Christmas Trees

The first Xmas trees

The first reference of a fir tree decorated for Xmas is at Riga in Latvia in 1510. In 1521, the Princess Hélène de Mecklembourg introduced the Xmas tree to Paris after marrying the Duke of Orleans. There also is a printed reference to Xmas trees in Germany, dated 1531. Another famous reference, to 1601, is about a visitor to Strasbourg, Germany (now part of France) who noticed a family decorating a tree with "wafers and golden sugar-twists (barley sugar) and paper flowers of all colours."

The Xmas tree was introduced to the United States by German settlers and by Hessian mercenaries paid to fight in the Revolutionary War. In 1804, US soldiers stationed at Fort Dearborn (Chicago) hauled trees from surrounding woods to their barracks.

Martin Luther (1483 - 1546) is said to be the first to have decorated a Xmas tree with candles to show children how the stars twinkled through the dark night

Britain was introduced to the Xmas tree in 1841, when Queen Victoria's German husband, Prince Albert brought a Xmas tree to Windsor Castle for the Royal family. The custom of of the Xmas tree spread quickly to the middle class, to working people, and throughout the colonies (where the Empire's flag would sometimes top the tree).

Xmas tree decorations

Trees were decorated with apples, cakes and candies for many centuries. Martin Luther was the first to use candles on trees in the late 16th Century. In 1842, Charles Minnegrode introduced the custom of decorating trees to the US in Williamsburg, Virginia.

In 1850s, German company Lauscha, based in Thuringia, began to produce shaped glass bead garlands for Xmas trees. They also introduced the Rauschgoldengel, the Tingled-angel', dressed in pure gilded tin. The glass ornaments reached Britain in the 1870s, and North America around 1880. In

Every year since 1947 the people in Oslo have given a Xmas tree to the city of Westminster (the tree in Trafalgar square). The gift is an expression of goodwill and gratitude for Britain's help to Norway in the 1939-1945 war.

1882, ornaments were complimented by electric Xmas lights. Edward Johnson, a colleague of Thomas Edison, lit a Xmas tree with a string of 80 small electric light bulbs which he had made himself. By 1890, the Xmas light strings were mass-produced. By 1900, stores put up large illuminated trees to lure the customers.