

## Christmas – the good, the bad and the ugly

By Keith Sands

Christmas is one of those holidays which means very different things to different people.

It can be a spiritual time, a family time, a time for giving, a time for partying or a time for just over-eating... Most people (in those countries where it is the main religious festival of the year) find something to enjoy about Christmas, whether they are Christians or not. But hasn't Christmas in the consumer age become just a bit too big? And a lot too commercial?

I think so. The secret of a good Christmas is to be selective. Here is my personal list of the things Christmas (at any rate, Christmas in Britain) would be infinitely better without. Let's get rid of....

### Plastic Christmas trees

Fussy people don't like trees that drop their needles on the carpet. Surely, in the age of vacuum cleaners, this is not a problem any more? Worst of all are those plastic trees that come with their own decorations already attached, so depriving children of the great pleasure of hanging the decorations themselves.

**Replace with** : Real fir trees, from sustainable forests.

### Fairy lights that don't work

We have sent people to the moon. Computers have changed our lives. On the Internet, huge amounts of information travel all over the world at the speed of light. So it shouldn't be too difficult to put a few coloured light bulbs in a row, so they last until New Year without breaking down.

**Replace with** : Candles. And fireproof fir trees.

### Slade's Merry Christmas Everybody

A stomping, two-chord song from the dark days of 1970s rock. Played endlessly in British pubs and on the radio through December. It is the musical equivalent of jumping up and down with heavy boots on and trying to drink beer at the same time. I remember once, at a Christmas party, picking up my beer and taking a sip - to find out someone had used the can as an ashtray. And this song is the theme tune of that kind of party.

**Replace with** : The Pogues and Kirsty MacColl's Fairytale of New York : a great, soulful Christmas song.

### Bing Crosby's White Christmas

While we're on the subject of Christmas songs, let's not forget that this sentimental 1950s tune is the biggest selling single of all time. It's ideal for falling asleep in an armchair but finally just too nostalgic. And very annoying.

**Replace with** : Silent Night, a beautiful German carol known all over the world.

### Office parties

Doesn't a computer decorated with tinsel, and an office with paper chains hanging from the ceiling, look just a tiny bit depressing? And office Christmas parties are worse. Under the influence of cheap wine in paper coffee-cups, strange things happen with the photocopier. Rude messages are faxed to clients. Most people can't relax in the office. And those that can will probably do something they'll regret later.

**Replace with** : an extra afternoon off work.

### British Christmas Weather

In Richard Curtis films (like the recent hit Love, Actually), it always snows at Christmas in London. The city is covered with a beautiful white blanket, the perfect setting for a romantic happy ending. What's the reality of Christmas weather in the South of England? Grey skies with a good chance of cold drizzle in the late afternoon.

**Replace with** : Russian Christmas weather.

### TV

It's a fact that we spend more time in front of the TV at Christmas than at any other time of year. The TV schedules are filled with old films, comedy "Christmas Specials", soap operas with Christmas-related plots, and of course hundreds of adverts. Switch it off and visit your relatives instead.

**Replace with** : log fires, board games.

#### Turkey with Cranberry Sauce

In Britain, the usual Christmas dinner is turkey with cranberry sauce – although ultra-traditionalists may prefer goose. Cranberry sauce is basically a kind of jam. We don't put jam on meat at other times of year, so why at Christmas?

**Replace with** : No cranberry sauce.

#### Consumerism

You know what I mean. Adverts for toys on children's TV. Department stores which put out Christmas decorations as early as September. The stress of Christmas shopping. Everywhere the message is spend, spend, spend. Christmas is a Christian religious festival, to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. It's not just an excuse for making money.

**Replace with** : Midnight carols at church, peace on earth, and goodwill to all men.

So that's my advice. Avoid these things and you'll have a good chance of having a truly Merry Christmas. Which is what I wish you now. And a happy new year.