

Wassailing goes back to pre-Christian times in a tradition meant to bring luck for the coming year. Wassail gets its name from the Old English term “waes hael,” meaning “be well.” At the start of each year, the Saxon lord of the manor would shout ‘waes hael.’ The assembled crowd would reply ‘drinc hael,’ meaning ‘drink and be healthy.’ In cider producing regions, the wassailers went from door to door, with a wassail bowl filled with spiced ale and sang and drank to the health of those they visited. In return, people in the houses gave them drink, money and Christmas food.



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Christmas Day in the Regency period might start with a trip to church, followed by a lavish dinner of boar's head. You might also have turkey (which had been brought to England from the New World in 1550), along with plum pudding, march pane (what we often call marzipan), and gingerbread. Christmas Day was also the day on which a gift or tithe was given to the landowner. Note, however, it was not a widespread tradition to give each other gifts.



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“Sugar plums” were not really plums, but a type of candy called “dragee” or more commonly “comfit.” Sugar plums, or comfits, were most often made with caraway or cardamom seeds at the center. They were time consuming to make. Until the advent of machine innovations, comfits or sugar plums were a luxury good, most likely to be found in an aristocrat’s pocket or between courses at a banquet.



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Mince, or Christmas pie, varied by region, but ingredients usually included beef, suet, sugar, raisins, lemons, spices, orange peel, goose, tongue, fowls, eggs, apples and brandy. This was also called Twelfth Night Pie because it was originally made with the leftovers of the Christmas dinner. The pies were eaten every day for the Twelve Days of Christmas to ensure good luck for the twelve months of the new year. But the pies must be offered by friends and baked in dozens to strengthen the charm.



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In Regency time the upper classes presented gifts in boxes to their servants on December 26 for good service the day before and during the previous year. The servants were often given the day off, and if December 26 fell on a Saturday or Sunday, Boxing Day took place on the following Monday. Boxing Day was also a traditional day for fox hunting.



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Christmas pudding was a mixture of thirteen ingredients, which was boiled in a pudding cloth. Usual ingredients included suet, brown sugar, raisins, currants, citron, lemon and orange peels, spices, crumbs, flour, eggs, milk and brandy.



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The practice of gathering mistletoe began in the second century BC with the Druids in ancient Britain. They gathered the parasitic plant at the start of winter from the sacred oak as a symbol of hope, peace, and harmony. Sprigs were hung in homes to herald good fortune. The plants were also used for medicinal purposes to promote female fertility and as an antidote for poison.



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The more adventurous Regency-era gentlemen entertained themselves by extinguishing the lights and playing a rousing game of Snap-dragon on Christmas Eve. The unusual parlour game, made popular during the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, required players to pluck raisins out of a flaming bowl of brandy and then eat them without burning their mouths.



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Gingerbread rules/nuts were a favorite holiday treat during Regency times and one you'll find referenced in my November holiday hardcover, *'Twas the Night After Christmas*. These tasty sweets contained flour, sugar, butter, ginger and lemons that bakers combined into a soft paste and dropped into tins to bake.



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Welcome to the Christmas season during the Regency, where gatherers will enjoy the smell of wassail steaming over a grate, the pungent aroma of Christmas pudding baking and goose roasting against the quaint yet festive backdrop of holly, candles and a roaring fire in the hearth.



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*A Regency Christmas Menu*  
 Rice Soup, Turkey & Truffles, Beef Collops, Semels Souffle & Poivrade Sauce, A  
 Foul a la Daube and Mushrooms, Sweetbreads and Asparagus Peas, A Leg  
 of Lamb and Haricot Beans, Chickens a la Reine, Haunch of Venison,  
 Soup Vermicelli, Bacon Chine, Chickens and Celery, Neat's Tongue,  
 Grenadines and Endives, Rabbits a la Portugueze and Sorrel Sauce,  
 Petit Pate of Oysters, Souties of Mutton and Cucumbers, Giblet Soup,  
 Roast Beef  
*Second Course*  
 Partridges, Savoy Cake, Carmel Basket, Jerusalem Artichokes,  
 Cauliflowers, Mince Pies, Cheesecakes, French Beans, Spinage, Pheasant,  
 Snipes, Asparagus, Red Cabbage, Apricot Torte, Mushrooms, Ragoo Mele, Chantilla  
 Cake, Carmel Cake, Meringues, Guinea Fowl



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*On the fourth day of Regency Christmas my true love gave to me...  
four "colly" birds?*

In the original 12 Days of Christmas, which was first sung in England during the Middle Ages and Tudor era, the singer's true love gave four colly (or collie) birds as the gift. Over the years, modern corruption of that old English phrase turned "colly" birds into "calling" birds, which rolls off the tongue more easily. While a colly bird is an English blackbird, there is no such creature as a "calling" bird.



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