

# Christmas 1942

Christmas 1942 in Britain turned out to be a bit of a paradox. The last two months of the year were proving to be a turning point in the war. The Red Army had broken the siege at Stalingrad trapping the German 5th Army in the process. Rommel had been halted at El Alamein and American forces had joined the war in North Africa. Yet on the home front there were even fewer luxuries to go around than there had been for Christmas 1941.

Christmas 1942 for many Britons was also made different by the arrival of Americans, Canadians and others, who were garrisoned here in order to bolster the increasing intensity of the bombing raids on Nazi Germany or to participate in the preparations for the liberation of Europe. This was especially so in East Anglia where many of the New World service men were billeted in the homes of local people. Thus in 1942 many Britons were to spend their Christmas alongside these service men. American troops stationed in the UK were given extra ration packs to take with them for their British hosts. These packs contained items such as tinned evaporated milk, fruit juice, bacon, coffee, sugar, rice, peas and lard, all of which were rationed to the British. These additional rations enabled many American airbases established in the UK to organise lavish Christmas parties inviting the locals to join them, particularly the children.

The American efforts to make Christmas more enjoyable were also bolstered by the work of the British War Relief Society, an American organisation which co-ordinated the work of various American-based charities that had become established since the beginning of the war in order to raise money or goods for wartorn Britain. The Society even had its own theme song "Thumbs Up" composed with lyrics in 1941.

Christmas had become the only annual holiday left in wartime Britain, when the population could enjoy themselves and for a brief moment forget about the horrors of war. Many therefore went to great efforts in order to make Christmas a memorable time. Yet by 1942 two more potential gifts had become rationed, notably soap, which had been put on ration in February of that year, and alcohol, which by December 1942 had become very difficult to obtain unless one was a regular at the local pub or off-licence. Nevertheless many people began making

preparations well in advance of the festivities by saving their coupon rations or stockpiling food for the event. Paper had been put on ration and what was available was of very poor quality, therefore presents could not be wrapped. It also meant that Christmas decorations could not be bought, so many people made their own decorations, some even using old newspaper, colouring it with crayon or paint. People also collected sprigs of holly or other evergreen shrubs to make decorations, some following Ministry of Food advice to dip the greenery in a strong solution of Epsom Salts and allow it to dry, in order to produce a frosted effect. Others whitewashed their greenery and then added conifer cones to make a centrepiece for the Christmas table. The Ministry of Food also suggested that, since brightly coloured fruits like oranges and lemons were not available, coloured vegetables such as beetroot and carrots along with parsley might be used to make a Christmas display.

Improvisation was the order of the day making the most of limited resources. This also included Christmas presents. Many were homemade and often of a useful nature. One boy made a model harrow to give to his elder sister as a memento of her new career as a Land Girl. Food was no exception to the need to improvise. Although the British government had imported 400,000 turkeys from southern Ireland for Christmas 1942 it was realised that these would not go very far. Customers had to order one using their meat allowance months in advance. Chickens were in short supply as a result of the large-scale culling that had taken place in 1939/40 in order to redirect grain for human consumption. An alternative was rabbit, which although plentiful in the rural areas, was not so in the towns. Here Christmas revellers had to make do with a Festive meal consisting of mutton. Ready-made Christmas puddings were also in short supply, and indeed many of the traditional ingredients normally found in them, such as dried fruit, were very scarce indeed. Eggs were also rationed, both shelled and dried egg; nevertheless a recipe was devised by Marguerite Patten to make a Christmas pudding without eggs.

Christmas 1942 for some was a time of sad reflection on those members of the family lost to war, either on the battlefield or nearer to home in the Blitz. Yet it was also a Christmas for gentle optimism that the war against Nazi Germany was being won. An optimism bolstered by the increasing support of the Americans, Canadians and other

Commonwealth soldiers, who becoming stationed on British soil could unite in defeating the enemy.