

Voting for Christmas with their tar-hardened feet? Turkeys walking to market

# Bestiary of a feast day

From uncomplaining donkey to traitorous wren, animals have always played a part in Christian iconography. Johnny Scott examines their role in celebrating Christmas

A COLONY of bees lived in the roof of my parents' old home. Probably descendants of hives once kept in alcoves along the south face of the walled garden, they had been in the roof so long that the tiles below their entry hole were stained black. A Christmas Eve tradition when my sister and I were children, was being taken just before bedtime, up into the attics, tiptoeing by torchlight past ghostly piles of leather trunks and old furniture hanging with cobwebs, to a place where we could hear a faint murmuring behind the panelling that covered the eaves. This noise, we were assured, was the bees – God's little servants – joyously humming the Hundredth Psalm. This convinced us of the folklore that animals were granted the power of speech on Christmas Eve and knelt in memory of those that attended the nativity at Bethlehem.

There are any number of myths and legends connecting animals to the 12 days of Christmas and, like the festival itself, many have their origins in pagan animal cults, sacrifices and fertility rites: the Roman festival of Saturnalia and Yule celebrations of northern Europe. The winter solstice, with its lack of growth and sunlight, was a time of deep anxiety and fearful superstition for early pastoral communities. The old year was dying and the gods must be persuaded to start the new one. Early Christianity appropriated pagan traditions and much of our animal folklore stems from the religious fervour and pious anticipation of that period. Others are more recent and the product of 19th-century romanticism by popular writers such as Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens and Washington Irving.

The fifth-century Christian poet, Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, is credited with the idea of giving animals human voices, enabling them to join angels in adoration on the arrival of the Messiah. This notion seems to have been short-lived. Much later, in 1223, St Francis of Assisi received Papal permission to use live animals to recreate the nativity of Jesus for the benefit of the inhabitants of Greccio. As the popularity of nativity plays spread across Europe, folklore credited God with granting animals of the stable the ability to speak for an hour at midnight on Christmas Eve. In Eastern European countries it is considered very bad luck to catch them at it, as they often predict the death of their masters, a predicament avoided in Britain where the myth has been conveniently altered so the animals do not make use of their gift within human hearing.

Myths surrounding donkeys could have arisen from their prominent role in nativity plays. Christian tradition differs over whether the previously unmarked hide of a donkey received its dark, cross-shaped stripes for providing the transport that got a heavily pregnant Mary as far as Bethlehem or for carrying Jesus into Jerusalem. Either way, the dark hairs from the cross were worn well into the 19th century, in charms to heal ailments which ranged from toothache to fits. Passing a child three times under and over a donkey was believed to cure whooping cough. Sometimes hairs were mixed with bread and eaten or, alternatively, a complaint could be passed on to the donkey by putting a lock of the sufferer's hair in the animal's feed. Letting a black one run with mares was believed to prevent them miscarrying. ▶

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Much folklore grew around robins, whose inquisitiveness made them appear a friend of people. They, more than any other bird, are associated with modern Christmas. Robins are most visible in midwinter as shortage of food makes them tame and they puff out their feathers against the cold. In legend, robins acquired their colouring when one punctured its breast trying to pluck thorns from Christ's head at the crucifixion. Early Christian mythology has a robin rescuing St Leonorius, a sixth-century Welsh missionary to heathen Brittany, from starvation and a dead robin gave St Kentigern, founder of the church from which grew Glasgow Cathedral, the opportunity to demonstrate his saintliness by bringing it back to life. Acts of kindness by robins became the focus of 18th-century poets Wordsworth, Thompson, Blake and Percy; the latter described a robin covering the children with leaves and moss in the tragic poem *Babes in the Wood*.

Robins and wrens are often linked in mythology – “the robin and the wren, God's cock and hen” – but the wren's lineage is much more ancient. Wrens were Druidic birds of prophecy and have always been protected by superstition of dire consequences to those who harmed one. Contradictorily, one of the oldest elaborate folk rituals, once widespread in Britain and still surviving in Ireland and parts of Europe, was the St Stephen's Day wren hunt. On 26 December youths armed with sticks known as “libbets” beat hedgerows until a wren was caught and killed. This was hung from the top of an elaborately decorated pole and paraded to every house in the locality. A feather would be plucked and given to each householder as a protection against witches.

The origins of this primitive custom are very obscure. The most widely held belief is that a wren alerted the guards when St Stephen was attempting to escape imprisonment, causing the death of the first Christian martyr. However, the wren cult appears to have been brought to Britain by traders during the Bronze Age and to have its ancestry in Saturnalia, ancient Rome's most important fertility festival. During the weeklong orgy starting on 17 December the role of master and slave was reversed, moral restrictions removed and rules of etiquette ignored. The wren was the king of birds in Greek mythology and killing one at this time of year represented the end of the old season and start of the new.

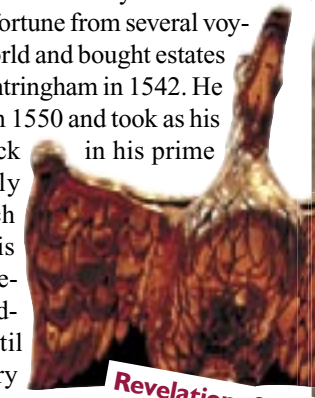
A dove was depicted in early Christian literature as the manifestation of the Holy Spirit

at Christ's baptism and has maintained its position through the centuries as the emblem of peace. Ravens, although they fed Elijah and featured prominently in Celtic mythology, have failed to last the course, except in Wales, where a belief persisted that a blind person who fed ravens would regain his sight.

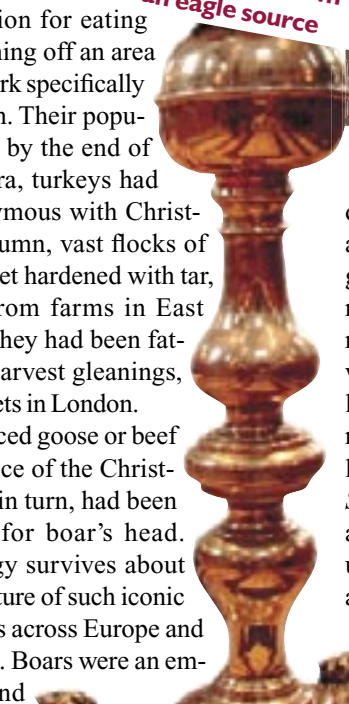
Eagles have been a symbol of power since time immemorial and there are frequent references to them in the Bible. An eagle was the beast of Revelations assigned to St John the Apostle, which is why the lectern in virtually every church in Britain is carved in its shape. An exception is St Andrew's church at Boynton in Yorkshire, where the lectern is carved in the shape of a turkey, with the bible supported on its outstretched tail feathers.

William Strickland, a gentleman adventurer who sailed with Sebastian Cabot to South America in 1526, is considered to be the person who introduced turkeys to Britain. Strickland made a fortune from several voyages to the New World and bought estates at Boynton and Wintringham in 1542. He was granted arms in 1550 and took as his crest “a turkey-cock proper”, liberally adorning the church at Boynton with his armorial. Turkeys remained an exotic addition to feasts until the mid 18th century when George II developed a passion for eating the bird, sectioning off an area of Richmond Park specifically for rearing them. Their popularity grew and by the end of the Victorian era, turkeys had become synonymous with Christmas. Every autumn, vast flocks of turkeys, their feet hardened with tar, were walked from farms in East Anglia, where they had been fattened on post-harvest gleanings, to poultry markets in London.

Turkey replaced goose or beef as the centrepiece of the Christmas feast as it, in turn, had been the substitute for boar's head. Little mythology survives about the latter, a creature of such iconic status in legends across Europe and the Middle East. Boars were an emblem of war and



Revelations from an eagle source



The donkey earned its stripes

destruction, divine figures on standards, coins and altars, the quarry of heroes, transport of gods, a significant fertility symbol and the most powerful of the Yule sacrifices. A decorated boar's head, carried into the dining-room with much pomp and ceremony, was the highlight of Christmas banquets throughout the middle ages. One of the earliest carols, published by Wynkyn de Worde in 1521, is the *Song of the Boar's Head*. The ritual of serving a boar's head on Christmas Day continued until the religious festivals of Whitsun, Easter and Christmas were banned by Parliament during the Puritan purges of Cromwell's Commonwealth. The custom survives with the annual boar's head “Gaudy” feast at

Queen's College, Oxford but for most of us, the last echo of the pagan boar cult is the tradition of buying a ham at Christmas.

Belief in a benign deity riding the winter skies dispensing reward or punishment stems from pagan worship to the god Odin. As ever, Christianity adopted the idea and in the fourth century introduced St Nicholas, a saint renowned for his generosity to children and the poor. Different cultures across Europe created their own interpretations of a mystical bringer of gifts to good children at Christmas. These manifestations came at night, flying through the air on horseback or in a carriage drawn by goats or dogs. Contemporary conception of St Nicholas in the form of jolly, fat Santa Claus in

a sleigh drawn by reindeer has been accredited to Clement Clarke Moore, a professor of Oriental studies at Columbia University in New York. In 1822, Moore wrote the poem, *The Night Before Christmas*, based around the Christmas folklore of northern European immigrants in New York and his knowledge of reindeer cults in Lapland and Siberia.

Nomadic Sami tribesmen had a tradition of gathering the hallucinogenic fly agaric toadstool and feeding it to their reindeer. The reindeer's digestive system removed any poisons, leaving hallucinogens intact in urine. Drinking the urine induced an effect similar to LSD and stoned Sami imagined, among other things, that reindeer could fly. Moore's vision was

widely adopted as Christmas gradually became commercialised, particular after 1930 when Coca-Cola used the image of Santa Claus in an advertisement.

Artists always portray Santa's reindeer with full sets of antlers. At a dinner party recently, someone posed the question of what sex Moore intended them to be. Bulls lose their antlers after the rut in October; oxen, which Lapps use as draught animals, in March; and cows after they calve in spring. Before I could explain this, a formidable woman on my right announced authoritatively that they were female. Asked how she was so sure, she replied witheringly, “Silly man would get lost otherwise, wouldn't he?”