

# HAPPY CHRISTMAS

from the

## Centre for Television Histories

Television is central to the British experience of Christmas, and its consumption is as much a part of the seasonal rituals as decking the halls. We know its peak television, right now, and there's already so much available to watch over the festive period, but we wanted to share a few of our favourites from Christmas TV's past.

### [Dinner for One \(NDR, 1962\)](#)



This first example is quintessentially British television at Christmas in which Freddie Frinton (playing James the Butler) acts drunk while performing the roles of the missing guests at Miss Sophie's dinner. It exposes the theatrical, vaudeville roots of Christmas television and the television pleasures of repetition, ritual and the presence of the diegetic audience. It is slapstick comedy, has a repeated punchline ("same procedure as every year") and evokes a visceral reaction in audiences (some love it, some hate it). Interestingly, it was NEVER shown on British television, rather it was produced for German audiences and is broadcast annually on New Year's Eve. It is very much embedded in German's cultural memory of British television and British national identity. An early example of transnational television. In 2013, [The One Show explored the sketch's popularity and significance.](#)

## [Christmas Night with the Stars \(BBC, 25 December 1964\)](#)



*Christmas Night with the Stars* represents an enduring tradition in British television, and the prime-time scheduling, of light entertainment at Christmas. It began in 1958, and was the centrepiece of the BBC's Christmas Day schedule until 1972. Each year, the programme was hosted by a familiar face from BBC television, and included festive-themed shorts of popular BBC sitcoms and other light entertainment content. In this edited edition from 1964, Jack Warner (*Dixon of Dock Green*) – the master of ceremonies – introduces “a whole host of old friends”, including Billy Cotton (Fearne Cotton's great-great-uncle!), Kathy Kirby and Dick Emery, as well as short Christmas editions of that year's most popular BBC sitcoms: *Hugh and I*, *The Likely Lads*, *Marriage Lines*, and *Meet the Wife* (which unfortunately is not included in this edited version).

## ***EastEnders* (BBC: BBC1, 25 December 1986)**

**[Part ONE, broadcast at 6.35pm](#) and [Part TWO, broadcast at 10.00pm](#)**



While there is no shortage of festive content relaying the enduring ideal of the *perfect Christmas* as one spent at home with family, there is space, even at the heart of the Christmas schedule, for more varied and critical perspectives. Soap operas compete annually for seasonal viewing figures by bringing a storyline, developed over a number of months, to a dramatic climax in a prime-time Christmas Day slot. Over 30 million viewers tuned in to BBC1 on Christmas Day in 1986 to witness the now-iconic moment when *EastEnders*' “Dirty” Den Watts handed his wife Angie divorce papers (brilliantly performed

by Lesley Grantham and Anita Dobson), and a particularly harrowing episode in Arthur Fowler's (Bill Treacher) battle with mental illness.

## [Doctor Who \(BBC, 1963-1989; 2005-\): 'Voyage of the Damned', \(25 December 2007\)](#)



Certainly not the best episode of *Doctor Who* (it's not even one of the better Christmas episodes), *Voyage of the Damned* still represents all that was perfect with Christmas television in one of our PhD student's earlier years. Unlike today's holiday special, relegated, as it is, to the 1<sup>st</sup> January, where it's barely comprehended by thousands of hungover viewers, *VOTD* was broadcast in a primetime slot on 25<sup>th</sup> December 2007. Children, giddy with Christmas cheer, finally had something genuinely exciting to occupy them, while slightly sozzled elderly relatives had a good excuse for a nap. Written by showrunner, Russell T. Davies, *VOTD* presents a ludicrous phantasmagoria bursting at the seams with jokes and barely concealed references to religion, Britishness, and pop culture. Erring on the side of teasing rather than outright criticism, this episode pokes fun at these topics while still allowing the viewer to revel in all its Christmassy excess as they are buoyed along by the preposterous plot and dizzying array of characters, including Kylie Minogue as waitress, Astrid Peth!

## [Inside No. 9 \(BBC, 2014-\): 'The Devil of Christmas', 27 December 2016](#)



It's not all fun and games in British Christmas TV Land. So we leave you with the darker side of Christmas and it would have to be one of the more macabre/spooky programmes that fit in with the literary tradition of ghost stories and Christmas scares that we also love. 'The Devil of Christmas' is an *Inside No. 9* Christmas special which originally aired in 2016 and has become one of our other PhD student's go to 'festive' TV programmes. As with any *Inside No. 9* episode it's hard to discuss without spoiling the 'twist' (an integral part of each episode) but what we love about 'The Devil of Christmas' is the fact that it plays with both Christmas and television production traditions. This episode is filmed in the style of a 1970s horror, this was not only a stylistic choice but reflected the plot and the acting. The props and even the cameras were from the period, and people who used them at the time were brought back to work on the episode. The love and respect for 'old TV' and films shown by *Inside No. 9* comes across in so many of their episodes and means that 'The Devil of Christmas' is much more than a 1970s pastiche or a gory Christmas special. We hope you enjoy this 'twist' in the tale of British Christmas television.

## A couple of stocking fillers

Take a stroll through this TV listings wonderland, browsing [the Christmas covers of the Radio Times \(1969-2020\)](#).

Step into Christmas (idents) with this video compiling most of the [BBC Christmas idents from 1974-present](#).

Do you have a favourite Christmas TV moment?  
Share it with us.

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