

Christmas and Cromwell

Excessive celebrations to encourage immoral behaviour? Bridget Flanagan from the Great Ouse Valley Trust examines the claim that 'Cromwell banned Christmas'.

The Christmas season is here! The commercial countdown is underway. Shops are stocked and glossy advertising campaigns entice us to buy gifts and goodies in great quantities. Our town centres have held Christmas Markets and have switched on their Christmas lights with lots of razzamatazz, and an early visit from Santa. It's all good fun and lifts our spirits when the nights are lengthening and the weather worsens.

The winter solstice on December 22nd is a much older festival than Christmas – and even though few of us celebrate it specifically, we welcome the turning of the year and the beginning of more daylight. On December 25th Christians celebrate the Nativity with worship and carols. Families and friends gather together to exchange presents, feast and be merry. And then comes the end of the calendar year with New Year's Eve and more celebrations and festivities. The proximity of all three events makes for a powerful combination – for which participants need much preparation and, afterwards, even longer for recovery.

Here in Huntingdonshire, one of our most famous citizens is often referred to as 'the man who banned Christmas'. Oliver Cromwell is controversial for many reasons, but this title contains more legend than fact. From the late 16th century, before Cromwell's Protectorate of 1653-58, Puritan leaders were openly critical of what they felt were excessive and wasteful celebrations that encouraged immoral behaviour over the Twelve Days of Christmas. They also saw Christmas – 'Christ's mass' – as a remnant of the pre-Reformation Catholic faith. In 1645 Parliament directed that Christmas, along with other festival days, should be spent in quiet and respectful contemplation. In 1647, they went further and banned the feasts of Christmas, Easter and Whitsun. More legislation followed in the 1650s, but the law was unpopular and frequently not followed. So is it fair to say that the ban was Cromwell's doing? He may have been sympathetic towards it, and as Lord Protector he allowed the continuation of the ban. But there's no record of his views on the matter in his speeches or letters, and he was absent from the Parliamentary decision of 1647. So we don't know. A quick headline can begin a myth, and a myth can sometimes be assumed to be history. Christmas celebrations were reinstated with the Restoration of the Monarchy – and haven't looked back since. Hooray!

The Great Ouse Valley Trust promotes for public benefit the conservation, restoration and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and heritage of the Great Ouse Valley and environs in the county of Cambridgeshire. For more information about the Trust please visit www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk



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Is Cromwell pointing his finger of disapproval in Market Hill St Ives?
Possibly, but thank goodness, Christmas is here to stay! Photograph by Alicja Malysiak