

Worcestershire Wildlife Trust, Malvern Group

The natural history of Christmas, by Michael Leach.



Michael, a zoologist, wildlife photographer and author, recently made a short TV film on the natural history of Christmas. His researches led to his 27th and latest book and this illustrated talk, in which he examined some of our long-held beliefs about the origins of our Christmas customs.

Every winter we stir puddings, send cards, decorate our homes for Christmas, eat mince pies and Brussels sprouts, but just where do these customs come from? Michael explained why holly and ivy are associated with Christmas, the pre-Christian roots of hanging

up mistletoe and that turkeys never did come from Turkey. He told us why our favourite Christmas bird is the robin and looked at the origin of the Yule log.

Holly and ivy's connection with winter dates back ten thousand years. As they were the only trees in the woodland to retain their leaves it was believed that they harboured the last remnants of the sun and were taken indoors to protect the precious light through the dark winter days.

After the winter solstice the lengthening of the days and the return of the sun were marked by many festivals, the chief of which in Roman times was Saturnalia. This festival was used as a 'cover' by the persecuted early Christians for the celebration of the birth of Jesus on December 25th.

The relatively recent ideal of a white Christmas is believed to originate from Dickens' novels because before he was sixteen, Dickens experienced an unusually high proportion of white Christmases due to climatic conditions at the time.

The Father Christmas legend is thought to have originated in Scandinavia. "All Father" would enter smoke holes in huts and leave food for the people who were struggling through the long, cold winter. Flying reindeer may have resulted from hallucinations caused by the supplementing of a meagre diet with magic mushrooms.

Michael's thoroughly entertaining, topical and thought-provoking talk provided a welcome start to the Christmas season.

The next meeting is on January 2nd at 7.30 pm at the Lyttleton Rooms, when Alan Shepherd will give a talk: *Amphibians of Worcestershire and beyond*.