

Festive: Beatrice Yell

Yes, Christmas is coming, I'm afraid. So, brace yourself for the onslaught. Tinsel, endless carols and the appearance of reindeer, snowmen and that morbidly obese man squeezed into a padded red suit everywhere.

My son, one of five siblings, married one of six children born into a gigantic family of aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews. Some are two or more generations removed but maintain close contact every school holiday and on birthdays, at christenings and weddings.

Every December they all gather near a favourite beach, either in a rented house, apartments or even in tents as they have done since their ancestors arrived in Australia (with the rabbits.) Come Christmas week, there will be a progressive round of celebrations.

The reason for the festive season is almost completely swamped by mountains of food, a gigantic turkey or two and burnt sausages, accompanied by vegetables, cranberries and sauces, enough to last any street for a week. Plus, celebratory bubbles and foaming tankards to wash it all down, followed by some massive burps.

Today, it seems a far cry from Depression-era camping, when families united to survive, but family ties are still strong. Has the infant in a manger, long ago, been completely forgotten?

As a small child, our family was summoned every Christmas to visit Grandma, a dour teetotaler, who gave us bargain basement things wrapped in newspaper with half a card from the year before. Before setting out, we were instructed to look delighted, or else!

After Grandma went 'home' to Britain, my mother used to take us to midnight mass. Then we opened one present each and had some wine and fruitcake. And a blissful sleep-in next day before a swim.

Almost as bad as the mornings at Grandma's, was the non-event in the Cairngorms in Scotland when I went for a skiing holiday. Disappointingly, Christmas Day was just an ordinary day, not even a public holiday.

Days later it was New Year's Eve. For Hogmanay all the stops were pulled out.

It was the best New Year celebration ever, with huge roaring log fires, bagpipes, haggis, and lots of whiskey. I was caught up in a swirl of kilts doing highland reels all night while snow fell outside. It was just the best way to survive an icy winter and hazards under the snow. Nothing can ever match that night.