



[Sign in](#) | [Register](#)

Go to:

**The Observer** **Cash**

<a href="#">Home</a>	<a href="#">UK news</a>	<a href="#">International</a>	<a href="#">Politics</a>	<a href="#">Business</a>	<a href="#">Comment</a>	<a href="#">Leaders</a>	<a href="#">Focus</a>
<a href="#">Sport</a>	<a href="#">Review</a>	<a href="#">Magazine</a>	<a href="#">Screen</a>	<a href="#">Travel</a>	<b>Cash</b>	<a href="#">Letters</a>	<a href="#">Food</a>



# It's time we started putting the box back into Boxing Day

The annual gift for the poorly paid dustman or postwoman has fallen into disuse, but Nick Kettles thinks we should revive it

**Sunday December 21, 2003**

[The Observer](#)



The transition of Boxing Day from a time when the goodwill of Christmas meant offering alms to the less fortunate, to our current somewhat less altruistic tradition of turkey sandwiches, Del Boy or a day at the sales, marks the loss of meaning in the few festivals that we still celebrate.



The halcyon days when chipper local tradesmen could reasonably expect a tip or gratuity from their customers are long gone. Today, we expect their employers or local government to make up any shortfall in their wages.



The tradition of giving on Boxing Day may stretch as far back as the Middle Ages, when priests, opened the church's alms boxes on the day after Christmas and distributed the contents - 'the dole of the Christmas box' or 'box money' - to the village poor.

**Tools**

- [Text-only version](#) ▶
- [Send it to a friend](#) ▶
- [Save story](#) ▶

Later into the industrial age the term Christmas Box referred to the actual box owned by apprentices which was taken to customers of the owners' or masters' business in the hope of receiving some small gift in appreciation of their work. And until very recently, the postman, dustman and a few other public servants still called on 26 December at the houses they had served during the year to collect their Christmas-box gratuities.

**The Observer**

According to A Dictionary of British Folk Customs, by Christina Hole, they were the last of a once considerable company. Formerly, errand-

[Front page](#)

[Story index](#)

## Recent articles

[Year of paddling furiously](#)

[Old computers spread some festive cheer](#)

[The loser finds his form](#)

[When kids outgrow their welcome](#)

[Shoppers save now ... but we'll all pay later](#)

[Crash and burn - or slow slide?](#)

[Maria Scott: All of us stand to gain if we help Equitable](#)

[Being out of order at the Christmas bash could seriously affect your future](#)

[Treasure beneath your feet and under the waves](#)

[Cash in a flash](#)

[Maria Scott: Card firms must sharpen up their act on loan binge](#)

[It can be hell away from home](#)

[It's in your cards](#)

[Money coach: And for our third house...?](#)

[Home thoughts from... Christmas Island](#)

## The Guardian

[Front page](#)

[Story index](#)

boys, also lamplighters, turncocks, journeymen, itinerant tradesmen and many other workers expected to receive presents, usually in the form of small sums of money, at this time. It's not surprising that in 1864, Robert Chambers, founder of the eponymous publishing house, described the custom as a nuisance.

But today we cannot escape the fact our postwoman, dustman and milk delivery person may be poorly paid. Posties earn around £13,300 a year, or £250 a week, which is not a lot for being out in all weathers carrying a heavy sack. The dustmen or 'refuse disposal operatives', are at the mercy of local authorities which must find other ways of raising revenue to meet shortfalls or private contractors who submitted low tenders for the work.

So although I have to pay to have my post delivered before 9am, and the dustmen will only pick up three sacks, three-quarters full, this year I will be resurrecting the jaded spirit of Boxing Day. Of course Boxing Day is a bank holiday, but the gift left on the 22nd will be in the spirit of the tradition. I will forgive our dustmen the refuse they left strewn on the driveway when one of the bags split. For them - beer and mince pies. But for our postwoman, the ever-bright Sheila, there will be more.

In days past, recipients of Boxing Day alms paid to drink from the 'Wassail Cup', a highly decorated cup full of mulled punch used to toast the health and prosperity of friends and relatives at the Christmas Feast. But Sheila shares the spirit of Wassail - from the Saxon greeting 'wes hail' meaning good health or good cheer - with us every day. Collecting our rain-drenched cat, genuine interest in our newborn, chats about holidays in Spain, she even apologises for the poor quality of junk mail she is enforced to deliver.

This Boxing Day we will return her good cheer in kind and hope to capture the true spirit of the Christmas festival amid the fallout of overconsumption it has inevitably become. Unfortunately, however, our milkman, one Mr J Sainsbury, will be remain excluded.

I'm hoping that in a small town our small deeds will catch on. After all, at one time, innkeepers gave their customers a kind of Christmas-box by returning part of the charge for any meal served on 26 December...



Guardian Unlimited © Guardian Newspapers Limited 2003