

Abigail Williams of Worcester remembers:

Christmas always followed the same tradition in our house, from our primary school years in the 1970s through to our teens.

We didn't go on exotic holidays, but Mum and Dad always made Christmas a magical and unforgettable day.

"Can you hear the sound of bells coming over the hills?" my dad would say to my younger sister and me on Christmas Eve. We'd strain our ears to hear, then nod emphatically that we had. We knew it meant we must get to bed quickly. Father Christmas was coming.

Dad would lead the way upstairs holding the Wee Willie Winkie candle that surfaced only on Christmas Eve. One leg of mum's long brown stockings was carefully placed at the foot of each of our beds. My sister felt sick with excitement and was unable to drop off; I'd fall asleep in minutes.

It always seemed an eternity before morning and although it was still dark we knew he'd been. Something heavy and lumpy was balancing on our feet, and each time we wriggled, something rustled. Everything was wrapped in tissue paper so took twice as long to open and doubled the thrill.

We both had identical presents but in different colours, and we'd reach into our stocking at the same time to pull out the next mystery package. Flannels, toothbrushes and chocolates were regulars. As the years went by, teddies, soap on a rope and hair bobbles gave way to eye shadows and nail polishes.

When we found the squidgy clementine and a few walnuts at the bottom, we knew, sadly, it was all over for another year. Exhausted from the excitement we'd flop back on our beds.

Mum and Dad loved listening to our squeals of excitement and when they came in to see us they'd feign surprise at how well Father Christmas knew us.

Breakfast was always a traditional feast of hot buttered crumpets but first Dad would call us downstairs to see if Father Christmas had put anything underneath the Christmas tree. We raced down, our stomachs churning both with anticipation and from eating too many chocolates far too early in



the morning.

As Dad held open the living room door, there in front of us was a magical sight – the Christmas tree lights twinkled and beneath it were presents of all shapes and sizes beautifully wrapped and embellished with ribbons and bows. However old we got, we always gasped.

Before gift opening though we had a far more serious occasion to attend, the 10am Holy Communion service at our local parish church. Mum and Dad always wanted us to remember the real purpose of Christmas and to take an hour to reflect and realise how fortunate we were. For us as children, it was an ordeal. The church was cold, the service seemed interminable and our parents always exchanged pleasantries with everyone afterwards. We hopped from one foot to another, eager to get home.

Back indoors, we still had to wait patiently until Mum had basted the turkey and Dad had poured them a sherry. Then, at last, it was time for more presents. My sister and I sat together on the sofa, Mum gave us a present simultaneously to avoid squabbling or impatience. Then Mum gave a present to Dad, and he gave one to her. So it continued with much squealing and lots of paper ripping until mum realised the Christmas dinner would never get cooked if she didn't set things in motion.

Dad rented a small allotment and grew all his own vegetables, so the summer glut that Mum bagged up and froze became the Christmas harvest. We always ate turkey accompanied by the Brussels sprouts and broad beans Dad had grown with roast potatoes, all the trimmings and all the stuffings. We ate until we could hardly move.

As we got older, my sister and I were assigned the task of washing up. I would wash, she would wipe, although as the side groaned with wet dishes my assistant was usually nowhere to be found.

At 3pm, Mum and Dad watched the Queen's Christmas Message then had a doze. We didn't mind as we had our new toys, books or clothes to study. We always saved gifts from outside our direct family to open in the late afternoon. Presents from aunts and uncles, who we'd not seen in years and who had no idea of our interests, got mixed reviews. Dutifully we made notes of what we'd received to thank them later.

Despite our bulging tummies we still managed a few rounds of cold meat sandwiches, salad and crisps for tea. As night fell, we reluctantly headed upstairs, full and happy. However, one final surprise awaited us. Under our pillows was a small gift, wrapped in tissue paper. It brought our magical day to a wonderful end.

Abigail and her sister enjoying a grown-up Christmas.

