

Christmas 1939.

For many people in Britain the first Christmas of the war was little different to previous Christmas s. There were a few extra restrictions which affected some aspects of the seasonal festivities such as the blackout which prevented the tradition of the lit Christmas tree and shop windows were obscured by anti-blast tape on the windows.

Food was not yet rationed although in November 1939 the Ministry of Food announced that butter and bacon were to be rationed starting in January 1940. It meant that despite some members of the government arguing for restraint at this first wartime Christmas most people with the knowledge that rationing was on the way ignored this advice spending freely as in previous years.

Everybody was determined to enjoy the festive season with reports that hotels and restaurants were fully booked. Upmarket shops reported that they were sending out more hampers than usual as wealthy people ordered them for friends hurt financially by the war. Sales of 'Santagen', described as a 'nerve tonic' increased considerably, often bought as a present for those away from home who might be suffering anxiety as a result. Consumers were encouraged by the advertising slogan 'Win your War of Nerves'.

Nevertheless some people were hesitant to go shopping in the blackout. In the first four months of the war around 4,000 civilians were killed on the roads compared with just 2,500 for the corresponding period in 1938. Hence the toy fair at Harrods in 1939 was described as a 'dismal

sight this year. The toys are alright but the children are missing'. Some shops tried to entice shoppers with early sales, notably Aquascutum of Regent Street which began its sale in early December and was selling a cashmere coat reduced to £10 in shades of 'beaver brown, nigger, navy and grey.

Lack of action on the western front meant some soldiers were allowed home on leave so they swelled the shopping crowds very shortly before Christmas visiting such shops as Marshall and Snelgrove of Oxford Street where a very brisk trade in evening dresses and party dresses as presents was reported. Apparently the lingerie department was especially busy.

Some men however were unable to come home from the front so for many families this Christmas was different with members of the British Expeditionary Force away in France. Also thousands of children who had been evacuated at the start of the war had to spend their Christmas away from home, instead with their new 'parents' out in the countryside. Parties were laid on by villagers in these areas to make their 'guests' feel more welcome. Travel restrictions also meant that the members of the family who had further to travel in order to get home for Christmas were unable to do so. In September 1939 petrol rationing had been introduced and rail travel was discouraged.

For those who spent freely on gifts they often had a topical flavour, especially for children. For example, miniature Red Cross, RAF, or naval uniforms or card games such as 'Blackout' and 'Vacuation'. For adults typical gifts included steel or bakelite helmets and gas masks cases in rexine or leather. There was also the 'Take Coverlet' a cross between a sleeping bag and an overcoat, - presumably for use when a trip to the air raid shelter was required.

For the families that did brave the blackout in order to go to the theatre Cinderella was showing at the London Coliseum, Puss in Boots at the Newcastle Empire and at the Leeds Empire George Formby starred in Dick Whittington. Such entertainment was not restricted to the cities however, elsewhere troops often put on their own, often more ribald pantomimes. For troops stationed on Salisbury Plain social photographer Cecil Beaton and film director Alexander Korda staged 'Heil Cinderella', with Beaton playing an ugly sister.

In households around Britain the war seemed briefly a long way off as people danced to songs that would become war time favourites such as 'Run Rabbit Run', 'We're Going To Hang Out The Washing On The Siegfried Line', 'I like a Nice Cup Of Tea in The Morning' and 'Kiss Me Goodnight Sergeant Major'. Turkey was the most popular meal served on the Christmas table in 1939 accompanied with plum or bread sauce and the usual trimmings, followed by plum pudding. As rationing took hold this was to change in future war festivities.

Church services were held as normal but bells were not rung as they were taken as an air raid warning. In the afternoon of Christmas Day at 3pm King George VI broadcast his Christmas message from Sandringham on the BBC Home Service.

On New Year's Eve many people went out to celebrate and see in the New Year whilst others stayed at home. Harold Nicholson MP, writer and the husband of Vita Sackville -West took a gloomier view of the year ahead writing in his diary.

"I don't stay up to watch the New Year in or the old year out. I write this diary 11.15pm and shall not wait. The old year is foul and the new year is terrifying".

Britain was entering her darkest hour.