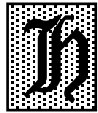


## A dream come true: Christmas in England



aving preserved a rather childlike attitude to Christmas and having enjoyed Charles Dickens' "Christmas Carol" many times in all its variations it had been a dream of mine for a long time: Once to spend Christmas in England in a nice family with children. This year my dream was to come true. The Walsh family consisting of the parents Catherine and John and the children James (8), Andrew (10) and Lisa (12) had kindly invited me to spend the Christmas holidays with them in their lovely home in Stratford-sub-Castle near Salisbury.



The 23 December finally came and packed with Christmas presents and full of expectations I boarded the plane to London from where I went by train to Salisbury. Catherine and Lisa met me at the station and after a quick lunch at home we all set off for some last-minute shopping in town. I had expected a very Christmassy looking city but was quite disappointed: Only very few shops had bothered about outside Christmas decorations, and even inside the shops it was not much better. If the huge Christmas tree in front of the Guildhall had not been there one could have thought it was just an ordinary winter's day.

We collected Lisa from a friend's place where she and some other girls had been busy making her personal "Christmas tree" from a tree branch and lots of lovely decorations. It immediately got an honorary place in the hall!

In the living-room, however, the colourfully decorated Christmas tree had been put up already on 20th December, and all the presents arriving were laid out underneath.



Under the lamp in the hall the traditional mistletoe was hanging but somehow I must have missed the likewise traditional kissing ceremony when passing underneath. The Christmas decorations consisting of balloons and festoons were up, and all over the house were Christmas cards. I had never seen so many Christmas cards in one place in my life, and I learnt that virtually everybody sends everybody he

knows a Christmas card. They are partly delivered by the people themselves and even visitors bring them along if they have not sent them. The family had received - and written! - about 120 cards! Amazing and hard to imagine in Germany.

I was told this year it would be my job to set up the crib, and I was handed a set of figures (from HARRODS!) and a board to put them on. Usually they were placed on a table in the hall but I was up for a somewhat bolder idea: The Walshs had

a small fireplace which had never been used so that all the stone and marble were still in their original beige colour. I suggested to use this "natural" environment and to set up the crib therein. Somewhat reluctantly the family agreed. Andrew got some sand his father had recently acquired and we modelled a kind of desert landscape with some hills. Lisa contributed some straw she had taken from the horse stables nearby she frequently visited. For his birthday I had sent Andrew a light bulb chain to be used with his train set. As this was still in one piece we decided to illuminate the scene with these twenty small bulbs. Only blue paper for the sky was missing. We tried the remains of a blue plastic bag but it looked awful. As John had forgotten something likewise important (the Christmas card for his wife!!) we set off to town again at 3 o'clock on Christmas Eve. All the shops were still open, and we managed to get hold of what we wanted ... and more:

In summer I had brought a CD for a present, expecting the family to have the appropriate machine to play it but they didn't have one. They had plans to buy one though, so I had sent them a Christmas CD in December only to discover at my arrival that they still had not got a CD player. Now it was high time. As we passed the COMET shop on our way home at about 4 p.m. we decided to drop in, and there it was: A super CD player with remote control (Andrew's favourite!) just the right size and - more important - the right price. It was the last one, so we bought it off the shelf and set it up at home immediately. At last we could listen to my German Christmas music ... (Now I cannot stand it any longer because, being the only available CD apart from the Beethoven one, it was on practically day and night throughout the week!).

Christmas Eve as such is a non-event in Britain. We had a quiet evening around the Christmas tree with some drinks and music. The children were very excited but they had to wait for the next morning when Father Christmas would have been in. Before they went to bed they placed a glass of sherry for him and a plate with carrots for his reindeer in front of the fireplace where he was supposed to come through - never mind the crib!

The children were not sure where to put up their stockings. On the fireplace? At the bedposts? On the door handles? Pretty late we went to bed.

Lisa woke up first. She later told us she had opened her stocking by about 4.30 in the morning and gone back to sleep afterwards. At about 7.30 a.m. the children marched into my room, waking me with a cup of tea and - a stocking. I had not hung one up but Father Christmas must somehow have thought kindly of the German visitor: There were sweets, writing and bathing utensils and a lovely colourful bow-tie.

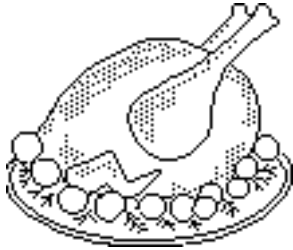


After the opening ceremony we all went into the parents' bedroom - still in our pyjamas - to get more presents from under the Christmas tree and open them. I had never experienced a similarly happy family atmosphere: Everybody was excited and most pleased with what they got. Some presents though were to remain under the tree to be opened after church,

just to keep the tension going.

Church was at 10.30 and we attended the service in the little village church in Stratford. The atmosphere was cheerful, and the sermon offered a very interesting speculation on how far the Christmas card designers got it historically right when depicting the nativity scene.

After church the turkey was put in the oven and off we went - for drinks to a distant relative in the village. We stayed for about two hours - standing, chatting and sipping our drinks in the typical British cocktail-party manner - before we walked home to enjoy a super



Christmas dinner with everything that belonged to it: The roast and stuffed turkey, brussels sprouts, carrots, roast potatoes, gravy and - of course - Christmas Pudding. Meanwhile the children had opened more presents and we were playing with them all over the house. Especially keen they

were on two games they had got: We played MONOPOLY whenever there was a chance, and nearly everybody had to have a go at TWISTER, a hilarious limb-twisting fun game. I must admit, I managed to escape it but I am sure next time they will get me!

On Boxing Day the Walshs had invited the neighbours for drinks; it was nice to get to know another lot of people from the village. For dinner there were more visitors - and games.

On Sunday Lisa's great moment came: Shortly before I had left home Radio Bremen had inquired if I could provide a German-speaking English child to tell the listeners about Christmas in Britain. I could not think of anybody in Bremen but casually mentioned that I was going to UK and that Lisa and her mother spoke German. The editor immediately decid-

ed to ring us up and Lisa took it on to talk about her Christmas. Of course she was very excited, especially as we did not know what the concrete questions would be. At 9.30 a.m. the phone rang and Lisa was "on air". She did very well in a mixed German-English conversation and I am sure the listeners will have enjoyed it.

In the afternoon Lisa and her father went riding while the rest of us went for an icy walk in the New Forest.

Monday brought another highlight: John had arranged a guided tour at Salisbury Cathedral but it was not an ordinary church tour but a roof tour. We climbed up to the "first floor" and from there we had the most marvellous views into the cathedral and outside over Salisbury. We walked over the vaults and saw the bell mechanism trigger the 11 o'clock chime. Unfortunately we could not go higher up as the spire was still under renovation. Our guide provided a lot of "useless" but interesting information and although it was quite cold up there it was a great pleasure.

My last day brought shopping - and Stonehenge. On the crisp winter's afternoon we went out to see this historical monument, just in time for sunset and some spectacular photos. Not too many people were around so that we could really enjoy it.

I was very sad to leave on Wednesday. It had been a week full of enjoyment, fun and happiness. Childhood days had come to life again. It had been as I had imagined - and better. I sincerely hope that every family experienced a likewise happy Christmas - ours certainly was wonderful!



## Christmas in England: Worksheet

1. Fill in the author's diary (key words) as accurately as you can from your knowledge of the story.

23 Dec	24 Dec	25 Dec
26 Dec	27 Dec	28 Dec

2. *Homework till after Christmas:* Fill in YOUR Christmas diary as accurately as you remember.

23 Dec	24 Dec	25 Dec
26 Dec	27 Dec	28 Dec

3. Now write YOUR **Christmas story** in your exercise book.