

My country Christmas

OURS WAS ALWAYS

a full house at Christmas time. When I was young, we celebrated it at my grandparents' home, the rectory in Minchinhampton, Gloucestershire. It was the house where I was born and spent my early years – my father left for India with the British Army while my mother was pregnant with me and didn't return until I was four years old. Even after we moved to York and then to Surrey, Cotswold Christmases remained the best.

Life at the rectory was colourful and chaotic, and, whatever the time of year, there was often some kind of drama going on. We had a constant stream of visitors because my grandfather was the local rector. My grandmother, a fascinating and formidable woman, rather resented this because it meant they never had any privacy or an uninterrupted meal. But my grandfather was quite a character, with huge amounts of dash and glamour, so there were always parish groupies requesting a word with the rector alone. As young men, he and his twin brother answered an advertisement to become Bush Brothers – young priests who could 'pray like angels and ride like cowboys' – and preach in remote parts of Western Australia. Even after he returned, he continued to deliver the parish magazine on horseback and wear spurs beneath his cassock.

When I was five, my little brother Andrew was born, and then three years after that came my sister, Victoria, so along with our family and my mother's younger siblings – Uncles Haro and David and Aunt Joan, plus any friends they brought – my grandparents invited what they called a Christ Child. This was someone you asked to join you for Christmas who wouldn't otherwise have had a happy one. It sounds like quite a holy idea, but there was often a very good reason why this person might not be asked to somebody else's house – they were generally rather peculiar or unpleasant.

At Christmas dinner, we might have 16 to 20 people around the table, and my grandmother – who became a splendid cook despite never having been near a kitchen before the Second World War – would get a girl from the village in to help her. All the vegetables were grown in the garden and brought inside



Author **Joanna Trollope** recalls the delightfully eccentric quality of family celebrations held at her grandparents' rectory in the Cotswolds

in a muddy state by the rectory's gardener, Dallow. He was a taciturn chap, but once through a spectacular sleight of hand, persuaded me that I'd laid an egg while visiting the henhouse. We didn't eat turkey in those days; my grandmother would serve up several chickens instead.

Charades was a family tradition, and so after dinner we retired to the sitting room for a very serious and complicated game. The room was rather sparsely decorated in those days – no one would have dreamed of

dressing the tree with tartan ribbons or anything like that, just a few baubles inherited from my great-great grandmother.

Of course, with a rector as a grandfather, church played a big part in the festivities. He was High Church and so there would be a big carol service on Christmas Eve and then all the family would go again on the day itself. Nobody cared if we felt bored or cold – we were expected to behave beautifully. I think we were allowed to take one toy with us, but

it couldn't be anything that might make a noise or whirred.

On Christmas morning before church, we piled into my grandparents' bed to open our stockings, and one year I received a truly amazing gift. Both my mother and grandmother were great seamstresses. Just after the war, when suitable presents were thin on the ground, they managed to get hold of a little doll and a tiny cardboard suitcase, which they filled with outfits they'd hand-sewn for her. I thought she was ace, called her Perry and took her everywhere with me. I still have her today, though she is very crude by modern standards. Recently, I showed her to one of my grandchildren who was startled that she didn't have beautiful eyelashes and had hair growing in chunks out of holes in her head. But, as I told my granddaughter, she did once have the most wonderful wardrobe. 🐾

*Joanna Trollope has written 16 contemporary novels and numerous historical novels under the name Caroline Harvey. Her latest book *Daughters-in-Law (Black Swan, £7.99)* is published on 8 December and is available to pre-order with free p&p by calling 0871 803 6764 or visiting allaboutyoubookshop.co.uk.*