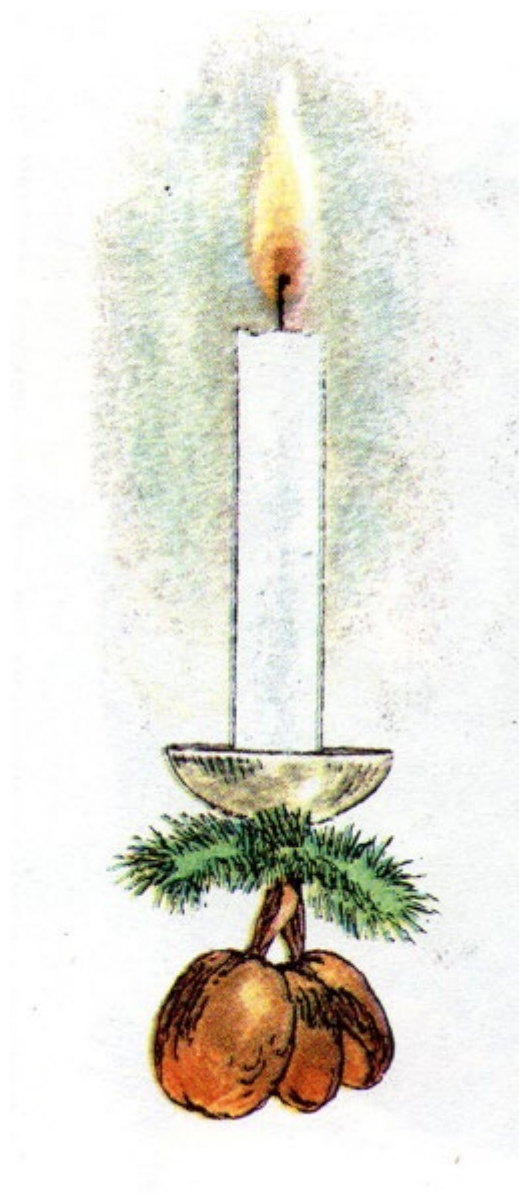


Christmas on Samsø



Memories from a childhood long, long ago by

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Preface

Some time ago members of the council of my local parish, Odd Rode in the county of Cheshire, England, decided that the Christmas issue of the parish newsletter should have some pieces about Christmas in other countries. The brief was that the piece should be about 300 words.

I originated from Denmark so that was the country I was going to write about. Obviously I have been back at all times of the year including Christmas, but one loses touch, and I do not really know what makes that country 'tick' so I decided to write about my childhood Christmas on Samsø, which in many ways was not dissimilar to the one described in 'Peter's Christmas' (see below).

As I started writing I soon realised that 300 words just was not enough. Memories just came flooding back and the piece got longer and longer and what you see here is the end result.

Towards the end I discuss the lack of snow in my tale, but the observant reader may wonder about other 'omissions' as for example there is no 'Father Christmas' with or without a red top. The reason being that my parents as fairly enlightened liberal conservatives considered this a pagan, heathen concept which had no place in a Christian home.



However, the concept of 'nisser' (little fairy people with red tops) was embraced and cut-out images were spread about the home. (On Christmas

Eve you must remember to put a bowl of rice pudding on the loft for these fairies. If the bowl is empty the next morning it is a sign that in return 'nisserne' will help you to have a good, successful, happy new year (or alternatively that there are rats on the loft – depending on your sense of realism or cynicism). If the bowl is not empty – bad luck! Needless to say my family did not engage in such customs.)

Likewise I have not mentioned the custom of a 'Saint Lucia' procession, which seems to have invaded Danish Christmasses since I left in the early 1970s. We knew about it, of course, but considered it a custom especially relevant to Swedish culture with Sweden being a bit further north and therefore having a longer, darker winter. The custom also entails the whole concept of 'saints' and seems to have roman-catholic under currents, which again was not something to be embraced within a Lutheran protestant family.

Unfortunately I do not have any photographs or other graphic accounts of my childhood Christmas to hand. I have therefore 'borrowed' some illustrations from:

J. Krohn, *Peter's Christmas*, illustrated by Pietro Krohn, translated by Hugh F. Pooley, Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag A/S, third impression, Copenhagen 1965.

Jul på Samsø

Introduction

This is the story of my childhood Christmas on the island of Samsø in the middle of the Danish archipelago. My family (our parents and three brothers) moved there in the middle of the war in 1943, sailing in a traditional wooden (so as not to attract mines) schooner with all their belongings on the open deck. My father as vicar took over one of five parishes on the island. There were (and are!) of course five main churches, but also two annex churches, so seven churches in all. As dean he would oversee the other parishes and the small nearby island of Tunø on which the church tower double up as a lighthouse.

As parish priest my father had responsibility for one main church (Tranebjerg) and one annex church (Ørby) 4-5 miles away. He would cycle between them every Sunday until

Samsø was then a thriving community of over 7,000 souls with five local authorities, five dairies, an abattoir, eight maybe ten (including two small primary schools) local authority schools and a private school, a local judiciary, a customs office, two maybe three power stations, two independent banks, a well functioning hospital with a doctor (overlæge), a locum (reserve læge) and several nurses, and much else besides, but as still is the case only one policeman; also two practicing GPs and three veterinary doctors. There were daily ferries to and from Zealand to the east (Kalundborg) and Jutland to the west (Aarhus) by DSB and a more infrequent service by DFDS from København via Samsø to Odense and return.

What I also remember are the door to door deliveries by a milkman and the rubbish bin collector both with very fine pedigree horses. Meat would be offered by a butcher, who frequently changed his delivery vehicles. I seem to recall that they became more and more luxurious and in the end he acquired a big, bright red Chevrolet Customliner.

Fish would be offered by a local fishmonger who arrived on a special pushbike built for deliveries, in Denmark known as a 'Long John' (nothing to do with items of clothing). He would do the initial preparation of the fish eg pull skin off the plaice in a special grip. Heads and intestines would go on the floor to our big tabby housecat called 'Pjevs'.

In the autumn he would deliver a load of herrings, which were stored in layers of coarse sea salt in a big earthenware tub on the floor of our cellar.

he finally got a car in 1956.



The cellar was a very safe cool storage area even in the middle of summer as long as we had coal fired central heating. However with the introduction of more efficient oil fired central heating we also had to buy a fridge-freezer unit. (There is a lesson here somewhere!)

In our village, Tranebjerg, the largest on the island, there were at least two postal deliveries, both in the afternoon after the ferries had unloaded their cargo of post and other freight. One was in the centre of the village by a postman dressed in a uniform with a red jacket as was the custom in urban areas. The other was by a postman dressed in an all black uniform as was the custom in rural areas.

Now the island is no longer an independent local authority created, but amalgamated with Odder Kommune on mainland Jutland. There are no dairies or abattoir, no banks and judiciary and only one school, but the island is famed the world over for being self-sufficient in electricity through numerous windmills. I understand the hospital's main function is as a nursing home while anything remotely complicated is flown by air ambulance to the mainland. I believe the parishes have also been amalgamated with one or two vicars rotating between all the churches.

Advent

As in all Christian countries the lead up to Christmas is in Denmark through the four Sundays of advent. As is the custom in Denmark my mother would make a wreath of pine twigs. It would have four candles (one for each Sunday) and would be hung from the ceiling in red ribbons in one of the living rooms. On Sunday evenings our mother would get my sisters (both born on Samsø) and I (my two older brothers had by then left for boarding school) together round the wreath. The electric light was turned off and the candles lit, one on the first Sunday, two on the second and so on. My mother would read a story appropriate for the season and a hymn might be sung.

Preparation

Preparations for Christmas within the family would go on all through December. Within the household it involved a lot of baking including many of various types of the cookies (småkager) customary at the Danish coffee table, especially the gingery ones known as 'brune kager'. It would also include home made liver paté, sausages, brawn and pickled herring made from the salted herrings delivered in the autumn.

Of course it would also involve everyone buying presents to everyone else and some times our father would make a present like a dolls house for my sisters; everything was done in deepest secret.

As my father had been a seaman's missionary in Hull here in England it had become tradition that we received some presents from England usually in the form of Chocolate, sometimes the so-called 'Magic Box'. A special task would be to collect these parcels from the local customs office. And once the officer had satisfied himself that there was nothing on-towards in the content we could bring them home.



and other festive items for the Christmas tree. We would plate new hearts from the glittering paper and do the cut outs to renew the decorations some of which might have past their glamorous best.

A Christmas tree would be delivered from the local manor estate and a special exercise was to measure it and put on the footing; always from floor to ceiling leaving room for a star at the top. In the days and hours leading up to Christmas Eve my father would decorate the tree with the old traditional plated paper hearts, cones and some of the bits we had made during the weeks before. Proper red and white candles and one or two sparklers were a must. This decoration was also done in secret and we the children were not allowed to see the tree at this stage.

Some evenings the family might get together round a table full of glittering paper and various sheets of ready to cut out 'nisser' (see preface), cones

The Community

In the wider community preparations continued apace.

In the main village festoons were hang from one side of the street to the other all through the nearly two mile long main street and every shop would have Christmas decorations in the shop window, some more elaborate than others. I remember in particular the very elaborate display in the new greenhouse of a local vegetable grower and garden centre. There were waterfalls, mysterious caves, nisser, artificial snow and drifting mist; all weird and wonderful.

In the churchyard (the cemetery surrounding our local church) the ground of every grave would be covered with twigs of pine.

One of the duties of the parochial church council was to allocate the savings of some small charitable funds, which had their roots in the 1920s or 1930s when dkr 20 (£1 at the old exchange rate) was a considerable sum. The purpose was of course to help the poor and needy and the identity of the recipients would be confidential. However, somehow I recall the identity of one recipient, a single mother with two children, a boy and a girl aged about 10.

I remember once meeting them in the shop of the local butcher. Their turn came and they asked for this that and the other, nothing very elaborate. As the goods were brought they were put into the shopping bag, but when it came to payment there was

no money! The poor children had to put it all back onto the counter. Humiliation, if ever there was one.

(In general the local community was reasonably well off and this kind of spectacle was an exception. In fairness to the butcher it must also be said that they probably had stretched the goodwill credit as far as they could.)

Little Christmas Eve

The 23rd of December was, and probably still is, in Denmark known as Little Christmas Eve (Lille Jule Aften). Nothing special about the day itself. However, in our family it was tradition that that evening we would have a dish of pork with potatoes, white cabbage and other vegetables all boiled in one big bowl similar to lobby, but without gravy. The juice would be eaten as soup while the potato and the meat would be eaten from a side plate with knife and fork. For sweets we would have the special Danish doughnut-like buns known as 'æbleskiver' and eaten like pancakes with jam or lemon juice and sugar.

Christmas Eve, early hours

The 24th of December would start like most other days. The run up to the evening's events would start with a wholesome lunch with all the food that had been prepared during the days and weeks before. Snaps would be available for the adults to go with the herring and probably some sweet alcohol free beer for both adults and children.

At the age of twelve I was given a Shetland pony to be called 'Musse', a common name for a female horse in Denmark and part of the preparations for Christmas would be to give her stable an extra special clean out with spreading of fresh new straw. As a special treat her afternoon food would be some of the curly leaves of kale otherwise used for a sauce (see Christmas Day below).

It would then be time for a rest before the long evening.

At about 4pm we would all go to the local church for the traditional carol service conducted by my father. The church with two large Christmas trees covered in white candles would be absolutely packed with probably about 2-300 people and special seating brought in. Afterwards my father would come home and then the doctor at the local hospital would arrive in his car to take him and my mother off to a similar service at the hospital while our cook stayed behind to look after the food.

Meanwhile the postman would have been, always with a lot of letters and cards from family and friends far and wide. He would be offered a cigar, which he kept inside the leather band of his cap.

By now the time would be 6.30-7pm and it was time for the traditional Christmas dinner.

Christmas dinner

As was the custom in Denmark this would start with rice pudding served with warm beer or warm fruit juice (to fill you up before starting on the more expensive dish that followed!). There would be a small lump of butter in the middle and sugar mixed with cinnamon on top.

Following tradition a whole almond would be concealed in the pudding and a small prize would be given to the lucky person who found it in his or her portion. Perhaps another ploy to get you to eat more if the almond did not show up in the first portion.

In some families the tradition for the main dish was roast duck, but for most it was roast goose or pork and in our family it was pork accompanied by boiled red cabbage, boiled potatoes, pickled marrows (asier) and black current jam. In later years this would be accompanied by a glass of red wine.

Dinner over and it was time for another pause while our mother and the housemaid cleared away the food and did the dish- washing. The rest of us often filled this break with a walk around the town to settle our tummies and to see what other folks were up to behind the brightly lid windows.

The Christmas tree

Having arrived back in the vicarage most of us would be seated in a darkened room next to the Christmas tree with the doors between tightly closed. While sitting there waiting for the culmination of the evening - in fact the culmination of the whole Christmas - we could hear our father move round the tree gradually lighting one candle after the other. And then the double doors would be opened and we would see the tree for the first time in all its magic splendour.

Having admired the tree for a few minutes and agreed it was the finest tree ever (!) we would get up and walk round the tree hand in hand singing the traditional carols. Following that it would be the unravelling of the presents with all that that entails wherever such events are happening. A few more rounds round the tree and more unravelling.

The event I remember most is the Christmas my mother brought in this tiny little lump of white fur covered under a blue knitted jumper. It turned out to be the family's first and only dog a white small collie type. I named him 'Tjep', but I really have no idea from where I got this name. He stayed with us for some 14-15 years until he



ate rat poison twice in succession. By then and my mother decided enough was enough and Tjep was humanely put to sleep.

Also part of Christmas Eve was the opening of the parcels from England. It was always a source of excitement as we tried to decipher the menu of the 'Magic Box'. Some of the English delicacies seem not quite so delicate to Danish taste buds.

Christmas day

As the reader will appreciate we did on Christmas Eve what in most English homes is happening on Christmas day so for us Christmas day was in many ways a day of rest except for my father.

First there was the big service (sung Eucharist you might say) in the main parish church at 10 am. This service would be preceded with chiming, that is to say the local churchwarden (who was probably unique in mastering this technique) would be beating manually one of the two bells with a wooden hammer monotonously for up to an hour until shortly before the service was due to begin at which point the usual call to service would ring out.

In the afternoon a similar service would be held in the annex church some four or five miles away at 2pm. Some of the family would go to one or both of these services.

In between we would have lunch with all the trimmings. It would include pan-fried sausages with a traditional green cabbage sauce, caramelised potatoes and sliced beetroots or mustard to taste.

2nd Christmas day (that is what it is called!)

Again in some ways a working day for my father only now the annex church came first at 10am with the main church at 2pm.

Following the service in the main church some friends and members of the congregation would be invited back to the vicarage for afternoon tea or coffee and a few rounds round the Christmas tree.

In between

There now followed a period of relative calm until the new year, again except for my father who would have to prepare a sermon if there happened to be a Sunday in between.

New Year's Eve

Marking the coming of the new year probably started when we gathered round the radio to listen to the king's new years message. In those days it was delivered from a gala dinner at the royal castle, Amalienborg. When the microphones opened you could hear the tingling of cutlery and glasses and the humming of guests. At precisely 6pm (18.00 hours) the band of the Royal Lifeguard would strike up the royal anthem ('Kong Christian', as distinct from the national anthem) following which the king (the present queen's father as it was until 1972) would put a knife to his glass (at least that is what we heard!) and start his message. He would end his message (as the Queen continues to do) with the words "Gud bevare Danmark" (God save/preserve/take care of Denmark).

The evening would continue with the dinner, which traditionally would be boiled fresh cod or the salted, dried version manufactured in Norway. In both cases served with a white mustard sauce and boiled potatoes. This might be followed by cold rice pudding mixed with cream and almond flakes and a fruit sauce.

In my childhood years the rest of the evening would be relatively quiet, as my father needed peace in which to concentrate on the preparation for next day's service. We might play some games and we would listen to the special new year's programmes on the radio.

However, outside there would be a lot of goings on which can only be described as hooliganism and there would be lots and lots of fireworks going off. It would involve such things as putting discarded Christmas trees in people's chimneys, moving implements about, all to the annoyance of property owners, ringing people's doorbells and run off to a hiding place from where you could watch the reaction of the angry house owner.

On one new year's eve me and my younger sister decided to 'have a go' ourselves and aimed to place a tree in one chimney down the village High Street. After several attempts at reaching the top of the building and sliding down the roof in the wet snow I finally got there, only to find that the chimney opening had been bricked over! I left the tree in disappointment where it was on the top of the building! I did though succeed in other cases.

On one such dark New Year's evening there was a quiet knock on the door. Outside stood a cold little girl probably aged about 10 at the time. She was a friend and classmate of my youngest sister and a 'late arrival' in her family. It seemed the celebrations by the adults there had become too rowdy and they probably ignored their little sister. She therefore sought refuge with her friend in our home. She probably had a fizzy orange juice ('sodavand') and some cakes and later on I followed her home. (When I relayed the story to her some 40 years later she had forgotten all about it!)

New Year's Day

New Year's day is in Denmark as in England a bank holiday, but also a church going day and as I hinted for our father it would be another day of church services to mark the start of the secular year as opposed to the Christian year, which of course starts the first Sunday in advent.

The tradition in our local church on that day was a New Year's parade by the scouts, boys as well as girls, in their finest uniforms, complete with their respective standards.

On arrival at the church everybody would file in and the two standard bearers with their flag were placed near the altar. At certain points during the service the flags would be lowered with the bearer's arm stretched, but the flags would not touch the ground. According to Danish tradition it is very bad form indeed to let the flag be soiled. It was my first experience of having to stand still on one spot for an hour or more.

Night of the holy three kings (Twelfth night)



We have now arrived at the 5th of January traditionally – in Denmark anyway – marking the end of Christmas and in my childhood also the end of the school holidays.

On that night there would be a special church service perhaps about 8pm after which the congregation would be invited back to the vicarage for a last coffee table and a helping of my mothers special apple crumble, a favourite with some members of the congregation.

Among the guests might be the master builder (muremester) J J Jensen, a tall stately figure with a white mane, a prominent white moustache and a hooked nose credited with many of the most prominent buildings on the island. Among these are, I believe, the building which used to accommodate the local branch of ‘Den Danske Bank’ and in the centre of our village a large

building build as a technical college, which later (in 1962) became the head quarters of the new local authority, but now sadly seems to stand empty.

After the coffee table there would be a few more rounds round the Christmas tree and singing of Carols.

Having lived in England in the late 1920s and early 1930s my mother in particular had become very fond of open fires and insisted on having a fireplace installed (done by the said JJJensen) when they arrived on Samsø. This evening was one of the few times a year an open fire was lit.

At the end of the evening the tree would be un-decorated and thrown out through the back door.

In the morning it would be back to school, which - I am afraid – I never enjoyed much.



Post Scriptum

The observant reader will have noticed that I never said anything about snow. In fact I cannot remember a real Christmas-card type white Christmas. Of course there must have been some snow on the ground some christmasses, but it was not a dominant feature of my childhood Christmas. There might be enough snow for children to sledge, but not enough for skiing and seldom for the use of horse drawn sledges.

What I do remember are the few occasions up until about the mid-1960s when prolonged periods of sharp frost (weeks with temperatures of below -5 degrees) would cause the sea to freeze so that the ferry service would have to be cancelled and emergency supplies could only be delivered by plane.

On one such occasion – sometime in the 1950s - a pilot lost his way during the dark winter night with no visible difference between the snow covered land and the ice covered sea. He had to make an emergency landing on the ice near to one of the many islets on the east-side of Samsø. His plane must have been loaded with Christmas presents and he got sustenance by opening a parcel which apparently contained some oranges destined for a sick child in hospital. On daybreak he again took off and later visited the child with another parcel of oranges, humbly apologising for having to eat the child's Christmas present.

Knud Møller, December 2012
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