

THE HUNDRED PARISHES SOCIETY

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As 2021 enters its final month, we anticipate seasonal celebrations to brighten the shortest days of the year. The ancient tradition of decking our houses with garlands of fresh green holly branches reminds us of the continuity of life, bringing us cheer when the days are short.

On reaching the age of 20, female holly trees bear red berries on branches covered with prickly shiny green leaves which can be cut to make decorative wreaths. Such wreaths featured in midwinter Celtic and Roman celebrations as symbols of good fortune, a tradition that continues thanks to the intervention of a local man, William Winstanley (1628 – 1698).

During the Commonwealth which lasted from 1649 to 1660, the Puritans under Oliver Cromwell proclaimed that it was illegal to celebrate Christmas, banning frivolities and feasting on mince pies. Winstanley, who lived in Quendon, believed in celebrating Christmas as a time for sharing joy, fun and good fortune with others. After restoration of the monarchy in 1660, using his influence as a writer, he encouraged a return to the seasonal merrymaking which we still enjoy today.

Holly trees were frequently planted near houses to ward off a lightning strike; interestingly scientific research has revealed its spiky leaves can act as miniature lightning conductors! Holly also grows in hedges or as a shrub in woods where its berries provide nourishment for blackbirds, thrushes and wood mice. Its dense branches provide secure nesting sites. Deer and rabbits will eat its nutritious leaves.

Today, many homeowners plant variegated forms of holly to provide interest in their gardens and they can select a mixture of foliage to make seasonal decorations.

Yew is another evergreen with red coloured fruits (loved by birds and squirrels), but as its leaves are poisonous it is less suitable for indoor decorations.

Tricia Moxey, Trustee