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“Tis the season to be jolly” – and safe from fires and burns: lessons from history

Christmas is filled to the brim with cultural rituals, which add symbolic meaning and fun to the holiday season. These include putting up the Christmas tree and dressing it in colourful decorations, gorging on rich and fatty foods, and gift-giving. These rites are all steeped in history – the modern Christmas was ‘the festival of the family’, as George V described it in his 1934 Christmas Day broadcast.

These are all fun traditions, but they are also accompanied by an underlying concern about safety. We want our families to enjoy their Christmas, but to do so safely. The [Government’s official statistics](#) reveal a variety of risks peculiar to this festive season. In 2011-12, candles caused around 1,000 domestic fires in the UK, resulting in 9 deaths and 388 casualties; faulty fairy lights caused 20 house fires, and Christmas trees and decorations sparked another 47. A&E departments treat upwards of 1,000 patients every year with Christmas burns injuries. Sensitive to the seasonal dangers, the West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service recently launched its annual [‘Countdown to Christmas’](#) campaign, which aims to provide the best advice on how to avoid a Christmas calamity.

Current campaigns are steeped in history – the modern history of Christmas has been accompanied by annual safety campaigns, as has been revealed in research for a four-year project involving researchers from Leeds Beckett University and the University of Birmingham, [‘Forged in Fire: Burns and British Identity, 1800-2000’](#). Christmas is an occasion when the state has been allowed to take a spare seat at the dinner table and tuck into the brandy pudding, but only if the flames have been safely extinguished.

The origins of safety campaigns were in late Victorian times when festive fire disasters highlighted the frightening dangers that lurked behind such occasions. On New Year’s Day 1891, eleven young schoolgirls were burned to death in a ‘disastrous calamity’ in a parish church hall, in New Wortley, Leeds. They had all been dressed in highly flammable cotton-wool for a festive performance of “Snowflakes”, and each carried a small Chinese lamp, which was lit by a candle. When the girls’ lamps set fire to their dresses, they quickly went up in flames and were ‘very severely burned.’ Despite the best efforts of the emergency services (the chief superintendent of the Leeds Fire Brigade transported four of the children to the Leeds Infirmary on his fire engine), they later died. When the jury returned a verdict of death by accident, they also censured the organisers for dressing the children in ‘a most dangerous material’, particularly so soon after a similar incident in the United States, where four girls had met similar gruesome fates over the Christmas holidays. Lessons about public safety would be learned from such a tragedy.

The twentieth century saw an increase around Christmas-time in safety campaigning, by the fire service and voluntary organisations like the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, which continues to issue [annual Christmas safety tips](#). In 1936, the *Yorkshire Evening Post* printed a list of Do’s and Don’ts for Christmas safety: don’t hang naked lights on the Christmas tree, don’t use cotton-wool for fake snow, and don’t use inflammable materials to cover illuminated globes, but do hang paper decorations well away from naked flames, keep matches out of the reach of ‘little fingers’, and guard fireplaces to protect

young children. The spread of fairy lights during the 1930s was a response to this growing awareness of the risks posed by trees which, if left unattended, could be a fatal hazard. Even then, the fire service warned of the dangers of overloading sockets, and the importance of turning the lights off at bedtime.

It wasn't all doom and gloom, however. Christmas was, as Ebenezer Scrooge learns, a time for looking after vulnerable people in our communities. Fire brigades helped to keep the spirit of Christmas burning from the mid-1930s, decorating their stations and entertaining orphaned or poor children with Christmas parties. These occasions were usually crowned with one of the firefighters, donned in a Santa outfit, sliding down the station pole to deliver presents to excited children. It was important for brigades to perform this community role, in part because they could use it as an opportunity to educate youngsters about safety, but also because the fire service has a historic commitment towards protecting vulnerable groups from danger – the West Yorkshire FRS' participation in this year's [Mission Christmas toy appeal](#) is evidence of the continuation of this community role.

Even Father Christmas, the embodiment of Christmas for many children, was at risk. Dressed in a flammable robe, he was at risk of being burned, as happened in 1951 when, during a toy appeal for children at Leeds's Gaiety Cinema on Roundhay Road, Santa (being played by the cinema's firefighter) set fire to his beard whilst smoking, and burned his face and hands. Two years earlier, 'Santa Joe', in Sevenoaks, suffered burns to his hands extinguishing the flames after the cotton-wool hem on his robes caught fire whilst passing an electric stove. The local paper described him as 'a Yuletide Hero' because he insisted on handing out gifts to the expectant children dressed in a borrowed dressing gown and with bandaged hands.

Risks and accidents are everyday events, then, but they are also historical phenomena, shaped by evolving social, cultural and material practices. Christmas has its own peculiar, and ever changing, set of risks, as do other religious and cultural festivals. Christmas trees are no longer decorated with candles, children don't carry naked lights, while stockings are rarely hung in front of open fires anymore. However, these hazards, and the stories behind them, are an important part of our collective memory of Christmas; they remind us of our good fortune at a time of the year when we think about those who are worse off than us. Spare a thought too for our emergency services who sacrifice their Christmases so that we can have a safe and relaxing time.

The newspapers consulted for this blog post are digitised by the British Newspaper Archive, an online subscription service.

*This blog post is written by [Dr Shane Ewen](#), Senior Lecturer in History at Leeds Beckett History. Shane has written extensively about the history of the fire service, including the 2010 book, *Fighting Fires: Creating the British Fire Service, 1800-1978*. He is currently Co-Investigator on a 4-year project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, researching the social and cultural history of burns incidents and injuries, called 'Forged by Fire: Burns Injury and British Identity, c.1800-2000'. Further information is available from the*

[project website](#) or via Twitter at [@BurnsHistory](#). If you have any stories that you wish to share with the team, please contact Shane at s.ewen@leedsbeckett.ac.uk.