

A personal selection of local, British Isles and world, history.

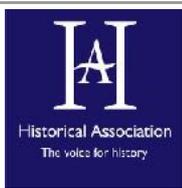
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BRITISH AGRICULTURAL
HISTORY SOCIETY

ORAL HISTORY SOCIETY



OLD YEAR'S DAY!



Most peoples celebrate the coming of the New Year with visits to family or a night 'on the town' with fireworks. In Korea, the *Bosingak* bell (above) is rung 33 times to see in the New Year. The Austrians ring the *Pummerin*, the third largest swinging bell in Europe and hung in Vienna's St Stephen's Cathedral. In Japan, New Year's Eve is used to prepare for and welcome *Toshigami*, the New Year's god. Japanese clean their homes and prepare *Kadomatsu* (left) or *Shimenawa* (page 2) to welcome the god before New Year's Eve. Buddhist temples ring their bells 108 times at midnight in the traditional *Joya no Kane*. The rings represent the 108 elements of *bonō*, mental states that lead Japanese to take unwholesome actions.



Danes eat their traditional *Kransekage* (right), the Finns, their *Janssons frestelse* (temptation) a casserole made of potatoes, onions, pickled sprats, bread crumbs and cream. This also forms part of a Swedish Christmas smörgåsbord known as a *julbord*. Historically this was eaten standing up with friends some time before the main family meal. In France, New Year's Eve is *la Saint-Sylvestre* and celebrated with a feast known as *le Reveillon de la Saint-Sylvestre* in which foie gras, seafood and Champagne (of course) feature.

In Estonia, meals should not be completely finished so that there is something for the ancestors and spirits. In Finland and a swathe of countries from Germany, the Czech Republic through Austria and the Balkans to Turkey, they practice *Molybdomancy*. Lead shapes are melted over a candle flame and then poured into water. The shapes are interpreted as an omen for the future or rotated in candlelight and the shadow interpreted. After some poisonings lead has given way to lead-free tin.



Dutch children read their New Year's letter and Belgian farmers wish their animals a happy New Year. Germans drink Sekt (sparkling wine) and consume tiny marzipan pigs for good luck.



Another traditional food offered to neighbours is *Speckendicken*, a type of pancake with dark syrup/molasses and slices of mettwurst and bacon. The giving and receiving of gifts in the UK was traditional at New Year, which until the 18th century eclipsed Christmas in this respect. In the north and west of Britain this survived much longer as tokens for children. Godparents would send Suffolk *kitchel-cakes*, *God-cakes* (left) in Coventry and *Popladys*



in St Albans (probably *Pope Ladys* and maybe related to the legend of Pope Joan - see J&T No.113).

My favourite tradition though is the watching of *Dinner for One*, a British TV comedy starring Freddie Frinton and May Warden (left²). It is seen in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Estonia. It can also be found in Australia, South Africa and the US but not normally in

GB! You can watch this classic on YouTube.

PANTO³



Cross dressing in theatre has a long pedigree, starting with the Greeks and Romans who forbade women on stage; a situation repeated by the Elizabethans and Jacobean. This theme was continued in the British interpretations of the quirky stock characters of the Italian *commedia dell'arte* (Pulcinella, Colombine, Harlequin, Pierrot, Scaramouche etc.). Pulcinella in Britain of course developed into Mr Punch.

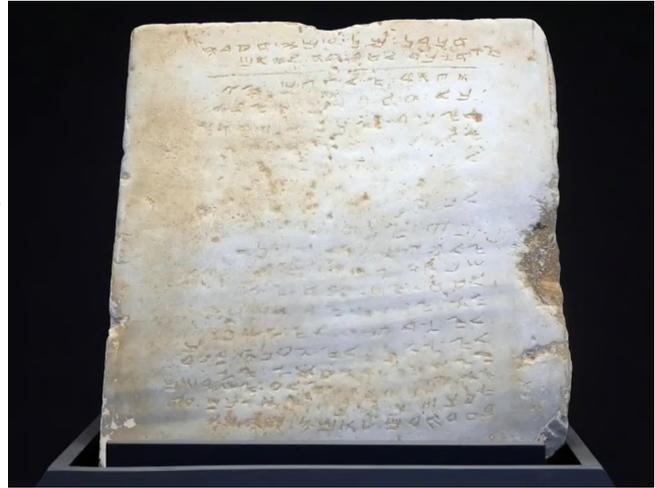
Theatre impresario John Rich used these characters in his *Harlequinade* which, with its slapstick comedy is really the precursor of the pantomime. The key character was the acrobatic clown played by famous star Joseph Grimaldi (above⁴). In the 1860s music hall stars began to infiltrate the pantomime world. The most famous was Dan Leno who starred annually in the Drury Lane's festive panto from 1888 to 1904 where he invented the character of the Dame. Our outlandish costumes and hairstyles can be directly attributed to him and we still like to use the *classic* look of the 19th century woman.

The word *pantomime* derives from the Greek *pantomimus*, the silent *imitator of all* who played multiple parts. Before the Theatre Act of 1843, dancing but not speaking was allowed, so all actions were mimed. Audience participation comes from the music hall and celebrities were popularised when Augustus Harris took over the Drury Lane Theatre in the 1870s.



THOUGH SHALT NOT...⁵

The oldest known stone tablet inscribed with the Ten Commandments has sold at auction for more than \$5m. The 52kg marble slab (right), which dates from 300 to 800 AD, was unearthed on the southern coast of Israel in 1913 but used as a paving stone at a local home for 30 years before a scholar recognised its historical significance.



TO MARKET

Salisbury is not the centre of the universe, although it is the centre of mine. The city's Civic Society December magazine contains an interesting article by Geoff Lang on the Market Place.



The market has always been central to city life right up to today and is quite a large space for a town of this size (47,000), and was once much larger. What I did not know, Geoff explains: *While the charter market takes its name from the royal charter of 1227, this was a making permanent of temporary market licences first granted in 1219, before construction work started on the cathedral* (foundation stones were laid on 28th April 1220). Now, as Elias of Dereham was the canon who turned the Bishop's dream of a new cathedral into a reality, it is most likely that he designed the city as well. He not only designed the cathedral but oversaw its building and fundraising. So it would seem that from the very inception of the idea, a town full of rental plots was key to the finance needed to build the cathedral.

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If there was a market as early as 1219 it may have been a small affair catering for the growing army of masons, carpenters and ancillary trades working on the cathedral and the Close. Bishop Poore had a wooden church

(forerunner of St Thomas's) built on the west side of the market square for the benefit of the same workforce; so we get a picture of an integrated plan of cathedral, close and town being envisaged and work starting at more or less the same time.

The original concept had water diverted from the Avon, flowing through the town as can be seen on John Speed's map of 1611. This idea was probably sparked as a result of the awful shortage of water at Old Sarum (see J&T No.97). There were however two problems: disease and traffic incidents. We have covered the disease aspect that finally saw the canals' closure but a quick look at the map above showing the bridges, one can see how difficult it would be for a horse and cart, especially if it met one coming the other way. The photo (left) courtesy of Wessex Archaeology, shows what was possibly the masonry from the bridge at the north-east corner of the market.



CORNY BUT TRUE⁶

Sir Goldsworthy Gurney (1793 - 1875) was a Cornish inventor. He built his castle at Bude on shifting sand by first laying down a concrete platform; a technique used later on the then world's tallest building (in 1998), the *Petronas Towers* at Kuala Lumpur. He invented the Gurney stove that was used to heat Salisbury Cathedral. His steam carriage (right) travelled from London to Bath at an average speed of 15 mph (a world first). He also forced oxygen and hydrogen through a blowpipe to power a flame that with lime added created a bright light. He lit the Houses of Parliament with three lights and numerous prismatic mirrors. This was then applied to lighthouses and eventually the stage, giving us the phrase *in the limelight*.



DE DEO JANO.
FELIX
PROSPERQUE
ANNUS SIT VOBIS.



As our scribe says: *Of the god Janus, may you have a happy and prosperous year.*

1. *The Customs and Ceremonies of Britain*, Charles Kightly, Thames & Hudson 1986. Wikipedia. Bell: Steve46814 Creative Commons. Kadomatsu: Marufish Creative Commons. Shimenawa: JnnCreative Commons. Kransekaga: Lorie Shaull Creative Commons. God Cakes: Baking for Britain.
2. Courtesy of Guardian.
3. Courtesy of Sky History. Photo of Dan Leno courtesy of National Portrait Gallery.
4. Courtesy of JSTOR Daily.
5. Courtesy of The Knowledge December 20th 2024.
6. From *I Never Knew That About England* by Christopher Winn (Ebury Press 2005). Picture (1827), London Transport Museum.