

Who was Good King Wenceslas Anyway?

CHRISTMAS CAROL TRIVIA

Ever wondered about the stories behind some of our most popular Christmas carols? Who was this King Wenceslas chap anyway? And what exactly is the feast of Stephen? How did a broken down church organ inspire the most popular Christmas carol of all time? What Christmas song doesn't actually mention Christmas at all?



And why were Christmas carols banned for a few years in the 1600s? Read on to find out....

Good King Wenceslas was the Duke of Bohemia who was murdered in 929 AD by his wicked younger brother, Boleslav. As the song suggests, he was a good, honest, man of high moral character who believed that his Christian faith should be put into action in practical ways. He became Bohemia's most famous martyr and patron saint. Technically, 'Good King Wenceslas' is not about Christmas: the 'feast of Stephen' mentioned in the song falls on Boxing Day, named after the tradition of bringing boxes of food and clothing to the less fortunate.

Hear the opening strains of 'Joy to the World' and your thoughts automatically turn to the magic of Christmas. But listen carefully to the words next time: although we associate this 18th century song with the festive season, there is no mention of the manger, the town of Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph, the ox and ass, the angels, the wise men, the shepherds, or the star. In fact, the lyrics never actually mention the birth of Christ at all - only his coming!

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Lewis Redner, rector of Holy Trinity church in Philadelphia in the 1860s, wrote a Christmas poem inspired by his visit to the Holy Land in 1865 during which he had made a pilgrimage to the field of the Annunciation to the Shepherds. He asked a composer friend, Phillips Brooks, to set the words to music. Brooks suffered an uncharacteristic case of writer's block, fell asleep exhausted on Christmas Eve and conceived the melody in a dream. The song? 'O Little Town of Bethlehem'.

Only one Christmas carol gets mentioned by name in the text of Charles Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol'

'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen'. A small boy begins to sing it at Scrooge's window, but flees when the old miser seizes a ruler and rises from his desk poised to strike.

Christmas carols were banned between 1649 and 1660 in England by Oliver Cromwell who thought that Christmas should be a solemn day.

Perhaps the best known Christmas carol is Silent Night, written in 1818 by an Austrian assistant priest named Joseph Mohr. Legend has it that on Christmas Eve, he was told that the church organ was broken. He hastily wrote 3 verses that could be sung by a choir and accompanied by acoustic guitar. The result, "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht", is the most popular Christmas carol of all time and is sung throughout the world in more than 180 languages by millions of people



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