

## West Countryman's Diary



With **LES DAVIES MBE**

CAN you remember a Christmas stocking that had an orange or tangerine stuffed into the toe? Do you recall finding some nuts in there as well? If you do, the chances are you are of that age when Christmas was more about the food treats and one main Christmas present than it is today.

It was the day when I remember having ham for breakfast, chicken for dinner and Christmas pudding for tea. For many people things have moved on since those days, including me, and our expectations have grown in proportion to our waistlines. Dinner has become lunch which (with any luck) can go on all afternoon.

Afternoon tea has become supper, with a table groaning under the weight of all those goodies that I can safely load onto it. No sitting down at the table here, just grab a plate and get back to the fireside where (again with any luck) there is this year's airing of that famous Christmas Bank Holiday television film – Zulu.

Still some simple pleasures remain, such as cracking open the walnuts and extracting the 'brain'-like kernel from within. There are 'exploding' Brazil nuts. Almonds that refuse to be broken and fly from the jaws of the nut crackers with the velocity of a rifle bullet. Hazel nuts that disintegrate into a mush of shell and kernel when you use the pliers on them instead of the nutcrackers that you couldn't find from last year.

Even worse if you can't find the pliers either and resorted to a hammer or the poker handle.

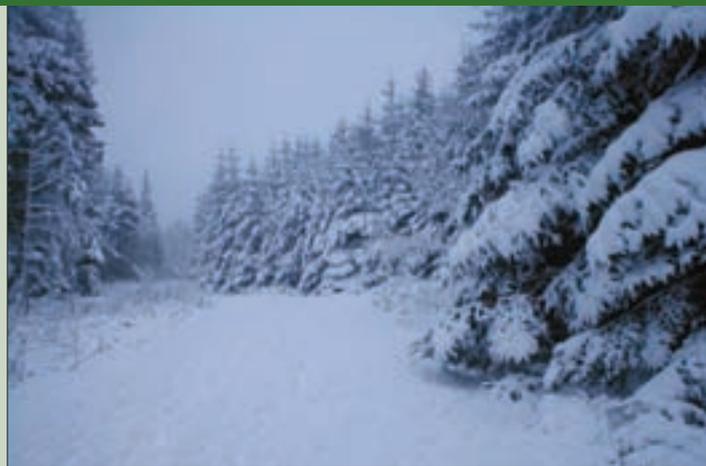
Christmas also brought with it food that you wouldn't normally eat, such as dates. These came in a thin wooden box with rounded ends. Inside were the dates, all sugary and shining with the stone still in them. There would also be a bowl of fruit, apples, grapes, tangerines and bananas. It was all quite special and not on 'everyday ration'.

Meltis fruits were a strange sugary concoction, shaped as per the fruits they represented, but with a hard interior containing juice. Then there was the very 'grown up' sweet of chocolate liqueurs; dark chocolate bottle-shaped sweets that contained a minute ration of alcoholic spirit. My recollections are they didn't taste of anything much, the chocolate masked the taste of the spirit and the spirit destroyed the taste of the chocolate. Like so many things in adolescent life, they were a bit of a disappointment when you got there.

Now sprouts are one of those vegetables, like Marmite and garlic, that you either love or hate with a vengeance. The poor old Brussels sprout has been vilified beyond belief, but for me it's one of the few 'greens' that I enjoy. They must however be cooked to the stage where they are soft and can be mixed in with the rich chicken gravy.

Bullet hard Brussels are not for me and crunchy carrots a definite NO. I have often been told that all the goodness has been cooked out of these vegetables this way, so I eat extra to make up for it! Sprouts had to have some frost on them before they acquired the right taste, but that taste came at a cost as I can testify.

At Hales Farm field scale vegetables were part of the farming rotation and most went to shops in Bristol to supply households of Bedminster, Stokes Croft and Hotwells with fresh food. Savoy cabbage, Swedish turnips (Swedes), potatoes and Brussels sprouts



were the mainstays. Picking sprouts was a very wet and, at times, painful job.

There was no mechanisation in any of this harvesting and picking sprouts meant walking through the soaking wet and often ice-covered plants. Then, placing your backside against the top of the plant to bend it backwards, you pushed down on the sprouts to break them away from the stem. Waterproof trousers were a must and you didn't want a pair with a hole in the seat.

Gloves were not considered a requirement, so your hands got wet and cold, cold to the point of being painful. I only hope that those Bristolians knew just how much I suffered so that they should have their Christmas sprouts that were taken by the wooden boxful into 'town'.

It was always chicken for dinner (not lunch) for as long as I can remember. Back then chicken was a treat and wasn't complete without the home-made stuffing made by my grandmother. No packet mix for her. She made hers with bread which had been crumbled up in a big mixing bowl and mixed with the leaves of thyme, each leaf of which had been plucked from the stem by hand so that no 'stick bits' would get in.

My mother tells me that before there was thyme in the garden, they had to pick it from a wild colony growing on the rocky soil of the right-hand steep ground. This disappeared during the war when this precipitous field was ploughed up under orders from the government, through the wartime agricultural committee (WARAG).

Potatoes were a must, roasted until the outside became crusty and full of fat. These came from my grandfather's crop that were field grown. He always had a couple of rows at the end of the farm crop. He bought the seed potatoes and would lift and pick them up after his daytime work was complete.

This gave the family a store of around 30 cwt, (around 1.5 tonnes) of tubers to see us through the winter. The variety was invariably 'Majestic' which would give a heavy crop, with huge tubers and some very funny shapes. Grading didn't exist, it was quantity that was all important.

Of white Christmases, I can only remember a few. In the Giles cartoons (a book of which was always a Christmas present) Christmases were always white. The seemingly chaotic Giles family would be tripping over decorations and precariously balancing on chairs. Mother would be up to her elbows in cooking and a hapless turkey would be attempting to escape from the fate that we all hoped it would not meet. Thankfully I don't think that this is a true and accurate picture (?) of today's family Christmas.

Whichever way you spend yours, have a great time and enjoy a little time off if you can. The picture is my seasonal greeting to you all, with my thanks to you all.

You can always contact me through my website: [Westcountryman.co.uk](http://Westcountryman.co.uk)