

Press release

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The original scrooge...Christmas cancelled for England

Documents from The National Archives reveal how a wave of religious reform that swept across England during the English Civil War could have permanently changed the way Christmas is celebrated today.

In January 1642 King Charles I and Parliament declared that a fast should be held on the last Wednesday of each month for the “*lamentable and distressed*” condition of the king’s subjects in Ireland. The Church ensured that people did not play sport or conduct trade on the day and those who defied the ban were reported to Justices of the Peace.

In December 1644, the fast day was due to fall on Christmas Day for the first time. Parliament issued an order squashing any doubts that the fast should be abandoned. At the same time, Oliver Cromwell was becoming more prominent as the military and political leader of the Parliamentary forces against King Charles I in the English Civil War. His stringent fundamentalist Puritan views on religious observance and public behaviour prompted the first of many laws forbidding Christmas.

Extract from Council of State Letters and Papers SP 25/15

This day in particular is to be kept with the more solemn humiliation because it may call to remembrance our sins and the sins of our forefathers who have turned this feast, pretending the memory of Christ, into an extreme forgetfulness of him by giving liberty to carnal and sensual delights, being contrary to the life which Christ himself led upon the earth...’

Cromwell and his allies in Parliament objected to the excess and debauchery that followed the traditional celebration of Christmas. They drew up strict rules to cleanse the country of such decadence. The existing fast to remember famine and suffering in Ireland then became linked to a clampdown on merrymaking and promiscuous behaviour.

All familiar festivities relating to Christmas were banned: from winter celebrations such as feasting, carolling to traditional decorations like holly. The restriction also meant that

worshiping idols, using the word 'Christmas', or taking the Lord's name in vain became serious offences. England at Christmas must suddenly have seemed joyless – especially when the new laws came on top of existing proclamations concerning the abolition of the theatre and public performance of plays.

Nevertheless, later entries among the government papers suggest that the ban on Christmas and other holy day festivities continued to be ignored. In December 1657, orders had to be issued to the authorities in London and Westminster to clampdown on visible traditional celebrations of festival days (Council of State Letters and Papers - SP 18/158, f.95):

The festivals of Easter, Christmas, and other holy days having been taken away, the Lord Mayor and justices of London and Westminster are to see that the Ordinance for taking away festivals is observed, and to prevent the solemnities heretofore used in their celebration.

Sean Cunningham, Head of Medieval and Early Modern Records, The National Archives, commented:

"Although this might seem like the ultimate Christmas Scrooge story, it's no surprise that the anti-Christmas legislation was ignored by many people who continued to follow ancient traditions in secret. What is most astonishing, however, is that for almost two decades the festivities of Christmas week were officially forbidden. If the ban hadn't been publicly reversed by Charles II, the joys of Christmas might have been a time consigned to history."

The Restoration of the Monarchy in May 1660 threw out all of this restrictive doctrine and encouraged a return to the traditional ways of celebrating. The country was once again officially allowed to mark the Twelve Days of Christmas.

For further information please contact: Tel: **Angela Owusu** +44(0)20 8392 5277
Email: press@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk

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Notes to Editors

The Council State Papers and Letters, reference: SP 25/15 and SP18/158 can be viewed on our partner website State Papers Online (subscription required):

<http://gale.cengage.co.uk/state-papers-online-15091714.aspx>

Summary transcriptions of the contents of the records were published as *Calendars of State Papers Domestic, Commonwealth, 1649-1660*, and can be viewed online at: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/>

- On 8 June 1647 Parliament went further and abolished the religious festivals of Christmas, Easter, Whitsun and other Holy Days '*superstitiously used and observed*'. Other time for recreation was to be given for scholars, apprentices and servants on the second Tuesday of the month, but holy days – holidays - as times to relax and celebrate were to be banned in favour of more solemn prayer and scripture reading.

This evidence is from the House of Lords Journal at the Parliamentary Archives. Many of the Acts are enrolled on the Parliament Rolls in TNA records series C 65.

- The ban is detailed in the Interregnum government's Council of State book of draft orders and accounts, 13 Dec 1650-3 Jan 1651 and is summarised in the published calendar:

Sir Hen. Mildmay to report to Parliament that Council have received information that there was very wilful and strict observation of the day commonly called Christmas Day, throughout the cities of London and Westminster, by a general keeping of shops shut up; and that there were contemptuous speeches used by some in favour thereof, which Council conceives to be upon the old grounds of superstition and malignancy, and tending to the avowing of the same, and contempt of the present laws and Government, and therefore request Parliament to consider further provisions and penalties for abolishing and punishing those old superstitious observations, and meeting with such malicious contradiction of offenders in that behalf.

This new law threatened major upheavals in the ways that the people of England and Wales marked traditional festivals. Unsurprisingly, the authorities found it difficult to enforce and there were demonstrations against the new laws in London.

The National Archives

For the record, for good... The National Archives is a government department and an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). As the official archive of the UK government and England and Wales, we look after and make available to the public a collection of historical records dating back over 1,000 years, including records as diverse as Domesday Book and MI5 files.

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