

NEWSLETTER

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CHRISTMAS CANDLES:

Do you display candles
in the window at
Christmas time?

Read about this tradition

FROM ALL THE TEAM HERE AT THE
NORTH MAYO HERITAGE CENTRE
WE WISH YOU A VERY

Happy Christmas



Cover: A traditional Christmas candle and a modern version (right)



Do you display candles in the window at Christmas time?

Candlelight has been linked to the festive season for centuries - after all, fairy lights are meant to mimic candlelight. Candles were the original tree decoration, before the introduction of electric light. Nevertheless, candlelight still evokes the spirit of the season, perhaps more so than any other decoration. Throughout Ireland, lights on windows mimicking candles are an ever popular feature during the Christmas period.

This tradition commenced with a red Christmas Candle which was fixed firmly in a turnip, which had both ends cut off and which had a hole for the candle carved out. Decorated with holly and ivy it was a beautiful sight heralding the start of the Christmas festivities. All the family knelt round the table while a family member lit the Christmas candle on Christmas eve.

In some parts, a girl named Mary is supposed to either light or extinguish the candle. As recounted by Bridie Dunleavy from Cloongawnagh, Co. Mayo (from duchas.ie) "*Families get one big Christmas candle. It has a red colour. It is lit on Christmas eve when they get ready for the big feast when they eat all they can.*"

Why do we place candles in the window at Christmas time?

There are many theories as to why we put candles in the windows, the most popular being that the candle in the window represents welcome – *the céad míle fáilte*.



A Christmas candle in the window of a cottage (image from Dublin City Library and Archive Collection ref. vital 14054)

Further back in history, it was said to welcome the Holy Family and a house without a candle was perceived as unwelcoming, similar to the innkeeper who refused Mary and Joseph a room. Three candles represented Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus.

In the years since the Famine, as emigration left so many families missing a loved one at Christmas, the candle became more and more as a sign of welcome to a family member returning home. It was also seen as a silent prayer for the safe return of the absent person and a sign that someone remained at home tending the fire and waiting.

One of the most symbolic acts of Mary Robinson's presidency was the placing of a light in the window of her official residence in the Phoenix Park. Even though it was electric, it resonated, she said, "*with the tradition of her home town of Ballina, where people would light a candle and put it in the window in the run up to Christmas*".

She did it in order to fulfil a promise made in her acceptance speech that "*there will always be a light on in Áras an Uachtaráin for our exiles and our emigrants*".

Locally, the gable wall in the Titanic Memorial Garden in Lahardane, is host to a candle in the window – a fitting tribute to those who perished on the Titanic from the Addergoole parish.

The other historical explanation for the lit candle in the window dates back to the Penal Laws when Catholicism was outlawed. During that time, priests fled into hiding to defy the British government's order to cease performing Masses. The laws had little effect on people's faith but did force them to be more creative in how they practiced it. One of three lit candles stood as a sign that the family was Catholic and an invitation to any passing priest to come and say Mass with the family. Irish Catholics yearned to have a priest come and say Mass in their home, especially at Christmas.

Nowadays, many homes display battery operated or electric Christmas candles in windows as a nod to times past and to keep alive the tradition of the candle in the window.



The light in the window at Áras an Uachtaráin

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