorations down on this night you must keep them up for another year to prevent bad luck! Whilst most of us at this time of year are catching up with office news and returning to work after the festivities, our Scottish cousins will be turning their thoughts to Burns' Night; but that's a story for another time!

We wish you a very Happy Christmas!

