

London Christmas – then and now

By Esmerelda Weatherwax

Our Managing Editor, Kendra Mallock, chose this very [detailed painting, London Christmas](#) by English School, to illustrate one of the short stories for our December magazine. It brought back so many memories of my childhood.



It isn't an exact record of a moment in time, more a collation of a post war period, in colour. The buses are those that came after the trolley buses were retired in 1962, the Routemasters and the Regent 3. The clothes could be late 1950s. It has the feel of a Lowry, but in London not the

north.

The big department store on the left must be Selfridges of Oxford Street and the toy shop on the right Hamleys of Regent Street which you can't see together in real life but which together represented adult glamour and childhood magic. Both are still there.

My mother, who was normally quite strict and disciplined always said it was cruel to take a child in there and not treat him or her to a present. I have happy memories of Maria a doll I named after the song which was constantly on the wireless that Christmas; Maria, Maria, I just met a girl called Maria.

Selfridges was noted for amazing window displays throughout the year, with the team of window dressers surpassing themselves each Christmas. They are still the best in the street but because of the [quality of recent shops](#) the bar is now set very low.

The fruit and veg stall half way down Oxford Street was still there during my last visit. But the newspaper sellers have gone. Of the three London evening papers of the period the Star had been absorbed by the Evening News by 1960 and the two I remember were the Evening News and the Evening Standard.

Both were sold everywhere. We had the Evening News delivered at home at around 5pm so if I was out I bought the Standard which I preferred. But my dad preferred The News for the superior football coverage. Both papers came out in several editions during the afternoon and you tried to get the later edition to get the latest news. And on Saturday the final edition for the football results. The papers merged in 1980. The title still exists as the London Evening Standard but it is a free give-away at the stations and no longer the source of up-to-date news, or a viable means of making a living.

Buskers are still a feature and not all are amplified

guitarists. Many are accomplished musicians.

The little girl buying pigeon feed from the man right in the centre is a scene interpolated from Trafalgar Square where feeding the pigeons was a great treat until [forbidden by London Mayor Ken Livingstone](#) on the modern grounds of health and safety in 2000.

But it is the lights that are the star of the show. And still are. Christmas lights became a feature of the West End shopping streets in the late 50s in that flowering of post war optimism. Special buses ran to show off the best streets, some of them open topped. I don't remember an open to bus but I do remember it was something we did after Christmas (my mother disliked the pre-Christmas crowds) riding up and down on the top deck, sometimes meeting my cousins.



The set I remember best were a series of crowns swaying across Regent Street in 1961. I was entranced. The display was different every year then and those crowns were sold on to a town in North Wales (according

to a January article in the paper). Having no idea of distance then I begged to visit there next year, to be told "Don't be ridiculous child!"

By one of those coincidences that may be no such thing a film clip popped into the Iconoclast X news stream a few days later. So here they are – my childhood memory confirmed as

Regent Street

*A drive along Regent Street, London, at Christmas in the 1960s. [#regentstreet](#) [#regentstreetlights](#) [#1960s](#)
pic.twitter.com/IiaT7QPM0b*

– Old England in Colour (@englandincolour) [December 15, 2024](#)

The lights are still a big attraction and my husband went walking up west earlier this month. These are of Oxford Street December 2024.





The pavements are more crowded, the crowds not so jolly, a more international clientele, shopping is now a serious business.



For fun, colour, company and tradition a Christmas market is now the place to go.

Winchester in Hampshire was wonderful and in London I'd recommend the South Bank.

But of course, there are [those](#) who would [murder](#) innocents enjoying innocent fun.

May they rot.