

Capitalism at Christmas

KEITH FLETT

KEITH FLETT takes a look at the social history of Christmas in the days of Queen Victoria.

THE scandal surrounding the Farepak Christmas savings club, whose wealthy owners went broke, leaving thousands of much less well-off people with the prospect of a miserable Christmas, is a reminder that, despite buying presents over the web and much else, there is not so much that separates Christmas 2006 from those of Victorian times.

Charles Dickens is credited with the creation of the concept of the Victorian Christmas and the festival we know today is a largely invented tradition. Cromwell banned Christmas, and his legacy continued into the Victorian period.

Some Christian sects refused to recognise the celebration of Christmas, while, in 1849, the headmaster of the Quaker-run Bootham School postponed breaking up until after December 25 and declared that he would rather have no holidays at all than call the period the Christmas holidays.

When Dickens started his series of Christmas books with *A Christmas Carol*, he was making a play for particular market with a specific message. Namely, that Christmas should be a happy, family time of song and celebration. This was the beginning of the bourgeois view of Christmas that is still around today.

But Dickens well knew that this was far from the reality for many Victorians and there is an element of social criticism of a society that cannot provide the basis of a decent Christmas for many.

Dickens understood his market. It would have been entirely plausible for Bob Cratchit, Scrooge's hard done by but loyal employee in *A Christmas Carol*, to join the Chartist movement, which would have given the book a different perspective.

However this was the mid-1840s and Dickens was looking to reach a large middle-class audience, so there was no reference to Chartism.

Dickens's view of Christmas came under attack from the free marketeers of the day. In 1844, the *Westminster Review* condemned *A Christmas Carol* for its ignorance of political economy and the "laws" of supply and demand. It argued that, if Bob Cratchit got a turkey then, unless there was a surplus, someone else must have gone without.

The success of Dickens's book created a demand for his work and, by the end of the 1840s, Dickens was said to be disillusioned that, each December, a flood of pseudo-Dickens-type material flooded the pre-Christmas market.

Henry Mayhew, in his lengthy series of investigations of the labour market, published as *London Labour and the London Poor*, identified "Christmasing" as an occupation of costermongers (street traders) and others looking for work in December. This consisted of gathering and selling holly and mistletoe. Even here, there was a class divide, the latter being more expensive and preferred by the well off.

The seasonal nature of Christmas went well beyond this and featured a large number of those whom Mayhew described as the "wandering tribes." These people, who were often "respectable" workers rather than what some would today regard as "tramps," spent the summer months engaged in agricultural work, moving around the country.

When the colder weather came, they moved towards the large towns, particularly London. Here, there was shelter, free, if Spartan, refuges and lodging houses run by charities or places on the

Thames Embankment and railway arches to shelter. This wasn't pleasant, but it continues to be a feature of London life in the 21st century.

Historian Raphael Samuel has noted that, in Victorian times, London in the weeks before Christmas was a paradise of odd jobs. There was work in the Post Office, at Covent Garden, working as an extra in Christmas pantomimes and jobs advertising Christmas products. There were around 6-7,000 advertising board carriers at this time of year.

None of this has changed all that much in the last 150 years.

A look at how the modern Christmas was constructed explains how "consent" to it was won. It provided opportunities for employment, but also, as industrial capitalism closed down, the traditional holidays associated with a pre-industrial way of life and the value of a mid-winter break around Christmas became more important.

Specific interest areas from children, who liked the presents, to businessmen, who enjoyed the profits, were brought into it. It was styled as a Christian festival, but this was not overplayed.

While Christmas Day was religious, the Bank Holidays Act of 1871 established Boxing Day as a public holiday and informally recognised it as a sort of workers' Saturnalia, where drunk and disorderly behaviour was tolerated by the authorities.

While there are historical continuities today with Christmas as it was invented in the 1840s and 1850s, there are breaks as well.

An important seasonal source of employment then related to the weather. Frosty conditions allowed people to collect ice to sell and frost fairs provided a variety of work.

Snowy weather increased sympathy and charity for those who had no permanent place to sleep at Christmas.

Now, climate change is undermining the "traditional" Christmas.