

‘All I remember is mucking out!’

Last-minute presents bought at Olympia, mucking out on the big day and escaping ponies – famous equestrians share their childhood Christmas memories with *Catherine Welton*

IT'S a magical time when you still believe in Father Christmas, you don't have mountains of washing-up or the in-laws to deal with – and it's not your responsibility to make sure the turkey and Brussels sprouts are cooked at the same time. Childhood Christmases are, simply put, the best bits of the festive season with none of the stress.

As a child at boarding school, Christmas was particularly important to Carl Hester.

“I would start thinking about Christmas as soon as half-term was over,” he says. “It was eight weeks of excitement. I didn't enjoy the journey home, though. Sark was always very wild and windy in the winter, so I was always seasick and ended up throwing up on the harbour, on the boat and when I got off.

“In Sark, Christmas was very magical. I can remember all gathering in the village to meet Father Christmas for the first time. I would have been about five. I did have a sneaky suspicion that Father Christmas was the man that

fixed all the bikes,” remembers Carl. “I asked Mum, ‘Is that Uncle John?’

“Our pocket money was so measly at boarding school, literally 70p a week. As soon as I got home, Grandmother would take me out shopping for the family Christmas presents and she would help me pick something – a bottle of red wine for Dad, a bottle of perfume for Mother. I think they got the same thing every Christmas.”

AS the son of an Olympic eventer, Harry Meade's Christmases revolved around that lifestyle.

“We were always at home because of the horses and ponies. My brother and I used to do the yard in peace and tranquillity until our mother came and tormented us!” he remembers.

Growing up in a showjumping dynasty, Jack Whitaker's childhood December was always defined by one big, famous event.

“We're such a big family, we couldn't all get together on Christmas Day, but we all went to Olympia so that's where presents got handed over,” he says.



“The most important present I had was my first bike; it was my most treasured possession”

CARL HESTER



FAMOUS FESTIVITIES

Luckily for Jack, Olympia also provided the perfect opportunity to buy presents.

"I was always very last-minute, but I think I'm good at it – the reviews were always good!"

By the time Christmas Day itself rolled around, Jack says he was always ready for a break from the horses.

"We never rode on Christmas Day," he says. "It was more getting down and trying to open presents as quickly as we could. Most days were so busy and hectic, we tried to make Christmas as nice and quiet and relaxed as possible."

When Jack turned 14, his Christmases took a decided turn for the worse.

"That's when I had to start mucking out in the morning," he laughs.

As you might expect, it's a common theme among equestrians.

"Ask me about my childhood Christmas memories and all I can remember is mucking out!" says Becky Moody. "We'd do the Father Christmas presents first. We had pillowcases that we'd leave at the end of the bed. In the morning they'd have all sorts of different things in them – the classic satsuma, socks, hairbands, some horsey stuff, some stuff for school. After that we'd do the mucking out and work on the yard."

"I think we've always been a Christmas-in-the-evening kind of family. We'd help make Christmas dinner, then do the evening yard, then have Christmas dinner when we were all done."

"When we were little, we'd go for a Christmas ride covered in tinsel. We'd go galloping around somewhere. I remember we had a 14.2hh called Joss who had a bit of a thing for taking himself hunting, and one Boxing Day he did manage to join the hunt. Luckily no one was hurt and he was successfully retrieved."



Other than that, Christmas was fairly unremarkable for the Moody family's horses. "I don't think we got presents for the horses – they got extra carrots and apples and that was about the extent of it," Becky says

THE carriage horses of Sark were a bit more privileged.

"Their Christmas present was being ridden by me," jokes Carl. "All the horses used to work from April to October, so in the summer holidays I couldn't ride them. But at Christmas I could ride as many as I wanted from the field and go for a spin around the cliffs."

When he wasn't riding, the young Carl was socialising.

"Sark is very much about community," he says. "In the morning after we'd done our presents and had a cooked breakfast, we'd go to visit my parents' elderly friends. In those days they weren't allowed mobility scooters or anything, so a lot of elderly people were housebound. We'd go

Illustrations by David Stoten



to see them and take them presents and chocolates. Then we'd go to the pub – it was a very social time, and exhausting!"

But there's one memory of Christmases past that escapes Carl – the food. "I don't remember what we had to eat. Being Sark, it was probably something alternative as they didn't have enough turkeys," he says.

Harry also remembers his family missing out on the traditional Christmas day dinner one year.

"My mother always cooked, but once we had to have ham as the Labrador ate the turkey while we were in church," he recalls.

For Jack, once the horses had been taken care of, Christmas Day was about two things: TV and leftovers.

"We'd sit down around the fire and watch films," he says. "About 7.30pm, we'd put the leftover roast in a sandwich with redcurrant jelly, stuffing and potatoes."

The Moody family had a different approach to entertainment at Christmas.

"We didn't do a lot of Christmas TV," says Becky. "It was more board games and

family games. Cluedo was a favourite and Charades. We played a lot of Scrabble. There were definitely competitive elements in the family."

And she has a confession: "Maybe I was one of the people who would cheat! I didn't get caught though. I was quite good at it!"

PERHAPS surprisingly for these riders, childhood Christmas presents weren't very horsey.

"It was more socks and underwear and pyjamas and the old Lynx set," remembers Jack. "My favourite present was a bike."

He's not the only one – Carl's most memorable present was also two-wheeled, rather than four-hooved.

"The most important present I had was my first bike," Carl says. "It was bright yellow, used to fold up in half and was called a Castaway. It was my most treasured possession because it was my means of transport. Of course, you have to fall off that many times before you can

be considered a bike rider – like riding horses. Unfortunately, the Sark roads are very gritty, so it was a painful experience.

"I also remember all I wanted was a guinea pig. I remember waking up on Christmas morning, and thinking Father Christmas has been. The whisky and the mince pie had gone, he'd definitely been. Finding a box under the Christmas tree with a load of curly wood shavings and dipping my hands in and there was the guinea pig. My first pet."

In the Moody household, the gift themes varied.

"When I was very little the presents were definitely horsey but as I got older as I spent so much time doing horses it was nice to get non-horsey stuff," she recalls. "One year, I would have been probably about 17 or 18, I got about 12 handbags from different people. I was like, 'Oh great another handbag!'"

"Quite often, Mum and Dad would give me money and that was cool because you got to spend it on whatever you wanted. I'd have a post-Christmas shop in the sales."

While most children are desperate to open their presents as soon as possible, Harry remembers trying his best to wait.

"Our little sister had amassed surrogate godparents throughout our childhood, so she always had double the presents that my brother and I had," he says. "We boys learnt to open ours at the end of the day, so we didn't have to twiddle our thumbs while she got through her mountain!"

FOR Harry, some childhood Christmas traditions have carried through to today.

"We hosted a lawn meet on Christmas Eve – Rosie and I still host it now," he says. "Then on Christmas Day we'd trot the horses up, turn them out and do the morning yard before church. Then after church, I'd ride a few. Each horse would have one day off, on either Christmas Eve, Christmas Day or Boxing Day."

Becky recalls a tradition many will be familiar with: "You had to leave out a glass of whisky and a carrot for Rudolph. It was always the whisky that had gone!"

Meanwhile Jack reveals a slightly more unusual Christmas tradition that the Whitaker family enjoys.

"We do Christmas jokes," he explains. "It normally starts with Will, he'll send a joke and then we video ourselves and send them around the family throughout Christmas Day and Boxing Day."

Boxing Day always signals the end of the festive fun and a return to reality – for children and professional equestrians.

"It's such a disappointment for kids when Christmas is over, it's such an anticlimax," says Carl.

Jack agrees: "After a quiet Christmas Day, when Boxing Day came around, it was like starting normal life again." **H&H**