Boxing Day

From *The Christmas Encyclopedia*

Falling on December 26, Boxing Day is a legal holiday in those countries forming the Commonwealth of Nations, especially Australia, Canada, and Great Britain. It is also known as Second Christmas Day and, in the Roman Catholic Church, as St. Stephen's Day, which honors Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

Boxing Day, which became a public holiday through an act of Parliament in 1871, derives its name from an English tradition dating to the Middle Ages, when churches opened their alms boxes, or Christmas boxes, on this day and distributed funds to the poor. This practice had evolved by the seventeenth century into members of the working class seeking gratuities from those to whom they had rendered services during the year, and the tips received became known as “boxes.”

This custom of boxing fell into decline by the nineteenth century, principally because the increasing number of trades people soliciting “boxes” had become quite burdensome. This did not prevent generous employers, however, from voluntarily bestowing monetary gifts upon their employees in the spirit of the season, which formed the basis for the Christmas bonuses that were more prevalent during the late nineteenth century. By the end of the twentieth century, Christmas bonuses had also declined but had not completely vanished.

From the eighteenth century or earlier, the British Isles and France observed “Hunting the Wren” on St. Stephen's Day, a custom that survives in modified form in Ireland. Boxing Day currently is a day for recreation, with pageants, plays, pantomimes, and sporting events, for example.

See also *Great Britain; Hunting the Wren; Ireland.*
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