

Tour Times

A publication from Mary Valentine Tours December 2025



Dear Reader,

These days I'm busy putting final touches on the itineraries for our 2026 tours in May and September. See pages 9-12 for more information.

As we get closer to travel time, and I discover new locations of interest, I adjust our plans. For example, I've added a stop at Young V and A Museum in London, which was just named the Best Museum in Europe, and a stop at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, the second oldest library in England, boasting 13 million items.

See a review of the Young V and A on page 5.

This issue of *Tour Times* focuses on December in Britain where the country is filled with of colors, traditions, music, and great food, no matter what the weather brings. Keep reading and you'll discover how the Brits celebrate the holidays, as well as behaviors that often surprise and confuse even the most serious Anglophiles year-round.

And, as always, you'll find some movie recommendations – this time, for films set in Great Britain during the holidays. Carry on and you'll find television programs of interest as well as book recommendations.

Now sit back with a cup of tea close at hand, and a scone or mince pie, if you can, and learn about British Christmas.

Cheers.

Mary





British Christmas Customs

The streets and stores are decorated with colorful lights and ornaments just like in the United States, but Americans are often surprised, confused, or amazed at traditional holiday customs that are still in play throughout Britain. Here are a few with minimal explanations.

- **Boxing Day**, December 26, was originally created for wealthy folks to give boxes of gifts or leftovers to servants and tradespeople. This was also when churches opened alms boxes to give money to the poor. Today, Boxing Day is a holiday (also called a Bank Holiday) when most businesses are closed and the majority of people get the day off. In recent years, it's developed its own version of Black Friday.
- **Twelfth Night, January 5th or 6th**, is considered the end of the Christmas season. It's the common time to take down any remaining decorations.
- **Scotland's Hogmanay**, December 31 – January 2, features a range of celebrations, including fireworks and boisterous street parties, especially in Edinburgh. Tradition includes "first footing," the belief that the first person entering a house after midnight will experience good luck during the coming year.
- **Mince pies** may be the best food associated with Christmas. These little bite-size gems are filled with spices, dried fruit, and a bit of alcohol. Many British children still leave a pie and milk for Father Christmas.



- Musical comedies based loosely on fairy tales, **Pantomimes, or pantos**, are common at Christmas time throughout the country. Regardless of which tale is performed, it will feature plenty of slapstick humor, as well as men dressed as women (dames); women dressed as men (principal boys); audience participation; sometimes raunchy jokes; and minor celebrities. (A personal favorite was Mickey Rooney starring in Cinderella a few years ago.) The audience boos the villains and cheers on the heroes while shouting out familiar phrases: “On no you’re not!” or “Look behind you.”
- **Christmas Cake**, a rich fruitcake covered in marzipan and royal icing, takes weeks or even months of preparation. As it ages, the cakes are brought out periodically and doused with brandy.
- **Pigs in Blankets**, sausages wrapped in bacon, are consumed by the millions during holiday time, particularly on Christmas Eve. It’s estimated that on average, a Brit consumes 15 of these beauties throughout the holidays.
- **Christmas crackers**, cardboard tubes filled with jokes, tiny toys, and paper crowns, make a loud popping sound when pulled. The crowns are supposed to be worn for the rest of the celebration, allowing everyone to look silly as they moan over bad jokes.
- **Father Christmas**, Britain’s name for Santa Claus, lives in Lapland, not at the North Pole.

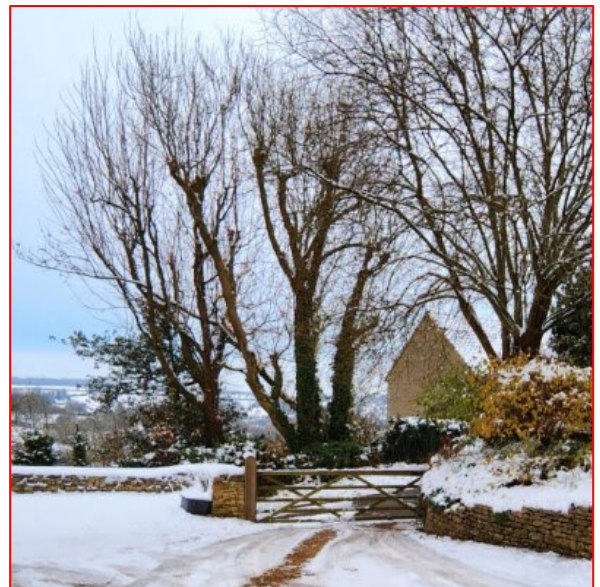


Thanks to Johnathan Thomas from anglotopia.com for his entries to this list. Read more in his book: *A Great British Christmas: Traditions and Celebrations from the UK*

Cultural Characteristics of Brits -- Any Time of Year

Even though we share the same language (most of the time) and some of the same history, here are some other examples of our cultural differences (courtesy of MSN).

- Most Brits haven't given in to the need for **air conditioning** during their hot and humid spells. Only 5% of homes in the UK have air conditioning.
- Brits often use the phrase "**I'm sorry**" to mean "I'm sorry that happened" without attaching blame rather than the American version, "I'm sorry I did that" or "That's my fault." On average, a Brit says "Sorry" eight times a day.
- **Queuing** (standing in line) is alive and still widely practiced in the UK. The average Brit spends the equivalent of two weeks a year standing in line.
- **Talking about the weather** predominates in conversation. One study found that 94% of Brits revealed they'd talked about the weather within the last six hours.
- **Teatime** reigns supreme. The average Brit drinks 894 cups a year.



BRITAIN MUSEUM SPOTLIGHT



Young Victoria and Albert Museum

(Photo from Trip Advisor.com)

This month's spotlight is on the Young V&A Museum in London.

All of us at Mary Valentine Tours are huge fans of the series of Wallace and Gromit stories. The laugh-out-loud, often ridiculous, and silly plots revolve around the characters of Wallace, the inventor of elaborate contraptions in the Rube Goldberg tradition, and his dog, Gromit, a beagle who is Wallace's best friend. The two have many adventures and exploits, all of which are captured in a painstakingly meticulous way through Claymation.

Beginning in February 2026, the Young V and A is mounting an exhibit called "Inside Aardman: Wallace & Gromit and Friends." This exhibit will offer visitors a chance to "go behind the scenes of stop-motion and explore how Aardman's iconic characters and worlds are brought to life." Aardman refers to the animation studio that gives the characters "life."

The name Young V and A does not describe the age of the museum but rather announces for whom the museum is intended. Formerly called the V and A Museum of Childhood, it received a £13m (US \$17.5m) makeover in 2023 (as well as a new name) that resulted in changing the museum from a drab space filled with dusty games and Victoria doll's houses (that the Guardian described the old

museum as “a place where childhood went to die”) to a space that is bright, airy, and fun.

The museum’s director of design said, “We want to encourage the next generation of designers, makers, and doers – not be a nostalgia fest for parents.” The makeover filled the place with more light, more color, and more sound. The new museum was so well received, it won the Art Museum of the Year award in 2024 as well as the Family Friendly Museum (2024), and the Council of Europe Museum Prize (2026).

The space has been described as “joyful,” “friendly,” and remarkable for “connect[ing] design and play with real-world themes such as sustainability, belonging, and empathy,” and it is praised for its sensitivity to the needs of disabled children and those with special educational needs.

While the museum may be intended for the young, it is entertaining for those of us who are young at heart. So, join us in 2026 when we will visit this museum along with many other creative spaces and see, among other treats, how Wallace and Gromit films are made. It should be a cracking time for all of us.



Wallace and Gromit

Photo from WallaceandGromit.com

Sources: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/young>,
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/jun/27/light-colour-newly-renovated-young-v-and-a>, <https://www.timeout.com/london/news/a-cracking-wallace-and-gromit-exhibition-is->

Movie and TV Corner

British Christmas Movie Recommendations



Available via streaming

- **Love Actually.** A romance classic since 2003, this story of eight couples and their love lives is set in various locations throughout London. It is worth watching if for no other reason than to watch Hugh Grant dance.
- **The Holiday** tells the story of a lovelorn woman in LA who trades homes with an equally romantically bereft woman in rural Surrey at Christmastime. As the story unfolds, you won't be surprised that each of them finds love in her new homeland. Kate Winslet, Jude Law, Catherine Diaz, and Jack Black bring collective charm to the film.
- **Bridget Jones's Diary** starts and ends at Christmas as it traces Bridget's rocky romances. Locations are set predominantly in London. This contemporary retelling of *Pride and Prejudice* allows Colin Firth, Hugh Grant, Renee Zellweger to show viewers how much fun actors can have with the right script. Don't miss the awkward yet delightful fight scene between Hugh Grant and Colin Firth.
- For traditionalists, **A Christmas Carol** would probably get the nod from Dickens for its faithfulness to the original text. Several versions are available from the 1930s on. Locations include London, Shrewsbury, and Hampstead. If you don't care about literary accuracy, watch **The Muppet Christmas Carol**, a retelling featuring our favorite puppets. Don't miss Michael Caine as Scrooge.
- **Last Christmas** makes the list because it doesn't reflect traditional holiday plot lines. A frustrated singer works in a dead-end job as an elf in a Christmas shop in London. She meets a charming man who helps her change her life as Christmas approaches. Locations include Covent Garden, Piccadilly Circus, and Regent **Street**. Watch this to see Emma Thompson at work and hear lots of George Michael's music in the background.

Television Recommendations

If you watch nothing else, catch the Christmas special of *Call the Midwife* or *Downton Abbey*.



Book Corner

Christmas-themed Novels set in Great Britain: one a mystery, one a classic, and one a modern-day story.

- *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* by Agatha Christie, a locked room mystery by the Queen of Detective Writing
- *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, the story of a miserly old man visited by Christmas ghosts who inspire him to mend his ways
- *Christmas Shopaholic* by Sophie Kinsella, a modern day tale whose protagonist who is daunted at the prospect of pulling off Christmas dinner for her relatives.

Let's go to England!
OUR NEXT TOURS: MAY AND SEPTEMBER 2026



Bodleian Library in Oxford

Photo from <https://visit.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/plan-your-visit/our-spaces>

WHAT: Our Museums and More Tour: a 10-day, small-group tour of England lets you experience England's geography, culture, and customs that are frequently overlooked by traditional tours. With the focus on museums and libraries, this tour will appeal to museologists, librarians, avid readers, Anglophiles, and people who love traveling. Tour size is limited to a maximum of 10 people.

WHEN: Offered twice in 2026: May 15-24 and September 22 – October 1.

LOCATIONS: London, Manchester, Leicester, Somerset, Oxford, and the Cotswolds

TO DO AND SEE: a partial list

- **Just Added:** The Young V & A, Europe's "best" museum
- **Just Added:** The Bodleian Library in Oxford
- **Black Country Living Museum, A tour through a coal mine**
- **Digital Immersive Art Museum, combining art and technology**
- **Beatles Story, includes sing along with the Beatles**
- **V&A Storehouse, London's newest museum**
- **National Justice Museum, Re-enactment of a famous trial**
- **Liverpool's spectacular library renovations**
- **Paradox Museum, Interactive exhibits designed to challenge one's perspective**
- **Shoemaker's Museum that celebrates the Quakers' role in social justice**
- **Roman Villa, an open-air archeology museum**
- **And more!**

COST: \$6650.00 A non-refundable deposit of \$500.00 will reserve your space. The balance will be due later.

WHAT'S INCLUDED?

- Four and five-star accommodation for ten nights
- All breakfasts, nine dinners, and an afternoon tea
- Transportation throughout the countryside
- Not included: airfare, airport transfers, incidentals, and tips for our driver.

QUESTIONS? Contact us.

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NEW! OUR LONDON 101 TOURS



An introductory three-day tour, designed for those who've never been to London or those who want to spend more time there.

WHEN: May 12, 13, 14 and September 19, 20, 21

WHAT WILL WE SEE AND DO? This fast-paced tour includes locations that have made London famous as well as a few surprises not found on traditional London tours. Here's a partial list of what to expect:

- A 2-hour double-decker bus tour that includes Big Ben, Parliament, the Tower of London and Buckingham Palace, and 30 other attractions
- An on-ground visit to the British Museum
- Stops at the British Library, the National Portrait Gallery, Trafalgar Square
- Churchill's War Rooms
- An evening at the theatre

COST: \$1549.00. This fee includes

- Three nights at a 4-star hotel
- Three breakfasts
- Two dinners at one of London's best restaurants
- An afternoon tea
- All entry fees
- Group taxi rides in London
- Not included: airfare, airline transfers, lunches, and incidentals

HOW TO JOIN THE TOUR: Send us a non-refundable deposit of \$150.00 to secure a reservation. The balance will be due later. Make checks payable to Mary Valentine Tours.

QUESTIONS? Contact us.

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We wish you all a Happy Holidays and New Year!

