

Anticipating Christmas?

by Kathie Richards-Jones

For the second consecutive year there are currently many articles in newspapers about Christmas, most concentrating on whether we should or should not get together. There is no easy answer to the current situation, but the discussions have reminded me of how different things were in the days when I was a young journalist.

In those pre-covid days because of my journalistic experience, I know that one day each June a harassed sub-editor would tell the most junior reporter to put together some copy on how unpleasant a family Christmas really can be. Stress should be placed on the ridiculousness of tinselly shop windows appearing as early as August. Then the tension of whether to invite Aunt Maud – who will drink all the sherry and then fall asleep at the dinner table, or Uncle Cedric – who will drink all the whiskey and then fall asleep during the Queen’s broadcast.

Highlights must be placed on the extremely difficult art of timing the all-so-important meal, with minute-by-minute timetables commencing the day before Christmas Eve and including comments such as – if you blanch your Brussel sprouts you will save 1.5 minutes on their cooking time.

Throughout July other journalists rushing past the junior’s desk intent on more worthy features, would throw out occasional asides for helpful inclusion. What about listing every single item of expense, ranging from the over-priced (and often over-cooked) turkey, down to the new roll of sellotape because the one bought last year has disappeared?

Don’t forget to mention family tensions and rows over immediate problems such as who will sit next to Great Granny, who farts noisily every ten minutes and who is prone to come out with the most unsuitable remarks such as “when are you going to make a honest woman of my niece” or “who gave me that hideous scarf”.

Or family tensions and rows over significant past Christmases, mentioning with relish the year that attempting to cram too many dishes into the oven caused it to catch fire and sentenced the family to live off a menu of uncooked items such as stilton or dates for the following four days.

And it is important to mention the difficulties of travelling to be with your family in the third week of December, when major rail engineering work is always scheduled, and coach seats are no longer available (having been booked since Easter).

The experienced – and jaundiced – editor would assess the resulting article in August and pithily point out that no mention has been made of the difficulties of seating – and/or indeed sleeping – twelve people in a house designed for four; the boredom of having to go to the sales on Boxing Day to exchange all those unsuitable presents; and how long it takes after the event to put away all the huge platters, serving dishes,

bedding, champagne glasses and decorations that won't be needed until the following year.

In September a photo session would be staged and it was obligatory to include a "typical" family focusing on an exhausted mother, a red-faced father, tearful and over-indulged children and umpteen visitors all ranged round a decimated table covered by a myriad of washing-up waiting to be done. Oh, and featuring the family cat quietly and comprehensively throwing up in the corner due to the feline theft of the contents of a jug of brandied cream.

By October the final tweaks had been added to the article. Key for inclusion was mention of how difficult it is when Christmas falls on a Monday (or indeed on a Tuesday, Wednesday etc etc). The cost of sending scores of Christmas cards, 35% of which will go to people you encountered once and will never meet again. The modern equivalent of preparing an annual letter to be included in cards to those you haven't seen since last year and which, as you get older, seem to veer away from listing good holidays, success of children or acquisition of new pets, to depressing diatribes starting "in February my usual bronchitis returned, and then in May Fred fell down the garden steps and broke his ankle just when the dog was recovering from mange etc etc"

Quickly the editor will add a final sanctimonious paragraph about how far removed the festival has become from its religious inception and how good it would be to go to sleep on December 23rd and wake up a week later having missed the whole event.

I used to hate these articles for their intention of blighting everyone's happiness.

But also from August the glossier magazines and upmarket broadsheets will assume that their readers do not know their family well enough to choose a suitable Christmas present – and therefore crammed. pages and supplements with 'must have' items. I mean who really wants a Traffic Light Alcohol Tester costing £16.99 batteries excluded? Or a Remote Controlled Skull whose eyes blaze and which lets out scary screams – and needs an initial seven batteries totalling over £6.00? Who can afford gold-plates and diamond-studded toothpicks at only £1,999 in seven easy instalments? How about Laser Scissors which will cut perfectly straight lines – what's wrong with drawing a pencil line to cut along? Or models of Granny plus a walking frame versus Grandad on a mobility scooter which can race each other? - especially when you've got the real thing staying with you for week.

I throw them all in the bin (but sadly only after I've flicked through them...)

I am just one of millions of ordinary people who discard all the complaints, the miserable prophecies and the blandishments and who spends an enjoyable few weeks in November and December, feeling a great sense of achievement when I locate the perfect present. Being amazed when all the bulbs in the Christmas lights actually work. Tearfully reading all the innocent letters the little ones write to Father Christmas. Watching "It's a Wonderful Life" while wrapping presents and writing ridiculous gift tags – in our house we even have "to our Master with woofs from the

Labrador”. Oh and then enjoying my favourite meal of the year – Boxing Day, slices of cold dark turkey meat with lovely bubble and squeak!

So I approach Christmas with the intention of being happy and (with the exception of last year) I invariably succeed. Besides, just think of how dreary the rain-sodden, gale-driven, icy and snowy period from November to late February would be without it!