

DESERT ISLAND TIMES

Sharing fellowship in

NEWPORT SE WALES U3A

Christmas Special

17th December 2020



*A MISCELLANY OF
CONTRIBUTIONS
FROM OUR MEMBERS*

Well, we have finally come to the end of what must rank as the strangest year in any of our lives! We have survived – probably exhausted from trying to keep up-to-date with the ever-changing rules and guidance, provided with the intention of keeping us safe. I know that we have been planning a family Christmas for some while, but have had to dramatically revise our plans, as the situation has deteriorated further, and meeting up in any numbers seems ill-advised to say the least. It may well be that Gill and I will be sitting down to a Christmas lunch for two, for the very first time in our lives, but if that is what is necessary, then so be it. Thankfully technology will enable us to gather with the rest of our family using Facetime or Zoom – and perhaps we will be able to have a proper Christmas celebration in May 2021!!! We will not be going out before Christmas 2020, in the hope that things might improve, but!

The emphasis is on free-standing Christmas content in the main, and for that reason I have not included any on-going series such as the Talking Points – they will continue in the new year.

On behalf of the Committee of Newport SE Wales U3A, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all contributors for keeping us supplied with interesting and lively material and to wish all of our members and our non-Newport U3A readers, a very happy Christmas and a healthy New Year – one which sees us regain some degree of normality and enables us to meet up again physically rather than electronically!

I hope that this final edition of Desert Island Times for 2020 will go some way to helping you to get through the Christmas period with a smile.

A Christmas Quiz for you from Pam Cocchiara

1. Which Christmas themed ballet is the most famous?
2. In which year was “A Christmas Carol” by Charles Dickens published?
3. In “A Christmas Carol” how many spirits appeared to Scrooge?
4. An advertisement for which product was the first to use Father Christmas?
5. How many reindeer (not counting Rudolph) traditionally pull Father Christmas’s sleigh?
6. In which country did the gingerbread house originate?
7. In which ocean is Christmas Island?
8. Which Christmas themed film has been played more than any other?
9. Who invented the Christmas cracker?
10. What is the best-selling Christmas song ever?
11. Which Pope decided that the date for Christmas Day would be December 25th?
12. The tradition of having a Christmas tree in Great Britain began in which century?
13. What was the name of the Grinch’s dog in “How the Grinch Stole Christmas”?
14. The turkey is native to which continent?
15. In which author’s work is it ‘*always winter but never Christmas*’?
16. In which country did the idea of a Christmas tree originate?
17. What was Brenda Lee doing around the Christmas tree?
18. ‘The Snowman’ was shown on TV for the first time on Boxing Day of which year?
19. Which British monarch delivered the first ever Christmas message?
And lastly, something which could perhaps put you off your Christmas dinner....
20. The average adult Christmas dinner is estimated to contain how many calories?

Answers are on page 5

Top of the Pups – a Dog’s Tale

(based on an article in South Wales Argus, 8th December 2020 (edited) – photographs ©SWA 2020)

Christmas fundraising campaigns depend heavily on “stars” to promote their cause and we are fortunate to have amongst our members a star – and her star!

Two years ago Hilary Lester had Portia as her guide dog. Hilary has severe sight impairment due to glaucoma and is the organiser of the Guide Dogs Newport fundraising group. During the first year that Portia was with Hilary, they were out and about doing bucket collections, giving talks to schools and attending canine calming sessions at the Office for National Statistics. Of course, for most of 2020 activities of this sort have not been possible, but Hilary has found new ways to spread the word about the fantastic work of Guide Dogs Cymru. She has given online talks to schools in different parts of the UK – and has even addressed a Beavers’ group in Bahrain!

Hilary has been personally affected by the COVID crisis, as her father died of it in the summer. Soon after, Hilary and Portia began to walk the equivalent of the Welsh coastal path – a distance of 870 miles. By walking six miles each day they completed it by the end of November. Hilary said, “Portia was with me every step of the way – I could not have done it without my wonderful Portia by my side. I just love her to pieces!”

Earlier this year Hilary was named the charity’s top volunteer and was given an award for her work engaging with the public. But Portia has rightly been given an award too – she was selected to be part of the Twelve Guide Dogs of Christmas Advent Calendar.

To view the calendar go to <https://www.guidedogs.org.uk/12-dogs-of-christmas> - Portia is at day 11.

The campaign aims to raise enough money to fund 12 new guide dogs and any donations will be gratefully received!



NOT THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS by Ros Lee

Twas the night before Christmas and all through the streets
people were shouting and buying their treats.
No stockings around chimneys, nobody cared
No chance of St. Nicholas with presents to share.

The children were restless all jumping on their beds
while vision of X Box danced in their heads.
The dogs were fighting for their crunchy snacks
while the parents argued over who first they whacked.

When out on the lawn there arose such a din
they sprang from their chairs to see fallen dustbins.
Away to the left in front of the trees
was a great big moose eating their leaves.

The moon was not out for fear of the snow
But everyone else was raring to go.
When, what their eyes saw it did transpire
the silly moose was lighting a fire.

With a little old man who was dressed all in red
He looked as though he should be tucked up in bed.
Then out of the darkened borders and shrubs
came he strutting with a very large club.

Now householders, looking in rage at this sight
I hope you've remembered that it's Christmas night.
'To the outside please,' Santa said, 'All stand under the porch'.
The moose came too, with a great big torch.

Now listen up you ungrateful lot of people
I've lost my reindeers, they're stuck on the steeple.
Dasher, Prancer, Vixen and Blitzen
have all lost their charge-up mittens.

I need to recharge their mittens to 70 degrees
then put them back on to warm their knees.
Santa barged by the amazed family and into the kitchen.
He plugged in the charger and heated the mittens.

Ten minutes later the mittens were charging
Santa said, 'Excuse me for barging'.
'Not at all', said the adults and kids
'another biscuit', they asked, as they lifted the lid.

Away in the night sky the moon was full and bright.
Santa stood up and said, 'I wish you goodnight'.
I'll leave your presents by the tree made of wire
but next year, please remember if it's not real, I'll set it on fire.

He mounted his sleigh, and off he went.
The reindeers left a whiffy scent.
They sped along the Milky Way
Santa will finish deliveries before day.

What did the family do next day?
Did they go to church and pray?
The kids argued over their presents and food
the electric went off and everyone was in a bad mood!

The moral of this poem? They should have billed Santa for the electricity!!

Have a very Merry Christmas, dear reader.

Christmas Quiz (page 2) - Answers

- | | | | |
|-----|-----------------------------|-----|----------------------------------|
| 1. | 'Nutcracker' by Tchaikovsky | 11. | Pope Julius 1 st |
| 2. | 1843 | 12. | 19 th |
| 3. | 4 | 13. | Max |
| 4. | Coca Cola | 14. | N. America |
| 5. | 8 | 15. | C.S. Lewis |
| 6. | Germany | 16. | Germany |
| 7. | Indian Ocean | 17. | Rockin' |
| 8. | "It's a Wonderful Life" | 18. | 1982 |
| 9. | Tom Smith | 19. | George V |
| 10. | "White Christmas" | 20. | 7000 calories - Enjoy your meal! |

A Christmas Joke submitted by Greg and Gwen Varney

The Teacher asked young Patrick Murphy: "What do you do at Christmas time?"

Patrick addressed the class: "Well, Miss Jones, me and my twelve brothers and sisters go to midnight mass and we sing hymns; we come home very late and we put mince pies by the back door and hang up our stockings. Then, excited, we go to bed and wait for Father Christmas to come with all our toys."

"Very nice Patrick," she said. "Now Jimmy Brown, what do you do at Christmas?"

"Well, Miss Jones, me and my sister also go to church with Mum and Dad and we sing carols and we get home ever so late. We put biscuits and milk by the chimney and we hang up our stockings. We hardly sleep, waiting for Santa Claus to bring our presents."

Realising there was a Jewish boy in the class and not wanting to leave him out of the discussion, she asked, "Now, Isaac Cohen, what do you do at Christmas?"

Isaac said, "Well, it's the same thing every year . . . Dad comes home from the office, we all pile into the Rolls Royce; then we drive to Dad's toy factory. When we get inside, we look at all the empty shelves . . . and we sing: 'What A Friend We Have in Jesus'.

Then we all go to the Bahamas."

Judith Nash has asked me to pass on Seasonal Greetings to all members of the French Intermediate group, the Art group and the Ukulele Intermediate group.

ANAGRAMS of CHRISTMAS SONGS

1. 

a galactic monsoon
untwists

2. 

healthily doth envy

3. 

seafront myths now

4. 

anagram ya wine

5. 

gilded going rhino
hymn

6. 

marshiest witch

7. 

a garland heels
her knights

8. 

a windsock glee
song

9. 

a referee network
hoisting

10. 

idle tent yolk

11. 

my hybrid coals

12. 

feline troths

Answers are on page 18

What We Were Doing . . . - Angela Robins

Two years ago, as part of our 25th Anniversary celebrations, we closed the Autumn Term with a special Carol Service that was officiated by the Reverend Gordon Gresswell in his unique friendly and humorous way. Ian Lumley of the Creative Writing Group recited his own poignant Christmas story and Tony Mason read the Lesson. These were interspersed with the singing of Carols by the congregation of our members. The U3A Choir sang another two and members of the French and Welsh Groups sang carols in their respective languages. There was also a World Premier of the Italian Group's own compilation. Jerome's request for the congregation to join in the chorus, had a cheerful response and just by la-la-la-ing along to a tune that none of us had heard before, we were suddenly one united congregation and that atmosphere remained throughout the service.

Afterwards we were privileged to welcome Dame Rosemary Butler who was a Founder of Newport U3A. She told us that she held the earliest meetings in her front room after being motivated by a TV programme about the international U3A movement.

She never imagined we would grow to almost 400 members, enjoying over 30 interest groups (now 43), but thought it was the nicest thing she had ever done, and wished she had the time to become a member. She urged members to value the friendship our association gives us, which extends our minds whilst enjoying social events and having a jolly good time!

Dame Rosemary then produced a certificate which had been awarded by the Third Age Trust to mark the 25th Anniversary of our association. She presented it to the Vice Chairman Alan Fry and three past Chairwomen - Pam Cocchiara, Maureen Rocke and Jackie Kerr. Dame Rosemary wondered if we should call a group of four Chairs a Suite!

It was a shame that the then Chairwoman, Barbara Phillips, was unable to attend due to hospitalisation: thankfully she has made a remarkable recovery.

"Nadolig Llawen, Buon Natale, Joyeaux Noel and A Happy New Year! "

-----X-----





-----X-----

At the U3A's Carol Service the Chairman welcomed our congregation and warned them to take care driving home, if taking the M4 route, as he had been informed there was a motorist driving in the wrong direction.

Euan piped up "Tell me about it - there were dozens of them when I drove here!"

A Christmas Poem from Hilary Lester

Covid arrived with little warning
Hovering over each day dawning
Raging through like a forest fire
In its wake things were pretty dire

So now on to a better day
The vaccine hopefully on its way
Massive thank you for all you've done
A hope next year will be more fun

So Merry Christmas and cheers to 2021

MUSICAL CRACKERS FOR CHRISTMAS - Delivered by Neil Pritchard

This Christmas could be a difficult and frustrating time for many of us, so I thought I'd try and cheer you up, with a selection of musical treats all packaged and delivered to you to open this Christmas. So think of this as 10 Christmas presents, care of YouTube, with some *cracker jokes with a Christmas message*. I'll include brief bits of info for each piece, so as to fill you in with some hopefully interesting tit-bits. Our first treat is a good old favourite which needs no introduction: it is of course White Christmas. With 50 million copies sold, not only is Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" the best-selling Christmas song of all time, it's also the best-selling single ever, according to Guinness World Records. It first aired during the Kraft Music Hall radio show (yes, sponsored by the food company) on December 25, 1941. It was written by Irving Berlin, a Russian-born immigrant who, interestingly enough, did not celebrate Christmas, as he was Jewish. He wrote "White Christmas" for a musical that eventually morphed into the movie and it ended up winning an Academy Award for the song. In 1954, it was the title track of another Bing Crosby Christmas Musical - White Christmas.

Crosby's rendition quickly became an American favourite, even though the original radio recording was lost and the 1942 version, which is said to have only taken 18 minutes, was worn out. It was constantly requested by troops during Crosby's appearances overseas during the war, which gave the singer some mixed feelings. "I hesitated about doing it because invariably it caused such a nostalgic yearning among the men, that it made them sad," Crosby said in an interview. "Heaven knows, I didn't come that far to make them sad. For this reason, several times I tried to cut it out of the show, but these guys just hollered for it." Clearly, they identified with the wistful lyrics about holidays at home. Since then, "White Christmas" has been covered by everyone from Elvis to Karen Carpenter to Lady Gaga—but its timeless message remains the same. Here's it's taken from the White Christmas movie.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7S-lidmcSN8>

A few years ago, when I was rather poorly, a friend sent me a card saying "Get Bell Soon". He meant well.

Let's go with some jazzy Jingle Bells. But before that - what's the origin of the original song? "Jingle Bells" was written by the American James Lord Pierpont. The song was actually first performed at a US Thanksgiving church service and was never intended to be a Christmas song. The song became associated with Christmas only decades after it was performed in September 1857, on Washington Street in Boston. The song's birthplace is contested. There are two historical plaques in two cities, each claiming to be the birthplace of Pierpont's "Jingle Bells." A plaque in Medford, Massachusetts, suggests Pierpont wrote the song in 1850 while sitting in a tavern watching sleigh races on the nearby street. However, research has found that Pierpont couldn't have written the song in 1850 because he was chasing cash in California during the Gold Rush. There's also a plaque in Savannah, Georgia, where people insist Pierpont wrote the song in late 1857 before leading the first "Jingle Bells" sing-along in a local church. Others say Pierpont most likely wrote the song in a Guest House not far from where he lived in downtown Boston in 1857. The main thing to recognise is its popularity has persisted up to the present day, wherever it was written.

Another interesting fact (if you're a space junky) is that Jingle Bells' was the first song broadcast from space. Ten days before Christmas 1965, astronauts "Wally" Schirra Junior and Thomas P. Stafford, orbiting aboard Gemini 6, met Gemini 7, piloted by Frank Borman and Jim Lovell. When it was time to re-enter Earth's atmosphere, on December 16th, Schirra and Stafford playfully reported to Mission Control some sort of UFO: "We have an object, looks like a satellite going from north to south, probably in polar orbit.... Looks like he might be going to re-enter soon.... You just might let me pick up that thing.... I see a command module and eight smaller modules in front. The pilot of the command module is wearing a red suit." Ground controllers then began to hear the strains of none other than "Jingle Bells," being played by the astronauts on a harmonica backed by miniature sleigh bells. Today, those bells and harmonica are on display at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. I definitely think there's space for a nice Jingle in this version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDmlo-w2nmw>

I don't know if you heard, but last year on Christmas Eve the police searched Santa's sleigh, for some strange reason. They were acting within the law, as they had probable Claus!

Time to go on a ride, in particular a Sleigh Ride. This is how Leroy Anderson came to compose his most famous piece Sleigh Ride. He and his wife Eleanor, with their young daughter Jane, first came to Woodbury, Connecticut in 1946, to spend the summer in a cottage there. Captain Leroy Anderson had been released from active duty in the U.S. Army as Chief of the Scandinavian Desk of Military Intelligence. During a July heatwave and drought in 1946, he began composing several tunes, including Sleigh Ride, which was a musical depiction of the winter season long ago. The following winter of 1946-47 turned out to be one of the snowiest winters on record in his home town of New York City. Leroy Anderson completed Sleigh Ride in Brooklyn in February 1948 and it received its premiere in May 1948, with Arthur Fiedler conducting the Boston Pops Orchestra at Symphony Hall in Boston.

According to the composer's widow Eleanor Anderson, "Leroy didn't set out to write a Christmas piece when he wrote Sleigh Ride. His intentions were to convey the entire winter season through the imagery of a sleigh ride, much in the way that Mozart did with his piece of the same name." Eleanor Anderson remembers hearing Sleigh Ride in New York City department stores right after the first recording was released in 1949. The composer's intentions aside, this winter composition quickly became associated with the Christmas season. "Sleigh Ride" is a Christmas favourite in many countries to this day, and the setting I've chosen for piano duet gives it a new fresh twist. It was recorded live at the United States Navy Band Annual Holiday Concert on 21st December 2014. This version is great fun and full of many musical surprises along the way: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3F0ZeyF4DiQ>

By the way: How much did Santa pay for his sleigh? Nothing, it was on the house!

We now enter the realm of Paul McCartney, and in particular the festive single "Wonderful Christmastime". "Wonderful Christmastime" still enjoys great Christmas time popularity around the world. On the track he sings, plays guitar, bass and keyboards and is also on drums and percussion. And although the video features the rest of his group Wings, they don't feature at all on the recording. It's all Paul. Even when it comes to 'the choir of children' who sing the song they've practised all year long (which seems to just consist of 'ding dong' which surely doesn't require that much practice) – it's just McCartney putting on a funny voice. Written by McCartney, on what he recalls was a 'boiling hot day in July', and recorded during sessions for the McCartney II album, the song was released in November 1979. It apparently took the former Beatle just ten minutes to write the song which, despite the simple lyrics (The party's on / The spirits up / We're here tonight / And that's enough), remains impressive.

It peaked at number six on the UK Singles Chart and has since become one of the most widely played Christmas songs on radio. In terms of composition, perhaps the most striking element of the song is the odd synthesiser sound that punctuates it throughout. And just to emphasise, that it's a wonderful Christmastime, there are of course sleigh bells and all sorts of jingling throughout. Some people love the song, others actively detest it. I think it's a song that perfectly captures the mood of Christmas. Kylie Minogue has recorded the song as a duet in 2016, and the likes of Diana Ross and The Monkees have all made their own versions. Interestingly, while The Beatles only really had one Christmas release – 'Christmas Time Is Here Again', which was distributed to their fan club in 1967, all four members went on to record Christmas songs. And so to the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94Ye-3C1FC8>

With presents in mind: How do you know when Santa's around? You can always sense his presents!

They just don't write Christmas songs like they used to! Enter Geraldine McQueen (the comedian Peter Kay) who set to put all that right with her/his! spoof Christmas song, 'Once Upon a Christmas Song'. The proceeds from the single were donated to the NSPCC, and at its peak in 2008, it reached number 5 in the UK charts. The song's memorable video and attention grabber, tells of them singing Christmas songs 'Over & Over & Over again'. This made the melody an instant hit. The video for "Once Upon a Christmas Song" features Geraldine (Peter Kay), on a float singing to the public. It ends with her lighting up a street with Christmas decorations. "Once Upon a Christmas Song" is the second single to be released by fictional

character Geraldine McQueen. It was co-written by Gary Barlow and Peter Kay, originating from a parody talent show called Britain's Got the Pop Factor. The CD was released on 15th December 2008, with the download available a day earlier. In 2016, an instrumental version of the song served as the theme tune to BBC One's compilation series Peter Kay's Comedy Shuffle. Here comes the video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kmPz5IbU90>

What is one of the best Christmas present that you can give and receive? It's a broken drum. Why? Because you can't beat it!

Next we have an old-time favourite in the shape of a little boy drumming up business. Yes, it's the 'Little Drummer Boy'. Before it became world famous as the "Little Drummer Boy," the song was originally titled "Carol of the Drums" because of the repeating line "pa rum pum pum pum," which imitates the sound of a drum. It's not certain who wrote the song, but the "Little Drummer Boy" is believed to have been written by Katherine K. Davis in 1941. The song lyrics are said to be based on an old Czech carol. The Little Drummer Boy is the story of a poor boy who couldn't afford a gift for the new-born Christ Child, so he played his drum at the manger with Mary's approval. The baby smiled, delighted with the Little Drummer Boy's skilful playing. The story of the Little Drummer Boy resembles a twelfth century legend. The French legend said that a juggler juggled in front of a statue of Mary and the statue, depending on the version of the story, either smiled at him or threw him a rose. Since the 1950s, The Little Drummer Boy has appeared in over 200 versions in seven languages, in all kinds of music genres. In 1964 Marlene Dietrich recorded a German version of the Little Drummer Boy. The Beverly Sisters and Michael Flanders recorded hit versions of The Little Drummer Boy in 1959 and 1972. The Pipes and Drums and Military Band of the Royal Scots Guards had a hit version of the carol. Bing Crosby and David Bowie recorded the most popular version of the Little Drummer Boy as a duet with Peace on Earth, for Bing Crosby's Television Christmas special in 1977. The duet version was written after David Bowie admitted he hated the song that he was scheduled to sing. Bing Crosby performed The Little Drummer Boy while David Bowie sang the new song Peace on Earth. The duet eventually became a classic. Katherine K. Davis once quipped that The Little Drummer Boy "had been done to death on radio and TV," but musicians all over the world continue to sing and record her song. Here's the Bowie - Crosby version. Sadly Bing died before this could air on television, on November 30th 1977. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9kfdEyV3RQ>

How did Jack know how many beans his cow was worth? Answer: He used a cowculator!

And so to a modern "Fairytale Tale" of sorts? My next entry is not your conventional Christmas song, but it's one I've always had a liking for since it first appeared on the scene in 1987. "Fairytale of New York" is a song written by Jem Finer and Shane MacGowan and recorded by their band the Pogues, featuring singer-songwriter Kirsty MacColl on vocals. The song is an Irish folk-style ballad and was written as a duet, with the Pogues' singer MacGowan taking the role of the male character, and MacColl the female character. It was originally released as a single on 23rd November 1987 and later featured on the Pogues 1988 album "If I Should Fall from Grace with God". Although there is agreement among the band that "Fairytale of New York" was first written in 1985, the origins of the song are disputed. MacGowan insisted that it arose as a result of a wager made by the Pogues' producer at the time, Elvis Costello, that the band would not be able to write a Christmas hit single. However the Pogues' manager Frank Murray has stated that it was originally his idea that the band should try and write a Christmas song, as he thought it would be "interesting". Banjo player Finer came up with the melody and the original concept for the song, which involved a sailor in New York looking out over the ocean and reminiscing about being back home in Ireland. The song's title, the musical structure and its lyrical theme were in place by the end of 1985 and were described by MacGowan in an interview with Melody Maker in its 1985 Christmas issue: "I sat down, opened the sherry, got the peanuts out and pretended it was Christmas. It's even called 'A Fairy Tale of New York'. Like an Irish ballad, but one you can do a brisk waltz to, especially when you've got about three drinks inside you. MacGowan had decided to name the song after J. P. Donleavy's 1973 novel "A Fairy Tale of New York", which Finer was reading at the time and had left lying around the recording studio. This is a version from 2012: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riN4M_x0pj4

I think we can safely say that Dawn is Rising by the end of the song. Talking about singers: Who is Santa's favourite singer? It's Elf-is Presley of course!

I turn now to Mr Bean and his crazy Christmas shenanigans. "Merry Christmas, Mr Bean" was the seventh episode of the British television series Mr Bean. For those of you "too young" to remember it, "Mr Bean" was a British sitcom created by Rowan Atkinson and Richard Curtis, starring Atkinson as the title character. The story is about Mr Bean preparing for the big day. He goes into town on Christmas Eve and visits Harrods to buy some Christmas decorations, continuing his trend of behaving inappropriately, in this case in a prestigious department store. After parking directly at the front of the store, and harassing a man dressed as Santa Claus, by plucking on his false beard, Bean proceeds to test two different baubles: one bounces off the ground and the other one simply smashes. He then looks to test out some Christmas lights, and manages to get into a storeroom while an employee is busy dealing with a customer. He tries it out on a socket being used for the store's exterior lights, plunging the entire exterior of the store into darkness in the process.

There are many more hilarious moments before Bean leaves the store. He wanders over to a local market and volunteers to help the conductor of a Salvation Army brass band, performing "God Rest You Merry Gentlemen", collect money in his bucket. In doing so, he catches a young pickpocket with a wallet in his hand and forces him to surrender all the items he stole, including cash and jewellery (notably, Bean retrieves a ring the boy hid in his mouth by smacking him on the head). He brings these to the conductor, who secretly decides to check out what he brought back (implying that he is greedily stealing the goods rather than donating them). Bean finds himself conducting the band, and has some fun with them, before conducting the same song with an upbeat, jazzy feel to it, earning a big round of applause from the crowd: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSWpVId72Jo>

We still have more songs perfectly wrapped for the festive season, and talking about more singers: *Who is a Christmas tree's favourite singer? It is of course Spruce Springsteen!*

Next in line is Nat King Cole. He started out playing jazz piano, and he was one of the best. His trio — piano, bass and guitar — turned rhythm and melody into a seamless mix. For that alone, we would celebrate Nat King Cole. But what defined his greatness, and his ground-breaking success, wasn't his playing. It was his voice. Nat King Cole's voice was cool and soothing and his pitch was impeccable. There's a word you hear a lot when people talk about Nat King Cole – relaxed. "When you start listening to him, one of the most important things is - he keeps you relaxed," says Cole's younger brother Freddie Cole. "The amazing thing about Nat's voice is that it has this kind of incandescent quality to it." Music historian Will Friedwald says: "It's like some kind of magic spell is being cast." And singer Aaron Neville: "He just hypnotised me. It was like medicine to me. If I had had a bad day, Nat would smooth it all out."

In 1946, Cole became the first recording artist to sing the classic festive lyrics about "chestnuts roasting on an open fire and Jack Frost nipping at your nose", in what many regard as the definitive version of 'The Christmas Song'. Nearly 10 million YouTubers are testament to this. The song was co-written by famous crooner Mel Tormé and Bob Wells on a scorching summer's day. Tormé's youngest son James, a jazz singer, said that his father and Wells took the song firstly to a publishing house who rejected it. "They then drove over to Nat King Cole, who was exploding in popularity at the time," said Tormé, Jr. "They played it and he asked them to play it again. 'Stop everything, that's my song,' he said." Cole's hit version isn't just one of the best Nat King Cole Songs, it's part of modern Christmas itself. See if you agree: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwacxSnc4tl>

I'm sure by now your thinking of getting a bite to eat. I know Santa was a big fan of Pizzas. What do you think was his favourite kind of pizza? One that's deep-pan, crisp and even!! Snow far snow good! You'll be relieved to hear that that was the last pun? Hurrah! I'm going to end with a song from the musical "Mame". I must say it's a musical I'm not familiar with, but during my YouTube searching, I came across a lovely Christmas song from the musical. I feel at first glance it might sum up this year's Christmas celebration: "We All Need A Little Christmas". This originated from Jerry Herman's Broadway musical

Mame and was first performed by Angela Lansbury in the original 1966 production. In the musical, the song is performed after Mame has lost her fortune in the Wall Street Crash of 1929. She decides that her young nephew Patrick and her two household servants "need a little Christmas now", to cheer them up.

Before I sign off can I wish you all a very Merry Christmas and the happiest of New (Vaccine) Years. This is a video taken from the film version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UL9rVtRvRI>

I can't resist a final joke: *What do Santa's elves learn in school? The elf-abet!*

No more Neil, you bad boy. No Christmas dinner for you.
That's your Pun- ishment!

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Is Cordon Bleu an Art, a Science, or a Craft?



This festive meal and its attractive setting prove that, whatever the “experts” on Masterchef might say, on this occasion it is most definitely a Craft! In this case it was the product of the ladies in our Craft group who, as always, produce the most amazing creations for special events and occasions. Produced in 2014, it was displayed at the Caerleon Craft Fair. The photograph was submitted by **Alan Fry** and is justifiably titled “Knitted Lunch”.

Two Christmas Poems by Ros Lee

(Not to be copied, duplicated or used in public without permission of the author Rosalind Lee)

REINDEERS REVOLT

It was Christmas Eve and all the reindeers were kipping.
Santa with his face aglow was high and tripping.
His reindeers stumbled as into the heavens they strode.
Comet and Vixen were puffing away, as Santa had a heavy load.

The milky way was all lit up with sparkling stars galore
But Dasher had a black eye and couldn't see no more.
Apart from his red nose, he was looking pale and stubbly.
Because the night before, he'd been out on the bubbly.

Dasher's feet were cold and he wasn't feeling happy
In fact, these deliveries had made him rather snappy.
All of a sudden, the reindeers stopped in mid fight
While Santa drank a brandy, then felt rather tight.

It was half-way through the night and getting very cold
When one of the well know reindeer, Vixen, I am told
Whinnied out with gusto, I'm quitting, and down went the sleigh
With Santa fuming as they crashed down from the milky way.

They landed in a field of white, frozen water on the ground.
Then Santa with his wisdom passed a bottle round.
This perked up the reindeers and made them feel quite nice
Prancer, Donner and Dasher were dancing on the ice.

Vixen seemed to come around, feeling now less miffed.
He said, let's get back to business and deliver all these gifts.
They took off into the night, and made the deliveries on time
Especially those that were ordered using Amazon Prime.

CHRISTMAS PRESENT

Amazon is not a rain forest but a delivery thingy online.
Better still you can order quick deliveries from Prime.
You don't need to walk to shops, outlets or malls
Because you can pay with something called PayPal.

Don't forget the quantity or what day you want it on
Random deliveries are now things long gone.
Order in the morning and get it the same day.
Remember to listen for them, or they'll go away.

If you go out for a walk and you are not around
You will find your parcel waiting on the ground.
Glass or fragile items are booted over your fence with glee.
As long, as they're delivered and they get their fee.

Black Friday is a huge success and if you shop online
You'll max out your credit card & it will be declined.
What about Alexa or Echo sitting on your table
But mind out, with listening they're very able.

All these modern gadgets are wonderful to own.
Charge up your car and pay right on the phone.
Perhaps you want a robot to help you with the chores?
Or perhaps one that pops out from a corner and cleans the floors.

When it's ordered and you think that's that
You'll find a notice lying on the mat
The parcel cannot be delivered as you were out
All you can do then is SHOUT AND SHOUT.

Winter in the Rat-Run by David Jenkins

A watery sun shone dimly in the grey mid-December sky, diffused through misty rain which had been falling for a week. An occasional point of light shone through the semi-darkness when by chance a ray of weak light sparkled from time to time on raindrops which had collected on a shopping-trolley abandoned in an alley between high-rise blocks, or glinted off a burned-out car at the edge of a sinkhole estate.

'You getting up today, or what?' Andy's mother called as she hammered on his bedroom door once again. He stirred, swore under his breath and crawled out of bed. Once dressed he opened the curtains, seeing the rain still falling onto the estate where they lived. He went into the kitchen where his mother was tidying up, slamming things around with unnecessary force. 'Oh good afternoon,' He hated the sarcasm she sometimes put into her voice, but a swift glance at a clock on the wall showed he'd slept past noon again. 'There's juice and cereals if you want them. Anything else, you'll have to stir yourself and get to the shops.'

'I'll go later, mum.'

'Yes, I bet. Everything's later isn't it? Any homework this weekend? If there is you'd better get it done for a change, or the school's going to kick you out.'

'They might as well. They don't teach anything useful.'

'You mean you won't learn anything useful,' she snapped back. Then her voice dropped, the harsh tone replaced by one of concern. 'What happened, Andy? What happened to the boy who used to talk about going to college?'

'You know what happened, mum. Your life got screwed up, and that meant mine did too. Look around at where we live. Once you end up in a place like this, you never get out. So why bother trying?'

'Well, get a job then.'

Andy laughed. 'Doing what? There's nothing going for anyone like me.'

'It'd be better than hanging around with those other lads. You know I don't like you doing that. And you know I don't like them.'

'They're my friends.' He stood abruptly. 'I'll go to the shop.'

'Got any money?' his mother asked.

'Yeah, I have.'

'Where from?' He ignored the question, instead walked out of the small and dingy flat, slamming the door behind him.

The world outside was no better than that inside, though it was much wetter. Andy went into one of the local shops, selected a packet of bacon slices and took it to the till. He was, as always, terrified the cameras would pick him up as he took a few more items, slipping them into an extra pocket on the inside of his jacket which was conveniently placed to deposit items 'purchased' at five-finger discount price. He walked out, relieved to have got away with it again, and saw a few lads lounging across the street. He walked across to join them, as there was damn all else to do.

'Got anything, Andy?' one of them called.

'Crisps, scratchings, chocolate,' he replied.

'Bloody hell, is that all?' The voice was incredulous. 'Ed got away with a bottle of vodka, and we distracted the guy in the corner shop long enough to score a few packets of fags. And you're bringing sweeties? About time you grew up, mate.'

Andy's thoughts were bleak. They always were lately. Shoplifting and petty theft, running with this gang, that's all life had to offer. And the feeling that one day petty theft would grow into something bigger, more sinister. And what frightened him the most was the thought that a time could come when he could no longer tell the difference - and even worse, that he might not care.

'Let's go sit in the cafe.' They all trooped inside, ordering coffee and drinking it slowly, spreading out so they could shout their conversations amongst each other. Especially the ones about other people there. One by one the other patrons left.

All except one. An old man bundled up in an even older raincoat sat at a table in the corner. A hat which had long since lost its original shape was jammed on his head. A scarf, moth-holes in the fabric clearly visible, was wrapped around his face up to his nose. The lads watched as he beckoned to a waitress, pointed to an item on the menu and sat patiently waiting. After a few moments, she brought him a cup of coffee. He pulled off a worn glove, rummaged in his pocket and brought out a battered wallet. He selected a note from the large number within and handed it over. The waitress smiled as she walked away, leaving the old man nursing the coffee cup, seemingly seeking the warmth of the cup as much as the beverage within.

Joe nudged Andy. 'That's the next mark,' he muttered. 'Did you see the wad of cash?'

'But he's just an old man,' Andy protested. 'That might be all the money he has.'

'Well he should leave it in the bank then,' Joe retorted. 'or stuffed in his mattress. He shouldn't flash that amount of cash in front of people like us who haven't got any. If he gets robbed it's his fault, not ours.'

Andy was fascinated by the twisted logic of Joe, who apparently saw himself as a trainee crime-boss in New York, not a kid on a run-down estate bullying his way through his 'teens.

After some time the old man rose and walked slowly to the door. Andy noticed frayed trouser turn-ups falling across well-worn shoes, one missing its lace.

'Come on,' Joe ordered. Andy reluctantly followed. He didn't want to do this, but, he asked himself what other choice he had. To bottle out would be seen as weakness, and then they'd all make his life hell.

The old man shuffled along, then turned a corner into a small alley which Joe and Andy knew was a block-end. They walked quickly now, catching up with their prey.

'Come on, hand over the wallet,' said Joe shortly.

The man looked at him, speaking in a soft, weak voice. 'What? What do you want?'

'Your wallet old man. Come on, give it to me.'

'No!' the old man wailed, cowering away from the two teenagers. 'You can't take it.'

'I can, and I will,' Joe's voice was getting louder. 'The easy way or the hard way, it's up to you. Give it to me now and you don't get hurt.' Joe raised a fist as he took another step toward the old man who was still protesting weakly. And at that moment, Andy made a decision, moving to stand between Joe and the old man.

'No, this isn't right. Leave him alone, Joe.'

Joe stared at him. 'You think you're going to stop me?' he snarled, reaching out to push Andy to one side. Though terrified, Andy felt the strength to stand still, and the nerve to punch Joe in the mouth. Joe's eyes opened wide, and he made another attempt to grab Andy, only to receive a second punch. 'Get away from him!' yelled Andy.

Joe wiped at his face. 'You'll pay for this, kid.' With that, he turned and ran.

'Thanks Andy,' came a voice from behind, surprisingly firm and strong. 'I knew you'd see right from wrong, and help me out.'

Andy spun around to look at the old man. 'How do you know my name?' he demanded.

'Oh, that's easy.' There was a soft laugh in the voice now, and the eyes seemed more alive, a twinkle showing in the steady gaze that regarded him. 'I get the lists, you see. Actually compiling the lists I delegate to the elves. When they give me the lists I check them once, then check them twice. And if there's a query, why I come to see the person myself.' As he spoke, the old man had removed the scarf which hid the lower part of his face, revealing a bushy white beard. The hat, then the raincoat along with worn shoes and old trousers sparkled into a mist which faded away, revealing garb which Andy remembered from more innocent times. A red suit with white trimmings, the face now merry and smiling. And all around the figure, Andy noticed, the rain was turning to crisp, clean snow.

'Just what is this? D'you think you're Sant ...'

'No, no.' the old man interrupted. 'Don't call me anything like saint, or make a big deal of who or what I am. When all's said and done I'm a delivery boy. And I only deliver once a year.' He laughed, and the laughter seemed magical, lifting Andy's spirits. 'Though I have this for you.' He handed a sheet of paper to Andy, on which was written:

Wish List

1. Free myself of Joe and his mates.
2. Try harder at school.
3. Get a decent job or a place at uni.
4. Get mum out of this place.
5. Find the strength to do the above four.

'Those are your thoughts, not mine. It's sometimes easier to focus on ambitions when they're written out, rather than just vague hopes and wishes. I can help with the last one. Consider it an early present. But the rest is up to you, Andy. You can do it. I know you can.'

'Come home with me?' asked Andy. 'Come and see my mum. She spent years telling me about you, pretending you exist.' He shrugged. 'Then I stopped believing her somehow. She'd love to see you, to know you were real all that time.'

'I'm afraid I can't, Andy. There are others for me to visit. But she will know we have met. She'll be able to sense a change in you.' There was silence for a moment. 'Well, time I was going, the reindeer will want feeding.'

Andy looked up from the list in his hand. 'Wait, please, for a minute.' He smiled shyly, like a young child in a megastore grotto. 'Would you say it? Just the once, for me?'

The old man smiled, his eyes twinkling merrily. And the voice of Santa Claus, full of mirth, called out 'Merry Christmas, Andy. HO ... HO ... HO !!'

Anagrams of Christmas Songs (page 2) - Answers

- 1 Santa Claus is coming to town
- 2 The holly and the ivy
- 3 Frosty the Snowman
- 4 Away in a manger
- 5 Ding dong merrily on high
- 6 White Christmas
- 7 Hark the herald angels sing
- 8 Good King Wenceslas
- 9 We three Kings of orient are
- 10 Little donkey
- 11 Mary's Boy Child
- 12 The first noel

CRYPTIC A-Z of CHRISTMAS. - **Angela Robins**

Can you solve these seasonal Cryptic Clues? Some have been compiled by members of the Cryptic Crossword Group. You can cover up the hints to make it more challenging! Most cryptic clues include a definition of the answer as in a straight crossword clue, so anyone can have a go at these.

Contact me on valdemos2@gmail.com if you would like to receive my group's easy weekly crossword with hints and answers.

The answers are on Page 24.



- | | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| A. Compiler without a spirit (5). | Part Word Exchange |
| B. Decoration at dance with nothing on (7). | Word Exchange/Number/text |
| C. The present time for stocking up? (9). | Pure Cryptic |
| D. University fellow locking pin for Ma's transport (6). | Word Exchanges |
| E. Santa's helper in Delft (3). | Hidden Word |
| F. Fast! That is unusual for a festival (6). | A-Z Abbreviation/Anagram |
| G. Bird somehow goes around duck (5). | Anagram/No Representing Letter |
| H. Moving by, hear about reindeer for sewing items (12). | Anagram/Word Exchange |
| I. Evergreen girl (3). | Double Definition |
| J. James Rule to compose patriotic song (9). | Anagram |
| K. Trio received stockings with no cost (5). | Part Word |
| L. Sounds like composer sent Santa his wishes (4). | Homophone |
| M. In Buddha is seminal saviour held back (7). | Reverse Hidden Word |
| N. Spice head girl (6). | Word Exchange |
| O. Confused storeman gets bearing to find trimmings(9) | A-Z Abbreviation/Anagram |
| P. Bus stop is no place for a pantomime (4,2,5). | Anagram |
| Q. At 3pm it's round to Liz's for one's say! (6,6). | Pure Cryptic |
| R. Setter's birds (5). | Double Definition |
| S. Natty Christmas tree (6). | Double Definition |
| T. Crazy vet lets out word of second gift (3,6,5). | Anagram |
| U. Tear off but started ultra nice with ribbons and paper (6). | Acrostic |
| V. Six grin about Mary (6). | Number representing letter/Anagram |
| W. Garland primarily with roses entwined around the holly (6). | Acrostic |
| X. Some fix massive drinks for the festive season . . . (4). | Hidden Word |
| Y. . . . and second person will, they say, be there then (4). | Homophone |
| Z. There's a secret ingredient in the prize stolen (4). | Hidden Word |



And a Happy Christmas to You Too!

Pam Cocchiara

It's Christmas now, this festive time of year
That we've anticipated for so long,
To celebrate with food, drink and good cheer.

The supermarket carols that we hear
Encourage us to hum and sing along.
Though it's not always pleasing to the ear!

The queues of shoppers stretch from there to here
And we're fed up with fighting through the throng
For all the food that we can commandeer.

Now one week on there's such an atmosphere,
The toys are broken, all the batteries gone,
The kids are squabbling and Dad's on the beer.

With all the food and drink we feel quite queer.
The turkey carcass has begun to pong
But the curry should disguise it, never fear!

The tinsel and the holly look so drear
And Auld Lang Syne sounds such a dreary song.
With food and drink we've had it up to here!
We're glad it's over.

..... now roll on next year!

The Star

"The Star of Bethlehem" is one of the most well-known features of the Christmas story – and one which has been the subject of scientific study.

A spectacular event is due to occur this month on December 21st. Two planets in our solar system, Jupiter and Saturn, will appear at their closest and brightest in the night sky, creating a rare 'double planet' phenomenon, not seen since 1623.

In 1614 a German astronomer, Johannes Kepler, stated his belief that it was perhaps this event that created what is referred to as the 'Star of Bethlehem' that guided the Magi to the place of Jesus' birth.

Whatever the astronomers' beliefs, we shall all have an opportunity to witness for ourselves this rare planetary conjunction which will be visible to the naked eye.

A Merry Veggie Christmas – from Barbara Phillips

Cheese and Parsnip Roulade, with Sage & Onion Stuffing (serves 4 people but any left will freeze)

From Delia Smith's Christmas

For the Roulade	For the Stuffing
1½ oz (40g) butter 1oz (25g) plain flour 10fl oz (275ml) cold milk 4oz (110 g) Sage Derby cheese, grated * 3 eggs, size 1, separated 1½ oz (40g) hazelnuts, chopped & toasted 1 tablespoon "Parmesan", grated **	8oz (225g) onions, chopped 1½ oz (40g) butter 3 level teaspoons dried sage (if using fresh, beware, it is much stronger) 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley 3oz (75g) white breadcrumbs Salt & pepper
	For the Filling
* Or strong Cheddar with chopped fresh or dried sage ** True Parmesan isn't veggie, but Sainsbury's do a very hard, Italian cheese that works well	12oz (350g) parsnips (prepared weight) 1oz (25g) butter 2 tablespoons double cream Freshly grated nutmeg Salt & pepper
You will also need a Swiss Roll tin, 13 x 9 inches (32 x 23cm) lined with silicone paper, plus another sheet of the paper, cut slightly larger.	

Pre-heat the oven to Gas Mk 6, 400°F, 200°C

First make up the stuffing by melting the butter in a small heavy-based saucepan, then add the onions and cook them for about 6 minutes or until they are transparent. Next add the herbs, breadcrumbs and seasoning, stirring well to combine everything then sprinkle the mixture evenly all over the silicone-lined tin. *(Don't be tempted to buy ready-made stuffing – it won't work & tastes awful!)*

Now for the Roulade: place the butter, flour and milk in a saucepan and whisk them together over a medium heat until thickened, then season with salt & pepper and leave the sauce to cook over the gentlest possible heat for 3 minutes. After that draw the pan off the heat to cool slightly, then add the egg yolks, whisking them really well in. Next add the grated Sage Derby/Cheddar + sage. Taste to check seasoning.

In a large bowl (and with a spanking clean whisk {Delia's wording, not mine!}) beat the egg whites until they form soft peaks. Gently fold one spoonful of the egg-white mixture into the cheese mixture to loosen it, then spoon this mixture, a little at a time, into the rest of the egg white. Now spread the whole lot evenly into the prepared tin over the stuffing mixture and bake on the top shelf of the oven for 20-25 minutes or until it feels springy and firm in the centre.

Meanwhile cook the parsnips in a steamer for 10-15 minutes until they are soft, then cream them together with the butter, double cream and a seasoning of nutmeg, salt & pepper. (This can be done by hand or in a food processor). When they are ready, keep them warm while you lay the second sheet of silicone paper onto a work surface and sprinkle the hazelnuts all over it.

When the roulade is cooked, turn it out onto the hazelnuts and carefully peel off the base paper. Spread the creamed parsnip evenly all over the sage & onion stuffing. Then roll up the roulade along the longest side, using the paper underneath to help you pull it round (it's not difficult, it behaves very well). Transfer the roulade to a serving plate and sprinkle the surface with a dusting of "Parmesan" cheese.

Portrait Artist of the Year by Glyn Sutton

Stephen Mangan stood before the cameras, his dark, longish hair sticking out in the usual mawkish fashion. He was wearing grey slacks and a nondescript dark blazer under which rested an open collared blue shirt. His facial expression was one of inane genius. Whichever of these adjectives you cared to select, you knew there would be a wicked sense of humour to follow.

“Welcome to the Christmas edition of Sky Arts Portrait Artist of the Year,” he began. “With us today, we have three professional artists – Charmaine Coal from Manchester – Tarquin Doodle from Richmond – and Meirion Mattock from Abergavenny.”

To choose today’s winner can I introduce our three resident judges– Art historian Kate Bryan, Independent Curator Kathleen Soriano and renowned portrait artist Tai Shan Shierenberg.

The camera switched to the three judges who were in the process of discussing the self-portraits that the contestants had submitted in readiness for the show.

The first self-portrait was of Charmaine, a young lady with boyish features and short dark hair. Had it not been for a bare breast vaguely defined on the left-hand side of the canvas, you could have well mistaken the sitter for a young man.

“Yes, yes,” explained Kate. “The dark background and light facial tones say it all. This young lady is without doubt classically trained.”

The second offering by Tarquin Doodle was completely different. A short stocky man of about 40, he had painted himself as a Flintstone. He assumed the role by donning a leotard and carrying a club in his right hand.

“I particularly like the way he lays down a strong base of dark pigment that permeates through a thinner outer layer of paint,” expounded Kathleen.

The third work of art was by a tallish, blond-haired man in his mid- fifties. Meirion Mattock had presented himself as a smart city gent in a business suit, but with unruly blond hair giving him an appearance somewhat resembling our current Prime Minister.

It was left to Tai to lend his critique to this self- portrait the artist had offered.

“The pale pastel shades give the work a certain delicacy. I cannot help but think the topical references to a well-known politician are in some way designed to catch our attention.”

The camera now swung back to Stephen Mangan.

“Our sitter today is a much-loved character who has taken a well-earned break from his busy work schedule. Can I introduce to you that much-loved character, Mr S Claus.”

A portly gentleman dressed in a red suit, heavy black fireman’s boots and a red and white furry hat, strolled up to the stage and installed himself in the chair that had been placed in readiness for the sitter.

Stephen Mangan enquired as to what major aspects he would prefer the artists to highlight and what features of his personality he would wish to be reflected in the work.

“That’s simple” he said. “I want my picture to hang in the elves workshop. If they have any thoughts of slacking from their duties, I want them to be aware of the gravitas of the person overlooking them and to think twice before neglecting their duties. Ho Ho Ho.”

With that, Stephen Mangan set the competition in motion.

“Artists - Pick up your brushes. You have four hours.”

“Ho, Ho, Ho! How would you like me to pose for you today?” asked Santa.

All three contestants were in agreement that they would prefer him to focus on an object directly in front of him, sit comfortably and adopt an avuncular attitude. One expressed a desire for him to carry the bag of toys on his back, but immediately rescinded, saying that the comments were in jest only.

With this, the three artists began their preparations. The youngest of them, Charmaine Coal, took some digital photographs and matched a drawing on her canvas with the grids on her phone. The two men were far more conventional and drew straight from still life.

There began some friendly banter between the sitter and the painters. How did he cover such a large geographical area in such a short time? In these times, how did he overcome the issue of narrow, modern chimneys and flues. The conversation became quite heated at one point when Meirion started to take Santa to task. The previous year he had requested a set of sable brushes for Christmas but had been devastated when he received cheap synthetic ones instead. What was occurring? Stephen Mangan was quick to spot the potential conflict and began to flirt with Charmaine.

“Do you know,” he quipped. “If I called you Char for short you would be Char Coal.” A nervous giggle went around the room and the tension was relieved.

This was the opportunity for the judges to appraise the early preparations of all three and to comment on individual techniques.

“I think the use of a digital image is most appropriate in this day and age,” commented Kate in full view of the camera, whilst Kathleen, out of camera shot, could be heard to say “Considering the gentleman has agreed to physically pose for four hours, it’s a slap in the face to take photographs instead. Big-minded bitch doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

The boom swung in to show the two lady judges conferring together as they smiled milk and honey at each other in concert.

Tai was oblivious to this undercurrent and continued to analyse the differences in preparation technique of the three contestants. The programme continued in similar vein for the four hours at which point Stephen Mangan masterfully stepped in.

“Ok artists. Your time is up. Please put down your brushes and turn your easels. Now Santa, will you please decide which portrait you choose to take home.”

“Wow!” he exclaimed. “They are all so different.”

In time honoured fashion, he went on to choose painting number three which depicted him as being a few stone lighter and a couple of years younger, although it must be said, it bore little resemblance to him – there were even traces of colour in his beard.

Out of sight of the small audience in the studio, the three judges now began their deliberations as to who the winner should be.

“I’m opting for artist number one,” Kate began. “I think Charmaine interprets the classic approach so effectively. The way she selects a dark background onto which she superimposes gentle shades of red and pink, to illustrate the visual image, is gorgeous. The way she lays down the brush strokes of thick oils make it such an intriguing balance between classic and contemporary styles.”

"I'm sorry but I don't agree," interjected Kathleen. "For me there is only one winner and that is number two. Tarquin out of the three is the one who has achieved the image which best physically captures the sitter."

Tai again was controversial as he stuck the proverbial stick firmly into the spokes. "First and foremost, I would stress that we are contemplating a work of art, not a photographic reproduction. I can only say that the prize has to go to number three. For me, Meirion's presentation radiates exquisite artistic potential and let's not under-estimate the narrative value of the work."

And so it went on. Had there been a fly on the wall then it would have lost count of the numerous occasions where comments like "stuck up bitch", "silly old cow" and "overpowering chink" were constantly heard. The unenviable quest for mutual agreement and the imposition of professional expertise continued for the next half hour with each of the judges sticking steadfastly to their chosen champion.

At the end of the day it was left to Stephen Mangan to intervene and bring the discussion to a professional conclusion.

"Right," he said. "You two ladies toss a coin and then the winner can toss a coin with Tai."





In this way, an outwardly professional approach was deployed and a winner at last determined.

Tai faced the cameras along with his two fellow judges who gazed lovingly into his eyes. He began to summarise their findings.

"It's never an easy task to come to a conclusion on what can be such a personal appraisal, but on this occasion all three of us judges were in complete agreement. The winner of our special Christmas edition showed great empathy with the sitter and produced a work that suggested the essence of the person as well as an accurate reproduction of his physical attributes. I am delighted to declare....."

He paused for the mandatory four point seven seconds and to the delight of some and dismay of others, declared the winner.

As they say, there's nothing like the spirit of universal accord at Christmas, is there?

  **Answers to Cryptic A-Z of Christmas (page 18).**  

Angel(a).
Ball/O/on.
Christmas.
Don/key.
Elf.
F/i.e./sta.
Go/O/se.
Haber/Dasher/y.
Ivy.
Jerusalem.
Kings.
List.
Mes si ah.

Nut/Meg.
Orname(N)ts.
Puss in Boots.
Queen's Speech.
Robins.
Spruce.
Two Turtle Doves.
U.n.w.r.a.p.
VI/rgin.
W.r.e.a.t.h.
Xmas.
Yule.
Zest.

Sudoku

Each row and each column has to contain numbers 1 to 9 once only; each large square of nine smaller squares likewise. Do not guess numbers! Work out each by elimination.

The four puzzles get progressively more difficult.

No 1 is "Easy", No 2 is "Medium", No 3 is "Hard" and No 4 is "Evil". Good Luck!

1.Easy

8	1					9		
						4	3	8
		7	3				1	
		8	7	9	3		2	4
	3	9	1		8	7	6	
1	7		6	5	4	8		
	9				7	3		
7	5	6						
		4					7	9

2.Medium

6									
4					6			7	1
					4	5		3	6
	2	7			1			8	9
					8				
	8	1			4			5	2
	1	4			6	8			
8	3					5			7
									9

3.Hard

3	6					7		
	2		7	6			4	
		7	4		3			
			6			5		
5	9						8	1
		3			5			
			1		4	3		
	8			7	6		2	
		9					1	4

4.Evil

8			1			7		
1		6	7		4			
								5
5		8						7
		4		3		8		
	9					2		6
	8							
			4		2	5		3
		7			1			4

Christmas Tree by Pam Cocchiara

O tannenbaum, O Nordic pine,
How beautiful you seem to me, the quintessential Christmas tree,
Majestic, noble and refined.

When harvested and brought inside,
Your resin scent pervades the air, and straight away we are aware
That now we celebrate Yuletide.

With baubles bright the tree is hung,
With tinsel and with fairy lights, evoking memories of the nights
And bygone days when we were young.

But all too soon the tree grows old
Its natural sap evaporates, each separate needle desiccates
And then relinquishes its hold.

The tree in splendour once arrayed
Starts to lose its finery as needles drop by two or three
'Til finally a great cascade.

Their destiny the rubbish bin,
Unwanted now the needles lie, til spotted by some eagle eye
By vacuum safely gathered in.

But often they can't all be found.
There are some needles so persistent to brush and Hoover they're resistant
And like a fox they go to ground.

Our lack of interest they begrudge,
And long after Epiphany, in carpets and upholstery
They stay and they refuse to budge.

When careless, with bare foot you tread,
In August when the weather's hot and thoughts of Christmas long forgot,
Residual barbs can still embed.

Insidious, sharp, they lie in wait.
No matter how long they may linger, in some unwary toe or finger
Their point can always penetrate.

This then my New Year's resolution.
Fond as I am of a living tree, it has become quite clear to me
There can be only one solution.

Though thought ersatz, by some despised,
My next tree will be plasticized.

Christmas Cracker Jokes – Topical and Seasonal!

Which TV Christmas special is being filmed in Brussels this year? Deal Or No Deal!

Why is Nigel Farage banned from Father Christmas's workshop?

Because smoking can seriously damage your elf

Why was the Cabinet's nativity play cancelled?

They couldn't find three wise men

Why didn't Father Christmas vote for the Brexit Party?

He's not irrationally worried about living close to a Pole

What's the difference between Rudolph's nose and a politician's autobiography?

Only one will be red at Christmas.

There's going to be a 50p coin commemorating Brexit.

They just can't decide what to do with the border.

Nigel Farage goes into his pub and asks for a pint.

The barman draws it and throws it into his face.

"Why did you do that?" Nigel asks.

"You asked for a pint," the barman says. "But you didn't say how you wanted it delivered."

Farage replies: "Okay, I'll have a pint in a pint glass"

"No. You can't ask again," the barman says.

"Why not?" Farage asks.

"Democracy," the barman replies.

Who delivers presents to baby sharks at Christmas? Santa Jaws!

What do they sing at a snowman's birthday party? Freeze a jolly good fellow!

What do Santa's little helpers learn at school? The elf-abet!

Why was the turkey in the pop group? Because he was the only one with drumsticks!

What goes "Oh, Oh, Oh"? Santa walking backwards!

Why does Santa have three vegetable patches? So he can 'ho ho ho'!

What is the best Christmas present in the world? A broken drum, you just can't beat it!

What do snowmen wear on their heads? Ice caps!

What did Adam say the day before Christmas? "It's Christmas, Eve!"

What do you get when you cross a snowman with a vampire? Frostbite!

How did Mary and Joseph know Jesus' weight when he was born? They had a weigh in a manger!

Why is it getting harder to buy Advent calendars? Their days are numbered!

How did Scrooge win the football game? The ghost of Christmas passed!

What do angry mice send to each other at Christmas? Cross-mouse cards!

Who hides in the bakery at Christmas? A mince spy!

What does Santa do when his elves misbehave? He gives them the sack!

What do you get if you eat Christmas decorations? Tinsilitis!

What's the most popular Christmas wine? 'But I don't like Brussels sprouts!'

Which famous playwright was terrified of Christmas? Noël Coward!

What carol is heard in the desert? 'O camel ye faithful!'

How many letters are in the Christmas alphabet? Only 25, there's no L!

What do reindeer hang on their Christmas trees? Horn-aments!

Why are Christmas trees so bad at sewing? They always drop their needles!

When is a boat just like snow? When it's adrift!

What do you get if you cross Santa with a detective? Santa Clues!

What is Santa's favourite place to deliver presents? Idaho-ho-ho!

What do you call buying a piano for the holidays? Christmas Chopin!

Who is Santa's favourite singer? Elf-is Presley!

Why couldn't the skeleton go to the Christmas Party? Because he had no body to go with!

What do monkeys sing at Christmas? Jungle bells!

Why did Scrooge keep a pet lamb? Because it would say, "Baaaaahh humbug!"

What would you call an elf who has just won the lottery? Welfy!

Why does Santa go down the chimney? Because it soots him!

What do you call Santa living at the South Pole? A lost clause!

What do the elves cook with in the kitchen? Utinsels!

What's the difference between St George and Santa's reindeer? One slays a dragon, the others drag a sleigh on!

What do you call cutting down a Christmas tree? Christmas chopping!

Where do Santa and his reindeer go to get hot chocolate while flying in the sky? Star-bucks.

What do sheep say at Christmas? A Merry Christmas to Ewe!

Why is everyone so thirsty at the north pole? There's o well, no well!

What do you get if you cross a Christmas tree with a posh laptop? A pineapple!

What athlete is warmest in winter? A long jumper!

What do you get if you cross a bell with a skunk? Jingle Smells!

What's the difference between Ryanair and Santa? Santa flies at least once a year!

What did Bruce Forsyth say when the Christmas pheasant repeated on him? "Good game, good game!"