

## Robins and Christmas

Amazingly, I have never written about Robins before, and as Christmas Card season is coming up and a significant proportion of cards have Robins on them, I think it's time to rectify the omission.

The association between Robins and Christmas has several different origins. Firstly, the Robin is a colourful bird which is at its most obvious in winter, especially against a snowy background. That red breast just looks festive!

In the mid 1800s, when Christmas cards had just become popular due to the introduction of the Penny Post, Victorian postmen were nick-named Robins due to their red uniform.

The Robin then became associated with the idea of delivering Christmas cards. This old Christmas card illustrates it well.



Going much further back, legend has it that the robin's redbreast gives it a direct link to Christmas. It suggests that when the baby Jesus was in his manger in the stable, the fire which had been lit to keep him warm started to blaze up very strongly. A brown Robin, noticing that Mary had been distracted by the inn-keeper's wife, placed himself between the fire and the face of baby Jesus. The robin fluffed out its feathers to protect the baby, but in so-doing its breast was scorched by the fire. This redness was then passed onto future generations of Robins.

Robins used to be called Robin Redbreast, and before that, just Redbreast. The "Robin" became attached as a nickname (like "Jenny" Wren) and then eventually the Redbreast was dropped. In fact the official name in the British Ornithological Union list did not change to just "Robin" until 1971.

I notice on the web that there is a lot of discussion about why Robins were not called Orangebreast. Many people consider the breast to be orange – have a look at the next Robin you see and draw your own conclusions. It is certainly not the colour of an orange. I think orangey-red would be a good compromise. And anyway, they couldn't have been called Orangebreast as the word "orange" hadn't been invented at the time Redbreast was first used.

In the UK Robins are renowned for their liking for gardens and their tameness with humans. It is possible that they regard humans as rather large badgers or wild boars. Robins will follow these animals when they are hunting, hoping to snatch a few titbits disturbed by the animals. Apparently they also follow pheasants and moles for the same reason. When we dig the garden we are carrying out the same kind of activity and we are also kind enough to provide a very convenient perch in form of a spade handle or wheelbarrow. They can be so tame, feeding at one's feet, that it is hard to avoid treading on them and this very confiding nature makes them very appealing to humans.

*I will write more about Robins, and their fascinating way of life, in the next issue of Peninsula Papers.*

*Rosemary Royle*