

The year Christmas was banned in Ireland and Britain



Source: RTÉ Brainstorm. <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/1118/1178881-christmas-banned-cancelled-ireland-britain-1647/8> Published: 8th Dec 2022. By Martyn Bennett - Professor of Early Modern History Nottingham Trent University

"Fighting against the prohibition of Christmas was a political act". Image: David Teniers II's Twelfth-night (The King Drinks)

Analysis: Christmas was cancelled in 1647, but people fed up with restrictions and financial difficulties ignored the rules.

Back in 1647, Christmas was banned in the kingdoms of England (which at the time included Wales), Scotland and Ireland and it didn't work out very well. Following a total ban on everything festive, from decorations to gatherings, rebellions broke out across the country. While some activity took the form of hanging holly in defiance, other action was far more radical and went on to have historical consequences.

In 1647, parliament had won the civil war in England, Scotland and Ireland and King Charles was held in captivity at Hampton Court. The Church of England had been abolished and replaced by a Presbyterian system.

The Protestant Reformation had restructured churches across these islands, and holy days, Christmas included, were abolished. The usual festivities during the 12 days of Christmas (December 25 to January 5) were deemed unacceptable. Shops had to stay open throughout Christmastide, including Christmas Day. Displays of Christmas decorations – holly, ivy and other evergreens – were banned. Other traditions, such as feasting and the celebratory consumption of alcohol, consumed in large quantities then as now, were likewise restricted.

Christmas Day, however, didn't pass quietly. People across England, Scotland and Ireland flouted the rules. In Norwich, the mayor had already been presented with a petition calling for a celebration of a traditional Christmas. He could not allow this publicly, but ignored illegal celebrations across the city.

In Canterbury, the usual Christmas football game was played and festive holly bushes were stood outside house doors. Over the 12 days of Christmas, the partying spread across all of Kent and armed force had to be used to break up the fun.

Christmas Day was celebrated in the very heart of Westminster and the churchwardens of St Margaret's church (which is part of Westminster Abbey) were arrested for failing to stop the party. The London streets were decked with holly and ivy and the shops were closed. The mayor of London was verbally assaulted as he tried to rip down the Christmas decorations with the help of the city's own battle-hardened veteran regiments.

Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk also celebrated Christmas rowdily. Young men armed with spiked clubs patrolled the streets persuading the shopkeepers to stay shut.

Taking up arms and breaking the rules weren't just about experiencing the fun of the season. Fighting against the prohibition of Christmas was a political act. Things had changed and the Christmas rebellion was as much a protest against the "new normal" as it was against the banning of fun. People were fed up with a range of restrictions and financial difficulties that came with the Presbyterian system and the fallout of the civil war.

The worst Christmas hangover

The aftermath of the Norwich Christmas riots was the most dramatic. The mayor was summoned to London in April 1648 to explain his failure to prohibit the Christmas parties, but a crowd closed the city gates to prevent him from being taken away. Armed forces were again deployed, and in the ensuing riots, the city ammunition magazine exploded, killing at least 40 people.

Norwich was not alone. In Kent, the grand jury decided that the Christmas party-going rioters had no choice but to answer to the law and the county went into exuberant rebellion against parliament. Royalists capitalised on the popular discontent and began organising the rioters.

Successively in 1647 and 1648, parties led to riots, these riots led to rebellions, which, in turn, caused the Second Civil War that summer. King Charles was put on trial after his defeat in the war and was executed. This resulted in a revolution and Britain and Ireland became a republic – all because of Christmas.



Questions:

1. What specific steps does the author note to highlight how the observation of Christmas as a holiday was implemented? Refer to 3 specific ideas from the early half of the text.
2. What was the response of the 'ordinary people to the banning of Christmas? Refer to 3 specific actions (excluding what happened in Norwich) that people took to defy to banning
3. Is the author correct to argue that the Norwich Christmas riots were "the most dramatic" aftermath of the banning?
4. How well do you think that David Teniers II's painting (top left) reflects the spirit of defiance outlined in the article as a whole?
5. What critique might you make of the closing line of this article, "-all because of Christmas"? Is this a valid conclusion to draw? Why/Why not?