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sharon griffiths

“There comes a time when you have to decide What To Do with the Christmas Cards

BET the Queen never has this problem. When she speaks to her loyal subjects on Christmas Day it's invariably at a desk, or in front of a splendid mantelpiece, or alongside a table that has just one or two large, glossy and tastefully arranged Christmas cards.

Magically, the cards have not wilted, collapsed, slid into the fruit bowl or fallen into the fire. How unlike our own home.

There comes a time – it used to be about the middle of the month but can now start at the end of November – when you have to decide What To Do with the Christmas Cards. It's one of those minor puzzles of life that has baffled me for years.

My mother managed it wonderfully. She would pick a few – the glossiest and most impressive, plus those from her favourite people – to have pride of place on the highly polished sideboard. So the huge charity offerings from rich friends would be slightly obscured by those home made efforts from grandchildren and great grandchildren with their fat crayoned Santas and scattering of home-sprayed glitter. A nice mixture.

Others she would pin neatly and attractively to coloured ribbons on the walls. Very festive. From the day she put them up until the day she took them down again – Twelfth Night, of course – they remained cheering and appealing.

Even when she tried to do the same in our house, it never worked. Boys hurtling through, real fire blowing back smoke, clumsy guests... spilt drinks... misplaced bits of disembowelled toys, always somehow conspired to spoil the effect.

We have bookcases, mantelpieces and dressers galore on which to display cards. Unfortunately, all these places – as well as featuring some of my vast collection of Christmas snow scenes – are also used as dumping grounds for all the other detritus of a family festival.

Even enormous posh cards from millionaires lose a bit of their cachet, when they're surrounded by the crumpled Quality Street wrappers or the dusty foil from yet another wine bottle. Not to mention the magic fart putty.

With a couple of hundred cards every year, we resorted to stringing them across the beams. Sometimes we used jolly coloured ribbons. Other times we had only hairy

gardening twine. A nice sort of homespun effect, I tried to tell myself...

We've popped them over the top of picture frames, which is quite pleasing – until a boy slams the door and the cards magically lift up and flutter, sadly, onto the floor.

Other people use those sort of Christmas tree-shaped cardholders which seem to work well for them. But not, alas, for us. Nor do pegs, pins or any of the other gadgets.

The trouble is that once you've pinned your cards to the wall or wherever, you can't read them any more. And because so many come at once you don't really get the chance to read them properly before they're put on display.

One of those small pleasures of Christmas is wandering round the house – maybe late at night with drink in hand, of course – and studying the cards, trying to guess who sent which one, reading the messages thinking about the people who sent them. For isn't that, after all, part of the point of Christmas?

It's why I rarely strike anyone off my Christmas card list. Even if it's the only contact we have with some friends from long ago, the link is still there. Keeping up with them, if only once a year, is like another episode in the soap opera of life. One day maybe if circumstances change, we might meet up. And a card and a stamp seem a small enough price to pay for that chance.

In the meantime, there's the problem of how best to display all those robins, trees, Rudolfs and the tasteful reproductions of old masters.

And I think I've found it. Last year, just before Christmas, I visited a stately home where I was interviewing the Lady.

She was waiting for me in the entrance hall – a huge stone-flagged room with a welcoming log fire blazing. In the centre was an enormous oak table complete with splendid Christmassy arrangement of branches and berries.

Also on the table was a huge gleaming silver salver. It was piled high with Christmas cards and her Ladyship was looking through them.

“So much easier to leave them here,” she said, “Otherwise I spend all Christmas picking them up and reorganising them.”

Exactly. Forget the string, the ribbon and the Santa card holder. How much easier it is when one has the silver salver, the oak table and the ancestral hall...

NE window shopping

ANGELIC ABUNDANCE

An abundance of angels has descended upon County Durham. They all feature in the new exhibition at scissors paper stone: wooden angels in all shapes and sizes Ken and Su Cook; cast metal angels and fairies from Northern Ireland by Karen Shannon; ceramic angels by Nicky Stone and lino printed angels by Melanie Wickham. Prices range from a heavenly £3 up to £30. Gallery owner Angela Forsyth says the angelic theme was not actually planned. “I didn't realise until I was finalising deliveries, just how many angels were comings,” she says. “My plan was just to source exclusive and unusual items for the exhibition, but with affordability in mind.” The exhibition, which runs until Christmas Eve, features many Christmas gift ideas, as well as affordable artworks and items for the home.

● scissors paper stone, Summerhill, Hutton Henry, Hartlepool Tel: (01429) 836010 www.scissors-paper-stone.co.uk

Top: ceramic angel by Nicky Stone
Right: paper angel by Hilary Mee



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NE christmas

The countdown to Christmas is on lads... and the search for that elusive special something for the ladies in your lives. BELINDA SZONERT helps out

IT'S so easy to simply play it safe and just give her the seasonal favourite that she expects each year, but this Yuletide why not let your imagination run riot and present her with something which will add an extra element of surprise to the festive season and show her that you really care?



HOUSE of Fraser - with stores throughout the country - has some super gift ideas with prices to suit all pockets. The J-Lo heart pendant bracelet in a box (£20) is sure to set her pulse racing, or treat her to the Shirley Geek black Cadillac T-shirt (£60) and hot pants (£30), which are ideal for relaxing in after the Christmas rush.

EVERY woman appreciates gloriously feminine underwear, but until recently it's often been hard to find lingerie to accommodate the more curvaceous figure. Bravissimo, catering for women who wear a D cup and above, has lingerie sets to die for by leading manufacturers, including an irresistible set by Bacirubati in a choice of two stunning colours - coral or pistachio - with bra (£29), brief (£18) and thong (£18). Bravissimo has eight stores and customers can also shop through mail order (01926 459859) or via the web (www.bravissimo.com).



THAT high street favourite Boots comes into its own as Christmas approaches, with gifts to suit all ages and tastes. The No7 beauty bag (£25) comes packed with its popular skincare range, while the Homedics spa therapy kit (£19.99) is sure to perk her up with a vibrating body massager and relaxation CD.

LLOYDSPHARMACY - the UK's largest national community pharmacy chain - also has some great ideas for Christmas gifts. Thanks to the So Far Away range, with its delicate scent, your loved one can enjoy all the benefits of a relaxing spa in the comfort of their own home. Try the So Far Away four-piece relaxing bath set (£8) that includes bath cream, body lotion, flannel and gel candle. To find your nearest Lloyds pharmacy visit www.lloydspharmacy.com.

ANY product from the Virgin Vie range is sure to delight. Choose her a Night Fever Shooting Star glitter pot (£12) from a glamorous collection of three glitter pots.

GIFTS FOR HER...

Each can be used wet or dry to highlight eyes, or simply sprinkle a little sparkle anywhere you want! Perfume is always a welcome treat - and Virgin Vie's Seduction is no exception with its opulent oriental fragrance (eau de parfum, 50ml, £20). For where to buy, contact the call centre on 0845 3008022 or visit www.virgin.com/cosmetics.

DISCERNING youngsters will just adore the chance to dress up in style in the Christmas Belle dress up kit (£20) from Marks and Spencer. Available in sizes two to eight years, she'll be the belle of the ball at any Christmas party in this nifty number.

IT'S often easy to forget the true meaning of Christmas, but several charitable organisations make it easier to help others who are less fortunate when shopping for Christmas treats. Oxfam, with 750 shops in the UK, has some novel gift ideas. These include the belly dancing kit (£3.99) that includes miniature cymbals, jewellery and instructions on how to master belly dancing in your front room. The Oxfam gift range also includes a cute heart-shaped fairy pillbox (£2.99) and heart and flower-shaped photo frame magnets (£2.99).



GIFTS for the home are always welcome and Woolworths offer some stylish accessories to grace any modern pad or more traditional home. Treat her to some sumptuous silk mix cushions (from £6.99) in seven assorted colours or a pretty beige suede picture frame (small £5.99/large £7.99) available at selected stores.

ANOTHER way to help a cause that is especially close to the hearts of women is to buy your loved one a stunning piece of jewellery that has been produced to raise funds for Breakthrough Breast Cancer. The Diamond Neck Charm (£120 - with £30 from each sale being donated) has been exclusively designed by www.icecool.co.uk. Set to create a sparkle, the 18k white gold ribbon features a trilogy of diamonds to represent your past, your present and your future. The Icecool website will have a special Breakthrough page for consumers to buy online and Icecool has arranged for its mail order line to be open from 7.30am-10.30pm, seven days a week on 0870 9006367 (available from October).

DESCRIBED as the must-have dinner party game of 2004, and based on the celebrity news magazine, HELLO!, the ultimate trivia quiz game (£19.99) is sure to delight any female with a penchant for celebrity trivia. Players advance through the game by answering multiple-choice questions to reach the top of the scoreboard. For more information, hours of dining room fun and stockist details simply visit www.hellomagazine.com



Boys of all ages love anything on four wheels, so why not treat him to his very own racing car – even if it is of the model variety? Marks & Spencer have several to choose from, including a radio control Porsche Carrera (£59) and a Ferrari (£99).

Finding that perfect gift for the hunky man in your life can be a major headache...

GIFTS FOR HIM...

... UNLESS, that is, he's into a particular hobby – or actually enjoys getting a new pair of slippers to slob around the house in each year – it's often quite a mammoth task searching out something he'll really appreciate. There are, however, plenty of festive treats just waiting to be unearthed which will please even the most difficult-to-buy-for male about the house. Just delve into our Christmas gift guide, and you're bound to pick up the perfect pressie to put a smile on his face.

FOR a gift with a difference – and one that's sure to please – fine wine and spirit merchant Berry Bros & Rudd has a selection of seasonal treats. For the man in your life with a sweet tooth, The King's Ginger Liqueur (£45) also includes a silver hip flask, a jar of King's Ginger Marmalade and a jar of the tangy King's Ginger Mustard. You could even treat him to a wine course! The Wine School runs in London and Basingstoke each season, including six-week courses in the evenings, week-long and daytime courses (£45-£350 per person). Gifts are available by mail at 3 St James's Street, London SW1, online via www.bbr.com or through Berry's wine shops.

CHRISTMAS is the ideal time to smarten up your man to show that he's cherished and cared for, and Jaeger has some stylish, essential must-haves to perk up his tired, old wardrobe. A velvet jacket (£250) can be dressed up or down to suit the occasion, or persuade him to throw out that scruffy old wallet and treat him to a new one (£85).

MEN, like women, love to receive fragrances in their Christmas stockings and Ralph Lauren has some gorgeous gift sets this year. Treat your man to the caress of smooth tropical sands and a light sea breeze with Polo Blue – the new male fragrance. This beautiful gift (£31.50) includes a 75ml Polo Blue EDT packed with a 50ml aftershave gel and 50ml shower gel in a Ralph Lauren Fragrances' signature blue box which are available at Boots and department stores (from October).

If your man's likely to get used to all those lie-ins over Christmas, pop a Mesh multi-colour digital alarm clock (£19.99) in his stocking and rest assured that his first day

back to the office won't involve a jug of water! Bright, funky, easily legible digits in red, gold and green can be dimmed for tired eyes, and there's also a radio to help to return him to the land of nod at night. The clock is available from www.mayhemonline.co.uk

ELVIS has been hitting the headlines once again, with the 50th anniversary of the release of his first single and the stage musical version of Jailhouse Rock becoming a huge hit in London's West End – and you can even let Elvis keep your man – and you – dry with the unique Jailhouse Rock umbrella (stick umbrella £24.99, micro-mini £17.99, plus £2.99 P&P). The umbrella shows Elvis in two classic poses from the 1957 movie, at the microphone and playing his guitar. Unusual and stylish, the umbrellas are only available in the UK from www.umbrellart.co.uk.

EVERYONE loves a guy who can make a mean cup of coffee, so why not drop him a hint by buying him a Café Merito pump espresso (around £99.99) from Morphy Richards and available in Currys? This little beauty benefits from a powerful pump pressure that produces deliciously rich coffee with a thick cream on top. Or if you prefer cappuccino, its additional pump cappuccino nozzle will whip up thick, frothy milk.



BUT if the Christmas excesses take their toll on your poor man's waistline, then the HFX60 Body Fat Analyser (£94.99) from Hanson is the perfect antidote. This cutting-edge fitness tool uses a clinically proven method known as Bioelectrical Impedance Analysis (BIA) to measure the percentage of fat in the body and it is an excellent gift for those with a New Year resolution to get fit.

WHAT I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS...

TRICIA STEWART

Tricia Stewart, 55, is one of the original Rylstone & District WI Calendar Girls from Cracoe near Skipton. She is now a Pilates teacher.

What is the best Christmas gift you have ever had?

It has to be when I was five and I was given a doll called Jennifer and I was absolutely thrilled to bits. I don't know why I called her Jennifer – but I've still got her.

What's the worst Christmas gift you have ever had?

I don't know about the worst but I've had plenty of horrible scarves in my time. I think that's what is wrong with Christmas when people just buy anything that's expensive without putting much thought into whether you like it or not. It's such a waste. I'd rather have nothing than someone buy me something and think 'oh, that will do'.

What do you want in your stocking this year?

This year is going to be really special. My son, Mickey, is coming home from Seattle where he's been playing rugby and Lizzie, my daughter, is going to be



home too. She's getting married soon and will be going to Singapore to live for three years so it will be really special to have them all here. I'm not bothered about getting any presents.

If money were no object, what would you want?

A little blue house on a Greek island somewhere please. I don't mind which island, as long as it's by the sea.

FESTIVETRIVIA

FATHER Christmas is based on Saint Nicholas, who lived from 270 to 310 AD. At the age of 30 he became the Bishop of Myra, a port town on the Mediterranean Sea, which is part of modern-day Turkey. He hailed from a rich home and became well known for supporting the needy. He would often be seen clad in red and white bishop's robes and riding on a donkey, handing out gifts to children.



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NE christmas



Something for everyone

CHRISTMAS is traditionally a time for families, but while it may be wonderful to spend the entire festive season surrounded by your loved ones, it can also make your Christmas shopping a nightmare. Coming up with new and different present ideas every single year can be extremely difficult, but don't despair - if you know where to look, there's something unique out there for even the hardest-to-buy-for relatives.

Grandparents often enjoy being surrounded by photos of their loved ones, so you can't usually go wrong with an interesting photo frame. Tesco's Gold Coloured Jewelled frame (£3.97) is perfect for cherished snaps, and pet lovers will be thrilled with the supermarket's special Cat and Dog Photo frames (£3 each).

Green-fingered grandads may prefer Boots Country Living Gardener's Trug Gift Set (£20), which comes complete with seeds, twine and scatters, while the Domestic Delight range could be just the thing for house-proud grannies. Buying someone cleaning products may sound like a sure fire way to get yourself struck off their Christmas card list for good, but the Kitsch Kitchen set (£12), which includes a bottle of pink washing-up liquid, a pink feather duster, and a pair of

extremely chic rubber gloves, should go down a storm with all domestic goddesses.

If you can afford to splash out a little more, then Red Letter Days have come up with their Culture Couples days out. For £125, your grandparents could enjoy the RHS Flower Show Experience, with access to either Chelsea, Hampton Court or Tatton Park shows, or the new Wedgwood Experience day, which provides a fascinating history of the famous 250-year-old company and a tour of the Wedgwood Story, the factory's multi-million pound visitor attraction.

The vouchers are available from selected stores across the country, including Alders, Debenhams, Harrods, House of Fraser stores and Selfridges.

If you're stuck for ideas about what to get your mum or an auntie, then why not check out Superdrug's impressive range of girly gadgets. The silver clip-on Talking Pedometer and Calorie Burner (£9.99) will calculate if you've managed to work off that extra helping of Christmas pud and will help mums stick to their New Year's resolutions in style.

If it's usually dad who gets the DIY-themed presents for Christmas, why not break with tradition and give mum the Superdrug's Ladies' Screwdriver Set (£6.99), which contains four animal print screwdrivers with marabou trim, or the bright pink 10-in-1 Battery Operated Girlie Screwdriver (£14.99).



Domestic goddesses will love the Domestic Delight Kitsch Kitchen set

Teenage boys' CDs will sound even better on Woolies' Army Portable Boom Box (£14.99).





Putting up shelves has never been so chic or so glamorous. However, girls about town who think a screwdriver is a cocktail, not a tool, will probably prefer to while away their spare time playing Marks and Spencer's Sex and the City Trivia Game (£5), or soaking in Virgin Vie's Seduction Decadent Bath Nectar (£16).

And of course, jewellery will always make an impression. Debenham's Diamante Cuff by Jon Richard (£31) should definitely put the sparkle into somebody's Christmas and will look great in the J by Jasper Conran faux leopard skin and fuchsia jewellery box (£50).

Dads and uncles with a taste for the high life will love the Deluxe Poker Layout (£40) from Debenhams. Complete with a felt layout and chips it will instantly transform your living room into a casino.

Male relations who like to think they're a dab hand in the kitchen won't be able to resist wielding the cook's torch in the Gordon Ramsay Crème Brulee Set (£25) from Boots, but dads who prefer eating to cooking will probably appreciate a hamper. World of Food's Gentleman's Gift Set (£15) from House of Fraser includes wild boar pate, which will taste delicious on the black pepper and sea salt biscuits.

Big kids can relive their lost childhood with Mark and Spencer's Scalextric compatible Starsky and Hutch Racing Set (£79) or recreate their favourite scenes from The Italian Job with the Mini Cooper Groovy Rider (£14.99) from Woolworths.

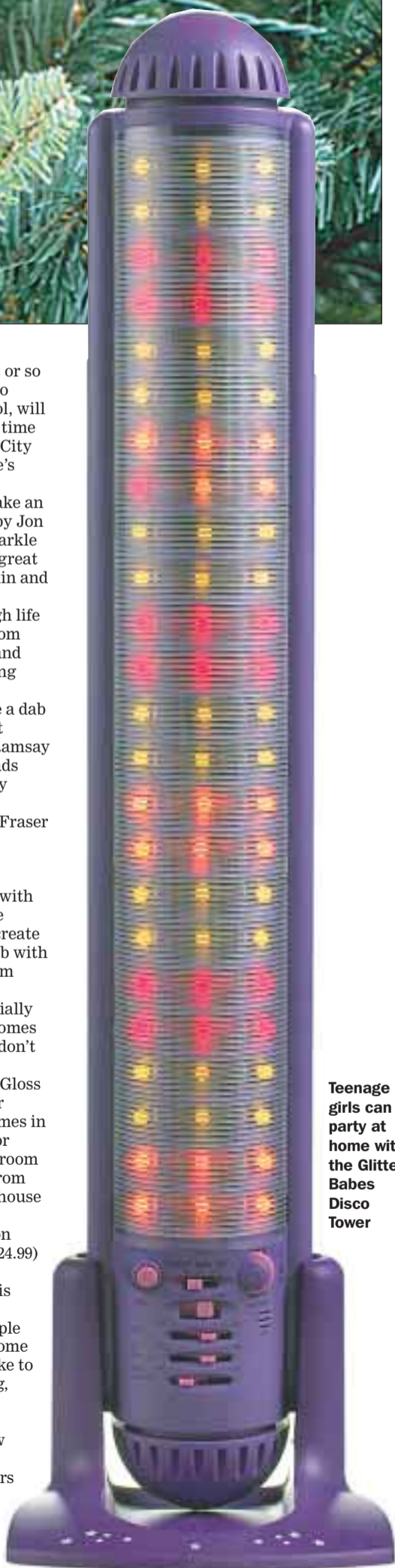
Teenagers can be hard to buy for, especially as they aren't particularly good when it comes to feigning enthusiasm for presents they don't like. Luckily, most teenage girls will be genuinely pleased to receive Superdrug's Gloss 2 Go Kit (£5.99) which contains a shimmer lipgloss and sparkling body lotion and comes in two choices of fragrance – toffee crunch or berry fiesta. And if you light up their bedroom with the Glitter Babes Disco Tower (£25 from Boots), they won't even have to leave the house to enjoy that disco ambience.

Boys can enjoy their favourite sounds on Woolworth's Army Portable Boom Box (£24.99) – perfect for listening to while he and his mates get stuck into the Mini Table Tennis Set (£10) from Superdrug.

Little ones are probably the easiest people to please. Their letters to Santa contain some pretty big hints about what they would like to find under the tree on Christmas morning, and even if they don't like their presents, they'll happily play with the wrapping.

However, if you're still looking for a few quirky stocking fillers, there's plenty to choose from, including the Lion Binoculars (£4) from Tesco or Mr Men Giant Snakes and Ladders (£10) from House of Fraser.

With gifts like these, you can be sure of a very happy family this Christmas.



Teenage girls can party at home with the Glitter Babes Disco Tower

WHAT I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS...

G P TAYLOR

GRAHAM Taylor, 46, is the best-selling author of Shadowmancer and Wormwood. He lives at Cloughton, near Scarborough.

What is the best Christmas gift you've ever had?

My first cricket bat when I was nine.

What is the worst Christmas gift you've ever had?

A jumper that was so big it didn't even touch the sides and it made me look like the astrologer Russell Grant.

What do you want to see in your stocking this year?

Preferably my wife... sorry in my stocking and not in stockings... A new Harley Davidson.

If money were no object, what would you like?

A Scottish island without the midgies.



Motorbike mad: Graham Taylor

FESTIVETRIVIA

EVERY year since 1947 the people of Oslo have given a Christmas tree to the city of Westminster in London. The gift is an expression of goodwill and gratitude for Britain's help to Norway during the Second World War.

Postmen in Victorian Britain were often called Robins because their uniform was red. Victorian Christmas cards often showed a robin delivering Christmas cards to homes.

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NE christmas

Deck the halls



Your home takes on a completely new meaning at Christmas as it becomes the focal point for family gatherings and parties for friends. So it's important to capture the essence of the season by giving each room a makeover that conveys not only festive congeniality but tradition, style, atmosphere and elegance.

ORGANISATION

WHETHER you can't wait to get stuck into decorating as early as possible, or you usually leave it until Christmas Eve, it's important to think ahead. Retrieving last year's dishevelled decorations only to discover the Christmas tree lights won't work and half your baubles are missing is no way to begin the season of goodwill.

Take stock of your existing decorations early on in December and decide if any need replacing or throwing away. If you've got an eclectic mix of styles gathered from years gone by, see if there is a common theme. Think of a style that at least some of your existing decorations will fit into and build on that. If they are all looking tired and worn, then maybe it's time to start from scratch with a totally new scheme.

DECORATION STYLES

IF it's tradition you're after or a more contemporary, funky look, then the high street has got it all wrapped up for Christmas 2004. From wooden handcrafted decorations to feathers, and beaded wreaths and garlands, there's something to suit every style this season.

Bold, bright colours are out in force again this year and a theme of opulence runs throughout most decoration collections. Marks & Spencer have a colourful array of hand-painted baubles in reds, blues, yellows and silvers, and their felt Christmas stockings featuring holly print are a must for mantelpieces this Christmas.

Woolworth's too has gone big on luxury this year with red, green and gold

baubles, antique ornate candlesticks and gold and red luxury crackers on offer. For a more frivolous, younger look, don't miss their range of clear baubles containing pink and lilac feathers, gold and purple fluffy baubles and jewel, amber and red drop tree decorations.

The Pier, meanwhile, is focusing on two themes this year - Imperial Russia, which mixes traditional red and gold with jewel-like colours and sparkling gems, and Exotic, which includes dazzling shades of blue, turquoise, purple and copper mixed with beading and crystals to create a magical festive look.

For naturally inspired decorations, check out specialist designer Emily Readett-Bayley's collection. Her hand-carved heart and Christmas tree designs are gilded with a metal leaf and come in gold, silver or red. The Shaker shops also have a large range of traditional handcrafted decorations to choose from.

As well as paying attention to your rooms, don't forget the other areas of your house. Decorate the front door with a traditional wreath made from holly sprigs, pine cones, and berries or go for a luxurious bauble-encrusted wreath from



For a more frivolous, younger look, don't miss Woolworth's range of clear baubles containing pink and lilac feathers, top, or gold and purple fluffy baubles, right



Crystal decorative fairy lights from The Pier, price £19.95. They are suitable for indoor and outdoor use with 10 lanterns on a 7.5m cable.

Marks & Spencer. Add a festive feel to the hall with silver twigs, sparkling mobiles and sprigs of mistletoe and don't forget to dress the stairs by wrapping the banisters with a rich red garland.

LIGHTS

LIGHTING has never been so exciting and this Christmas the choice of designs is simply endless. Bring decorations to life with delicate fairy lights and paper lanterns, and create a cosy atmosphere with candles and oil burners. Give the Christmas tree that snow-kissed look with a trail of white frosted lights and make the most of the season of cheer by taking your lighting scheme outside, line the front path with outdoor lanterns and install a traditional outdoor light to illuminate the front door.

TREES

CHRISTMAS wouldn't be Christmas without the smell of pine needles and a traditional Christmas tree. Homebase, B&Q and most garden centres stock a huge selection of real trees in December that can be bought cut, potted or pot-grown. Homebase, B&Q and Woolworths also stock a variety of artificial trees in natural colours as well as reds, golds, whites and silvers. Habitat are producing a fibre optic tree you can put on your table top this year, and you can even order half trees to mount on walls from www.xmas-treesdirect.co.uk.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

For Christmas decorations check out the following stores:

- Woolworths 0845-608 1101
- The Pier 0845-6091234
- House of Fraser 020-7963 2000
- John Lewis (08456) 049 049
- Shaker shops: 020-7935 9461 for branches
- Emily Readett-Bayley (01400) 281 563 for stockists



Going cheep: colourful, beaded bird place card holders from The Pier, £3.95



Tsar of Bethlehem: the baubles selection from The Pier includes the velvet beaded tree ornament, red sphere and purple oval, price £3.50 each. See front page

FESTIVETRIVIA

Christmas is a time when we eat, drink and be merry – fact! But were you aware that the real St Nicholas lived in Turkey or that Christmas was once illegal in Britain? Read on for more tantalising trivia.

- Around 65 million Christmas trees are grown in Britain each year, seven million of which are sold at Christmas time.
- The world's tallest cut Christmas tree was a 67.36m high Douglas fir erected and decorated at Northgate Shopping Centre in Seattle, Washington, in December 1950. It took two days to clear the streets between the logging merchant and the shopping centre and the trunk was accompanied by the Highway Patrol as it made its 20-mile journey.
- Martin Luther is believed to be the first person to have brought his Christmas tree inside his home. He decorated it with candles to show his children what stars looked like at night in the forest.
- The word 'holly' is thought to have been derived from the word 'holy'. The holly plant represents the crown of thorns worn by Jesus on the cross. It is said that the plant's berries used to be yellow before they were stained red by his blood.
- The largest functional Christmas cracker ever made was 55.45m long and 3.6m in diameter. It was made in Australia and was pulled at Westfield Shopping Town, Chatswood, Sydney, on December 16, 1998.
- In Norse custom, it was said that men

who met under mistletoe in battle would stop their fighting, kiss and make up.

- One of the oldest Christmas dishes known is the mince pie, which originated in the Middle Ages. The original recipe contained a mixture of finely chopped poultry, pheasant, partridge and rabbit. Later, sugar, apples, raisins and candied oranges and lemons were added. Over time, the meats were eliminated leaving only the sweet ingredients.
- Brussels sprouts are traditionally eaten at Christmas – but how many can you eat in one sitting? Britain's Brian Mynard currently holds the record by eating 43 in one minute at the Cactus Television Studios in London on December 10, 2003. Each sprout was eaten one at a time using a cocktail pick.
- According to the British Nutrition Foundation, studies show that, on average, people gain 5lbs in the four-week Christmas period, which works out at just an extra 500 calories a day – equivalent to a few handfuls of crisps, a mini sausage roll and a couple of glasses of wine.
- In 1843, the first Christmas card was printed in England for Sir Henry Cole, who wanted to save time at Christmas by sending cards instead of letters. He was also interested in encouraging the expansion of the postal system. One thousand copies of the card were sold at one shilling each.
- The abbreviation of Xmas for Christmas is not irreligious. The first letter of the word Christ in Greek is chi, which is identical to our x. Xmas was originally an ecclesiastical abbreviation used in tables and charts.

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ne christmas



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A noir noel is the way to be cool this Christmas as decorations go all grown up, says SARAH FRENCH

BLACK is back, but not just on the catwalks. Sparkly table cloths and black baubles on the tree, black candles and even black tinsel will all help create some mono merriment this Christmas.

And just in case you're thinking the festivities are starting to look funereal, don't panic. The black is for drama but it's the sparkling silver, white and crystal that give it a magical feel.

Cath Wadsworth, co-owner of Serendipity Interiors in Leyburn, North Yorkshire, says customers shouldn't be nervous of a blackout this Christmas – even if her black Cruella de Vil-esque ladies are a little scary.

"It's certainly different, I can't remember black being so strong before for Christmas. But it does create an eye-catching and very sophisticated look, especially for a dining table if you're having friends over for a dinner or for Christmas lunch itself," she says.

One way of making sure it's a white Christmas is going for an indoor winter wonderland, another major look this year. It's all feathers, frosting and twinkling lights, with chandeliers, engraved glass tea light holders and lace table linen for a soft, sparkly look.

At Serendipity, staff have been unpacking decorations for three weeks with ranges from Gisela Graham and Sia, Walton & Co tableware and Villa Collection glassware.

When it comes to colour, last year's all-blue and all-lilac trees are definitely out. Colour remains simple but it's more traditional with a red, green and gold theme and decorations of angels, santas, snowmen and nativity figures.

On the table, there's plenty of choice from regal burgundy with gold and, unusually, brown to take you from

autumn through to December, with extra gold added for some Christmas cheer.

Drawing on Alpine influences, a more homely look is embroidered linen table cloths and wooden napkin rings with colour kept to simple neutrals and red.

It works well with the New England theme. Wooden rocking horses, gingerbread men and cinnamon sticks hang from the tree, while children will love the Santa dolls in gingham dresses and knitted cardigans.

Whatever your choice, creating the right look for Christmas has become part of the interior design phenomenon.

Cath says there are so many different looks that there's something to suit all tastes. "There are some real contrasts this year, so you can have the fairies and santas for the children, create a winter wonderland in the hallway and keep the dining room glamorous and elegant," she says. "What's more, some of the decorations are so exquisite that they make wonderful gifts in themselves."

● Serendipity Interiors, Market Place, Leyburn (01969) 622112.

It's certainly different, I can't remember black being so strong before for Christmas

Clockwise from main picture: black bauble £2.75; the black look that's in this Christmas; Gisela Graham ornament £18.75; gingerbread heart; Sia Christmas doll £13.50; felt hearts, large £2.25, small £1.75



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Nokia 7280 – from £29.99 with contract from www.phones2udirect.co.uk

A real breakaway phone here from the Finnish folk, it's sleek and stylish and unlike anything else you've seen before. The phone has no keypad so you'll need a clear voice to activate many of the functions, which include a camera, and you start and end calls with a flick of the wrist.

BIG SPENDER
Vertu Mobile Phone – from £2,900 available from www.vertu.com. This phone could really take over your life. This is the entry-level model but all the mobiles from this company give you access to a concierge service to help you organise just about anything



SLEEK SLIDE
Sony Ericsson S700 – £499.28 sim free from www.mphone.co.uk



This phone is a must for style-conscious snappers as it has a massive 1.3 megapixel camera built in to its compact package. The real head-turner is the opening mechanism which slides open to reveal the keys underneath. For show-offs.

CHANGING TASTES
Nokia 7200 – from free with contract from www.carphonewarehouse.com

This clamshell camera phone wouldn't look out of place on the catwalk, not least because of its design, which includes textile covers, and there are all manner of accessories if you feel the need to change your phone as often as your outfit.



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Breathing new life into old rooms

Restoring Georgian elegance to a neglected farmhouse sparked a smart career move for the owner. CAROLINE TURNER reports

YOU can easily drive straight past Hall Farm and not realise that it's there. It's positioning is so incongruous, on a smart residential street in a North Yorkshire village, rather than set alone as most farm houses are. But if you look carefully, the gracious Georgian facade shows it to be by far the grandest house of all its neighbours, probably because it was here first. Many of its neighbours are built on land originally belonging to the farm, which was parcelled up and sold off for development over many years.

Hall Farm has an interesting history and inside it's packed with original features. These, however were not at all in evidence when Stephen and Isobel Peters bought the house four years ago. They have meticulously photographed their progress, starting with their very first viewing. This record shows now just how much work has been done in the intervening years as the farm house was split into three dwellings – a cottage, a bedsit flat and a main house.

The renovation was to be a long and daunting task. In many rooms, floors had to be dug back to the original foundations, as timbers laid straight onto the earth when the building went up in the mid-1700s were now rotten. Photographs from the start of the project show 1960s-inspired mock-stone fireplaces with gas fires and false ceilings. Once these were ripped out, original beams and fireplaces emerged from the rubble.

The massive hardwood beams show a fascinating secret history – they are punctuated with slots, holes and even metal fixings. It was common in the 18th century to reuse timbers that could have come from the likes of ships, mills or agricultural buildings. Every room has the original fireplace and once the chimneys had been cleared of soot, sticks and dead birds, they could all be lit to give the old house new warmth and cosiness.

Walls and ceilings had to be renovated in every room. Stripping down one wall, Tudor-style foundations were discovered underneath, cross timbers with intricate brickwork in between, a style of work very much older than the farmhouse's Georgian pedigree – suggesting a more ancient and interesting history yet to be uncovered.

The warren of tiny rooms at the back of the house was redesigned to make a large, airy kitchen with views onto the

garden. A modern kitchen based on a traditional design, with state-of-the-art appliances has been chosen. Natural stone flooring and granite work tops keep the look sympathetic to an old house.

New wooden Yorkshire sash windows have been installed to replace PVC windows and in the rest of the house, original windows have been restored. It's lovely to see old, bubbled and wrinkled glass in the original sashes.

Steve points out that the upstairs sash windows are four-paned Victorian-style remnants of a later makeover. His plan is to make the style common to those below, which are original Georgian 12-pane sashes.

Charming stories come to light as you wander through the house. As we walked up the stairs, I learned that when they moved in, every other spindle had been removed and a wood-turner was sought to make exact copies of the originals to complete the balustrade. Not an easy thing to find these days. A search led Stephen to the Yorkshire Dales, where he found a postman-turned-wood-turner. The new posts are indistinguishable from the old.

Four years into the renovation, the end of the project is in sight. Now the couple's sights are set on extending into the roof-space, formerly a granary. From the side of the house you can see blocked-up entrances where the grain would have been hoisted by crane for storage. This fascinating piece of heritage raises its head each time a ceiling is disturbed upstairs (which has been a regular occurrence in this house). A shower of ancient grain rains down from the spaces in between the timbers and the nooks and crannies of the house will be scattered from top to bottom with grains, which flow like water into any gap.

Now, with the benefit of experience and a more critical eye, projects that were finished are being rethought. Softwood floorboards are to be replaced with oak, which as the dining room and new bathroom show, are much more attractive, as well as hard-wearing.

Stark, modern radiators are being replaced with traditional reclaimed or reproduction cast iron and a renovated claw-foot bath brings a traditional elegance to the new bathroom. A jumble of junk-filled rooms untouched since the 1960s has been transformed into a warm and welcoming family home for Stephen and Isobel and their two young sons.

► Continued on page 14



Each time a ceiling is disturbed upstairs, a shower of ancient grain rains down from the spaces in between the timbers

The jumble of rooms has been transformed into a welcoming family home



Stephen and Isobel Peters have finished phase one of their restoration, but are now rethinking some areas of the house, including the flooring

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New life for an old home

► Continued from page 13

The four years of hard work, gaining experience along the way, encouraged Steve to give up the day job as a forensic accountant to launch a new career restoring other houses such as these. The Restoration Company was born, and all the lessons learned at Hall Farm serve to benefit the business. A source book of skilled local crafts people, suppliers and tradespeople means that Steve can source the best of everything for an authentic restoration and work the same kind of magic for other people that he has for his own family.

● **Stephen Peters** is managing director of the Restoration Company (North Yorkshire) Limited and can be contacted on 01845 578663 or 07739 258650, e-mail: stevepeters@restorationcompany.fsbusiness.co.uk



Georgian facade: Hall Farm has an interesting history

Pictures: RICHARD DOUGHTY



Natural wooden flooring, below, is a feature throughout the house



Stephen and Isobel have pictures of every stage of the work on the house

Pictures: RICHARD DOUGHTY

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Caring for your Christmas houseplants



Potted plants are great gifts for Christmas, but few of us have the knack of keeping them alive for long. Gardening Correspondent BRIGID PRESS has some timely advice



A Christmas Wish ❄️ ❄️ ❄️ *A Christmas Wish* ❄️ ❄️ ❄️ *A Christmas Wish* ❄️ ❄️ ❄️



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A Christmas Wish ❄️ ❄️ ❄️ *A Christmas Wish* ❄️ ❄️ ❄️ *A Christmas Wish* ❄️ ❄️ ❄️

ALL sorts of plants are often given as presents or used for decorative purposes over the Christmas period. Some of them are only ever meant to be temporary, but others can go on growing and flowering for many years to come.

Basket collections can be compiled of a mixture of annuals, perennials, half hardy or tender plants and after the festive period, all apart from the annuals may be carefully separated, potted on, and cared for in their own preferred manner.

There are though some notoriously difficult plants which can be extremely tricky to keep going for any length after Christmas. However, all they need is a little specialist treatment.

POINSETTIA

(*Euphorbia pulcherrima*)

THIS houseplant has become enormously popular over the last couple of decades with the introduction of modern varieties and dwarfing techniques. It is the colour of the bracts (petal-like leaves) that most people go for. Red remains the most common colour, but pink, white and green forms are also available. Whilst the poinsettia does flower, they are small and inconspicuous.

A temperature of 15C (60°F) is ideal, but it must not fall below 13°C (55°F) for prolonged periods of time. It needs maximum amounts of light during winter, but protect from full sunlight in summer.

Allow the compost to dry out between watering. Over watering will lead to a loss of colour and possible leaf drop. Mist frequently during flowering and colouring and feed weekly with houseplant food.

After colouring and/or flowering the plants are usually discarded, although it is quite possible to get them to colour up again year after year. Allow the soil to dry out, and after leaf fall cut back the stems to four inches from the compost

surface. Keep the plant cool (but protected from frost). In May re-pot and begin watering, feeding when shoots appear. Remove some of the new growth to leave four fifths of the strongest stems. From late September cover with a black bin bag from early evening until morning to give the plant a total of 14 hours of darkness each evening for at least eight weeks. This will initiate colour change and flowering.



AZALEA INDICA

THESE aristocrats of winter-flowering house plants can provide a mass of colour throughout the holiday season with their red, pink or white funnel shaped blooms. The dark glossy-leaved shrub originates from Asia.

A temperature of 10-15°C (50-60°F) is ideal, but avoid hot airless situations. They prefer a brightly lit spot, away from direct sunlight.

Keep the compost permanently wet, preferably by plunging the pot in a bucket of water for five minutes and then allowing any excess water to drain away. Rainwater should be used in areas with hard water. As a rough guide, the bottom centimetre of the stem should be dark. Feed with houseplant food weekly during the flowering period



After flowering move the plants to a cool frost-free place (re-potting if necessary using an ericaceous compost), moving them out into the garden in late May. They should be kept well fed and watered in the garden until mid-September when they should be brought in for flowering.

CYCLAMEN

CYCLAMEN are one of the most attractive and popular houseplants for winter flowering. It is a half-hardy tuberous plant which is found wild in the Mediterranean. It has a mass of shuttlecock-shaped flowers in a range of white, pinks, reds and purples.

They survive best in temperatures of 10-15°F (50-60°C), but don't like cold draughts or very warm rooms. When watering, soak them from below and avoid pouring water onto the leaves or corm, as this may cause them to rot. Allow the compost to dry out slightly between watering. Feed with houseplant fertiliser once a week while it is in flower. After flowering, reduce the amount of water and stop feeding until the foliage turns yellow. In late May take the pots outside and lay them on their sides and keep them dry until new growth is seen in summer. Re-pot the corm using a well-drained compost rich in organic matter. Restart the watering and feeding regime and bring back inside in September.



MEYERS LEMON (citrus X meyeri)

THE Meyers lemon has a compact growth and flowers all year. The leaves are glossy and leathery. The star-shaped flowers are highly scented. It can stand outside in summer but is best overwintered in a cool but bright room as lack of light will result in loss of leaves. It needs plenty of ventilation, but not cold draughts. This plant hates sudden changes in temperatures and dislikes root disturbance, so it needs potting into a large enough pot to last several years. In place of re-potting, scrape off the top two inches of soil every April and replace with a mixture of compost and well-rotted manure.

Watering in summer should be thorough, with water pouring out of the bottom of the pot, but hold back in winter, so that the compost stays just moist. It will not need regular pruning, but can be shortened by two thirds every three years or so to maintain its shape.

It is prone to infestations of scale and mealy bugs, but regular washing of the leaves can minimise the risk of attack.

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The stars at Christmas

Most people get nostalgic as Christmas approaches and celebs are no different. Here, sentimental stars share their intimate memories of Christmases past...



SURANNE JONES, 26, actress
 (Karen McDonald, Coronation Street)

“I WAS 19 and in Belfast doing panto. The cast and crew were all with their families and there I was on my own with flu and a fever, drinking hot toddies. My family wasn't able to join me so they sent my presents over. My aunts had given me these Santa Claus knickers and I was sat there laughing at them, and then my laughter turned to tears. That carried on as I opened my other presents. And I was thinking: 'What am I doing in Belfast, at Christmas, all on my own, opening gimmick presents which really need to be shared with the people who had given them to me?' I had no idea that I was drunk as a skunk from the hot toddies!”

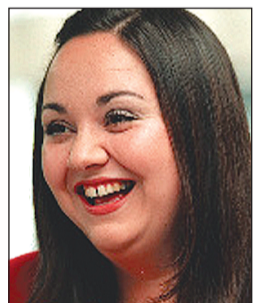


GABBY LOGAN, 31, TV presenter

“THE last Christmas that my brother Daniel was alive was an incredible Christmas. It was a really lovely family Christmas and the last we would all have together.”

VICKY HALL, 27, actress
 (Lindsay, Teachers)

“TANGERINES always remind me of this time of year. Every time I see a tangerine, I get really excited because I think it's Christmas. We always had tangerines and nuts in our stockings, it was really old fashioned.”



ANDREW LINCOLN, 31, actor (Simon Casey, This Life/Teachers)

“EVERY Christmas we would travel down from Hull to Gloucestershire to see my granddad.



My brother and I must have been about five or six, and used to count the Christmas trees on the way. Obviously we were really annoying kids and my parents had realised it was a good idea for us to count them to shut us up.

“Dad would also give us Fox's Glacier Fruits, and say: 'See how long you can make them last'”





KWAME KWEI-ARMAH, 37, actor (Finlay Newton, paramedic, Casualty), singer/writer

“MY favourite memory, I suppose, is our annual family debate. I’m one of seven brothers and sisters so it gets pretty noisy. We all go round to my parents’ house for Christmas and debate all day long, and I love it. Often new friends or partners think we’re all arguing but we’re just talking and discussing – you want to see us when we fight!”

KATY HILL, 33, TV presenter and radio DJ

“I LOVE family Christmases and one of my favourites was when me and my older brother Simon got given our very first bikes. We came downstairs and there they were. Mine was purple with white tyres and his was a Chopper. Getting your first bike was quite a major achievement, and they were both really cool.”



realise now what the son of a gun was doing – it was because he’s such a cheapskate. There we were for two hours rotting holes in our teeth. But it kept us quiet.

“It was so exciting going to granddad’s – all my cousins would turn up and we used to do the whole thing with the carrot for Rudolph and the glass of port for Santa. The next morning we’d say: ‘The carrot’s got a bite out of it, the port’s gone and look, there are presents!’ It was the real deal and I remember that being the perfect idea of Christmas.”

ALAN TITCHMARSH, 55, TV gardener and presenter

“WHEN I was a boy, I always remember my dad disappearing mysteriously down into the cellar around October time.

“At Christmas, something painted and made out of wood – like a fort, or a zoo, or a garage – would appear at the end of my bed. I never made the connection with that and all of his disappearing acts.

“The older you get, the more you realise the amount of planning, preparation, imagination, work and love that must have gone into making them.

“Dad was a classic northerner who didn’t say a lot, but the fact that he took the time to do all those things for me was wonderful. I don’t have any of the toys now. They were played with to bits and eventually fell apart.”

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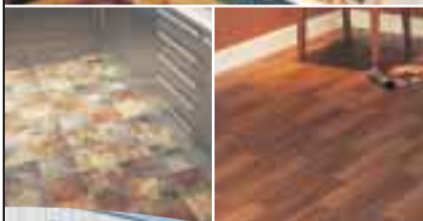
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me and my wardrobe



Caroline Turner, 32 is a freelance writer, part-time sales assistant and full-time wife and mother. She lives in North Yorkshire with her husband and son. Her obsession with clothes and shoes started around the age of four when she went to bed in her new fur-lined boots and wouldn't take them off. Caroline says she reads far too many magazines and takes it all far too seriously, but at least she wears good shoes while doing so.

How would you describe your look?

Considered; put together rather than thrown together. My style changes daily. I'll go from vintage 501s and biker boots one day to nice and Mummyish in tailoring and a cardigan the next; then as a reaction to the middle-age threat, a mini kilt and knee length boots the next day. I swore I wouldn't wear really short skirts after 30, but I'm regressing. I love accessories in all their guises, so even if I'm wearing just, say, jeans and a black sweater I can't go out without a good belt, a scarf of some description, great shoes and bag. I aim for elegance, but I'm not sure I'm quite there yet, at least not all the time.

What's your favourite item of clothing?

I have a plain black, very fine wool crepe suit that makes me feel confident. It fits like a glove. My husband bought me the trousers from Boden and quite by chance I found the matching jacket in their online clearance sale for just £15. It's incredibly versatile. And my new favourite things are my fabulous hand made beaded rings by a young designer, Kate Atkinson. They're on all my friends' Christmas lists this year after seeing mine.

What's the most you've ever spent on an item of clothing?

I don't spend much myself, I'm Queen of the Bargain and I tend to buy lots of clothes from the likes of H&M and Benetton, so you just can't spend a lot on any one item. I suppose shoes would be the most expensive thing I buy. Knee-length black patent leather



boots from Hobbs for £150 would qualify. But I justify the spend in that I'm wearing them to death for their third winter and they still look great. My husband believes in buying less and sticking to good quality, so he buys all my 'investment' pieces - coats, handbags, jewellery. The most expensive thing would be a leather and shearling jacket at around £450.

Main picture: black halterneck dress, Zara; belt with rose corsage, House of Fraser; black kitten-heel shoes bought in France. Earrings; Bradleys.

Above right: tweed jacket and brown sweater, H&M; brown baycord kilt, Matalan; white shirt, Barbour; brown riding boots, John Lewis

Left: shirt, Thomas Pink; jeans, vintage Levi's 501s bought in France; boots, Harley Davidson

Jewellery throughout, Bradleys of Northallerton, except beaded rings, Kate Atkinson. Christmas flowers on mantelpiece and potted pine tree from Bloom; bloom.uk.com.

My style changes daily. I'll go from vintage 501s and biker boots one day to nice and Mummyish in tailoring and a cardigan the next

Pictures: RICHARD DOUGHTY

NE out on the town

Our image experts scour the social honeypots of the region this festive season in search of style and individuality



McCourt & McKay

ANYONE who hasn't visited The Forum Bar and Club in Borough Road, Darlington is missing a treat. Housed inside this derelict-looking building are recording studios, rehearsal rooms and a live performance area, all kitted with quality instruments and recording technology that could even make us sound good, and we love the buzzer door entry system which ensures a secure environment while relaxing in the bar.

The Forum stages live performances most nights of the week, from opera and jazz to rock and punk and is a venue very quickly gaining a reputation as the cool and creative place to be. We went along on the fifth anniversary of First Stop, a Darlington-based charity which offers advice and guidance to the homeless. The organisers had put a lot of effort into this fund raising evening and the photographic images captured of people living on our streets made you grateful for organisations like First Stop. It was a sparkling do, a champagne reception with live jazz from the Jazztones and a superb buffet supplied by Darlington College Catering. BBC Radio Cleveland's Mathew Davis hosted the evening



DAVID REGAN

A man in a kilt always stands out and 33-year-old David Regan did just that. He is an administrator and trustee at First Stop and was wearing his traditional family Dundee tartan from Greenwoods. He prefers to wear a kilt rather than a suit as he finds it more comfortable, but other than that his wife decides what he is wearing. David's healthy tips are to eat haggis once a week - with a wee bit of tripe of course.

CAROL JOHNSON

It was Carol's first time at the Forum and she thought the venue was a refreshing change. Carol stood out

in an outfit that was tasteful, modern, feminine and certainly not dowdy. Her pink dress was by Linear from Eve in Yarm and to keep the chill off her shoulders, she wore a shawl from Primark. Carol shops wherever she sees something she likes and that could be The House, The Conservatory in Yarm or Primark. She believes you should wear what you feel good in, not what people tell you to wear.

NIGEL

Nigel, 32, is a graphic designer and artist. Some of his portraits were on display and they were amazing. What a talent! Nigel helped in organising and designing this evening as well as donating a portrait to the auction. He thought tonight's venue was perfect and was just what Darlington needed.

Nigel was wearing a beautifully cut suit by Reiss with a Thomas Pink Shirt and Prada shoes. His favourite label for cool, comfortable and stylish clothing is Diesel. I'm sure he has more beauty tips than he is letting on but he insists on getting a haircut every four weeks without fail.

LIZ NORTH AND KAREN GRUNDY

Thirty-something Liz is an arts development manager and did a great job designing the decor for the evening. Liz loved the creative atmosphere of the Forum and thought it was a perfect venue.

Liz wore a lovely sparkling wrap top from Monsoon, which sat perfectly with a classic pair of black dress trousers. Liz loves a bargain and shops anywhere - her favourite is Karen Millen but for a bargain she likes Primark.

Karen is the chief officer for First Stop in Darlington, but the many sleepless nights Karen has certainly didn't show as she looked elegant and radiant in a dress by Principles. At 44, Karen finds Principles is a great shop to suit her style, as well as Next. High on her list of grooming is a good hairdresser you can trust (hers is Tracey who works at Sue's in Cockerton).

● Judie McCourt, of TV and radio fame, and make-up and hair artist Allison McKay, run AM Creative Productions, which specialises in creative event management and the production of photographic images for advertising

amcreativeproductions.com

CAROL JOHNSON



LIZ NORTH & KAREN GRUNDY



NIGEL



MATHEW DAVIS

MATHEW DAVIS

Mathew works for the BBC and still manages to be a very funny and entertaining guy. Our host for the evening wore a Thomas Pink suit and generally shops in Manchester for its variety. One feelgood tip from Mathew is to stay off alcohol for a few months. Mathew has tried it and he says you get a fantastic reality buzz. Also drink lots of water - 70 per cent of us are dehydrated. One of Mathew's favourite sayings is: "Face the sun and the shadows will fall behind you".

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NE beauty

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Presents to pamper

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A SPA day is also available at Broom Mill Day Spa, out in the countryside near Ferryhill. The Signature Spa Day, which costs £65, includes a full use of all facilities, the relaxation zone, pool, sauna, aromatherapy and infra red rooms, full consultation and 30-minute treatment tailored to your needs plus buffet lunch and refreshments throughout the day. For the man in your life there is the Sportsman's Spa, 2 1/2

hours of massage and pampering for £50. Anyone accompanying guests to the spa can take up the offer of a one-hour Chauffeur's spa for £15, which comprises full use of all facilities. Gift vouchers and a gift wrapping service are available. The spa is at High Hill House Farm, Dean Bank, Ferryhill, Co Durham (01740) 654225. More details on www.broommilledayspa.co.uk.

YOU can always pretend to be offended when you open your "lift and firm" creams and gels this Christmas, but most women will be happy to add the cosmetics to their collections. Gatineau has a fantastic range of Christmas gift sets, including Youthful Promise - resculpting moisturiser, eye contour lift cream, throat gel and redefining serum - and Body Beautiful - body scrub, Melatogenine body firming cream, vitamin A hand cream and a natural sponge. The sets are £69.95 and £44.95 respectively from the CACI Beauty Oasis just off Darlington's Grange Road (01325) 489970. For perfect pampering, the salon also sells lovely Christmas collections from Mary Cohr, the UK's fastest growing aromatherapy brand, and has gift vouchers for £5 upwards and pamper days which start at £62.

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Rekindle the magic of Christmas

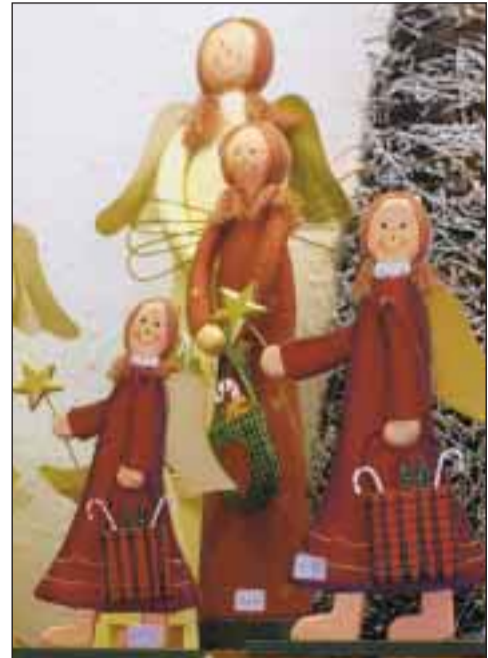
ARE you feeling stressed yet, rushing around trying to prepare for Christmas? Have you reached the stage where you wish it were all over? Please stop, just for a few moments. Take a deep breath and cast your mind back to Christmas when you were a child. Did you believe in Santa Claus? Can you remember that excited feeling wondering what Santa might bring? Did you put out carrots for the reindeer? Just take a few moments to remember those feelings of anticipation and wonder. Let yourself remember; don't brush this off thinking it's silly.

As adults, so many of us have lost touch with the magic of Christmas. It's a beautiful season of wonder and hope. Allow yourself to enjoy it, rekindle those feelings. Don't get caught up in the stress, remember what it really is all about. There is still a place for magic within all of us. Happy Christmas!



Juliette Lee

Website: www.juliettelee.co.uk
Email: info@juliettelee.co.uk



Dorothy Rowbotham, left, and Judy Brown surrounded by some of their wares

Pictures: ANDY LAMB

If you're still trawling the streets looking for Christmas gifts, SARAH FRENCH has spotted a shop in Teesdale which could provide some answers

A fruitful partnership



“People have really supported us and done everything to help and encourage us

“A PLACE for everything and everything in its place,” said Samuel Smiles, the English social reformer. He would certainly have been smiling had he visited The Damson Tree.

Small but perfectly formed, it's a department store squeezed into a shop the size of a cottage living room. How owners Dorothy Rowbotham and Judy Brown fit in so much without it looking cluttered is a masterpiece of interior design.

There's a children's section, shelves of products for men, toiletries and other gifts for women, jewellery, handbags, plant containers, even items for pets, all happily displayed together with large pieces of furniture and lamps. Lamps with feathers, lamps with beads, lamps with tassels, lamps made of glass, silk or lace. “We find that the more wacky the lamps are, the better they sell,” says Dorothy.

Both she and Judy had shops before deciding to come together at The Damson Tree, in Barnard Castle's Horsemarket – the shop is named after Dorothy's famed damson vodka.

Judy ran Brown's Antiques in Darlington, Richmond and Barnard Castle but after 30 years in the antiques business and with no family responsibilities any more, her plan was to disappear off to her house in France.

“Instead I opened another shop. It was Dorothy's fault,” she laughs.

Dorothy had run Philberts food and cook shop in Grange Road, Darlington for five and a half years but had to give it up because of hip problems. After a while, she got bored with being at home, and decided to knock on next door – Judy's house – with her idea.

“I thought Barnard Castle would benefit from a good gift shop,” she says. “Partners was very, very popular but its old format has gone. Both Judy and I had run shops before so it seemed like the obvious thing to do.”

They've been warmly welcomed in the town.

“People have been so complimentary,” says

Judy. “They've said things like ‘thank heavens you've opened’ and ‘you're an asset to Barney’, which is so nice. People have really supported us and done everything to help and encourage us.”

There are special mentions for Louis Swinbank, the electrician, Duncan Gales, the painter and Sandy, the carpet fitter, all local tradesmen who helped Judy to get the shop ready while Dorothy was in America. Judy's husband Philip is their accountant, and go-pher.

Buying is easy since they have the same taste and style – “a wide spectrum, from classic to fun”.

“There is probably five per cent at each end which is different but generally we pounce on the same things and say the same number when we're considering how much to order. It's been a lot of fun,” says Dorothy.

They trawl the trade fairs for ideas. Since their stock ranges from handmade silver jewellery from Israel and freshwater pearls imported directly from China to lamps shaped like a fruit cocktail and door signs saying “gone to the pub”, anything is possible.

There are keepsake wedding and baby boxes, loads of stocking-fillers and Olli toys to be warmed up in the microwave for children to take to bed. Their collection of handbags goes from brightly coloured crocheted to tweed and leather, while a brass companion set sits next to a shelf of shower caps.

They've sent lamps to Kent and furniture to London, and they will order one-offs for customers who spot something in one of their suppliers' catalogues. “We aim to have a really good range at competitive prices. We're not in London, and we know what people want to pay,” says Dorothy.

Judy adds: “We like to say that anyone can walk in here and buy all their presents for every member of the family. There really is something for everyone.”

● The Damson Tree, Horsemarket, Barnard Castle. Tel: 01833 690120. Opening times: 10am-5pm Monday, Thursday, Fridays and Saturdays.



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nE shopping



Above: Michelle Murphy with the range of decks in Urban Chaos; right, the Charms range at The Silver Shop and one of the artworks on display at Gallerina

Duke Street & Post House Wynd

Whether you're looking for a new piece of jewellery for a loved-one or artwork to brighten up your home, Darlington's Post House Wynd and Duke Street have everything you could want this Christmas, as Women's Editor LINDSAY JENNINGS discovers

ROWS of faceless high street stores set in concrete trading estates may be convenient for some, but Darlington's beauty lies in its winding cobbled streets and individual shops.

A saunter up Post House Wynd, situated off the town's High Row, proves that you really can find something for everyone in a series of hidden gems.

Typical of these is Michou, which counts traditional wooden games, handmade cards and original pieces of jewellery among its biggest sellers. Dads and granddads will no doubt love one of the classic games the shop offers, such as dominoes and backgammon and old favourites like the dice game, Shut the Box. Owner Brian Waddington also sells collectable chess sets and can order in various designs, from figures dressed as Samurai warriors to characters from the Lord of the Rings trilogy.

Says Brian: "We try wherever possible to stock things which no-one else sells. The traditional games are a fine counter balance to modern computer games."

Play is also a key factor in the energetic images captured by lifestyle photographers, Venture. In state-of-the-art, digital studios situated above the premises in Post House Wynd, expertly trained photographers shoot vibrant,

spontaneous images that capture people's natural expressions and personality.

Edward Frederickson, who owns the Venture franchise for Tees Valley and North Yorkshire, says: "We offer something more than just simple pictures, we offer an experience. Our relaxed, friendly approach means that the session is a fantastic, fun experience."

Post House Wynd is a fantastic place to come for distinctive Christmas jewellery and gifts. Popular jewellers include Asquiths, Bramwells and The Silver Shop.

Key pieces at The Silver Shop this season are the bright pinks in the Carrick range, Guess jewellery, the stone set Dolce and Gabanna "bling" style watches and the Nomination charm bracelets.

Like many of Darlington's shops, it's the personal touch which set them apart from some of the bigger high street names - which is particularly handy if you need some help selecting a gift.

Also in Post House Wynd, is designer menswear shop Fourth Chamber run by John Whitehead. Big sellers this winter, he says, include classic knitwear with a twist. Says John: "We're seeing a lot of the smarter, classic knitwear sell well at the moment but also some of the brighter colours. The pinks, lemons and limes are all going to be big next summer."

Another great place to shop for lads and lasses is at skateboarding and snowboarding specialists, Urban Chaos in Duke Street. The business, run by Michelle Murphy and Paul Naisbitt, is packed with top names to be seen in this winter from technical jackets and lifestyle wear by Volcom, to clothing by the up-and-coming brand Hurley - tipped to replace Von Dutch as the label of choice this Christmas - Nixon watches and footwear



Left: One of the portraits from Venture



Pictures: SARAH NICHOLSON

Top: Micheline Waddington in Michou gift shop; above, strolling down Post House Wynd

by Americas and Vans. The shop stocks everything you need to go snowboarding and skateboarding and has a huge selection of boards as well as all the protective gear you need.

“We’re more than happy if people want to come in and talk about their requirements so we can get it right and they’re satisfied,” says Michelle.

And if you’re a bit bemused about what to buy for someone, don’t worry – the shop also sells gift vouchers.

Gallerina, in Duke Street, also has a brilliant plan to pay for its goodies. The Own Art scheme enables buyers to help spread the costs over ten months interest free. The only problem is picking out what to buy from the fabulous collections of jewellery, glass, ceramic, textile and art work, which start from £20. But Darlington’s own Lou Harris, who has just brought out a set of limited edition prints in time for the festive season, is bound to be a winner.

And after all that shopping, there are a great selection of places to stop off for a homemade cake and coffee. Both Wades and Cooper’s in Post House Wynd specialise in providing tasty home-cooked foods as well as a twist on some of the traditional fare.

Martin and Tracy Elliot took over Cooper’s three years ago and have seen the business go from strength to strength.

Says Martin: “Our December menu offers all the Christmas fare such as turkey and mince pies but we like to put a nice twist on



it with sage and onion roasted potatoes, homemade chestnut stuffing and our own range of iced Christmas cakes.

“You can come in after shopping and have a light meal and a coffee, maybe a piece of homemade cake or you can have the full turkey dinner. It’s about giving people the choice.”

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gadget man



10 of the best Yuletide gizmos

Christmas is almost here but there's still time to buy a gizmo for the gadgetman (or woman) in your life. NIGEL BURTON serves up some tasty Yuletide treats

● Don't miss Burton's Bytes - game reviews in The Northern Echo every Friday

1 Sega-Mega Drive: What's this? A ten-year-old console in a column about gizmos and gadgets! It may seem crazy but many gamers of a certain age still look back on the old Sega with rose-tinted specs. To satisfy those cravings for Sonic The Hedgehog Sega has relaunched the Mega Drive - after a fashion. The new one is tiny (about the size of a mini disc) and only comes with six games. But what games! As well as Sonic you get Golden Axe, Altered Beast, Kid Chameleon, Flicky and Dr Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine. Price: £24.95

2 Medusa 5.1 headphones: Fed up with not hearing your DVDs in full-on surround sound? Why splash out on a bulky speaker set-up when you can have these headphones instead? The Medusa cans have three speakers and a so-called sub woofer in each ear pad for that immersive sound experience. They may lack the clarity of a separate speaker set-up but for listening at night they are just the trick for keeping the peace with your neighbours. Price: £59.95.

3 Presso: If you love real coffee but can't be bothered with the complexity of some grinder/percolators, this is the answer. For less than forty quid you get a manually-operated espresso maker. Simply pour hot water into the filling chamber and press down. Bellissimo!

4 The Bug: This crazy digital radio looks like a cross between a kid's toy and a robot. Beneath the cute appearance beats a high-tech heart that not only lets you listen to your fave digital stations but records them too. Your music is downloaded to a digital memory card so it can be played back on an MP3 portable or your PDA. Price: £149.95.

5 MP3 Alarm Clock: Wake-up to whatever. Transfer your favourite file from a PC and set the alarm. When it's time to rise, the MP3 alarm plays it back and flashes a light in time to your tune. Daft but fun. Price: £24.95.

6 The Soundbug: No room for speakers in that cramped office? Then just clamp the



Soundbug to your desk or window to turn it into an instant loud speaker. Perfect for music lovers who hate headphones. Price: £24.95.

7 Simkey: Don't lose your precious mobile phone data. Use the simkey to download all your numbers to this small keyring memory device for safe keeping. For added convenience the Simkey features a calendar and an alarm. Price: £9.95.



8 Fireplace DVD: If you lack a real log fire for those cosy winter evenings, get this DVD. Just slap it into your player and watch as your TV is transformed into a restful fire. Perfect for contemplative TV loafers everywhere, but not many special features. Price: £14.95.

9 USB Xmas tree: Tinsel around your PC monitor not festive enough? Then plug in a USB Christmas tree for the total Yuletide experience. Powered by your PC, the little tree transforms itself into six different colours. Price: £9.95.

10 Insectilix lollies: Don't buy the usual selection box this year. Have a cool Yule with a lolly that contains an edible worm, a minty ant or even a scary scorpion. Price: £3.75 each.



● All these goodies - and many more - are available from www.firebox.com the online gadget store.



The sloe must go on



Ann Brown puts labels on the liqueur and Ben Taylor makes sloe gin chocolates. Left: Julia Brown picks sloes on Manor Farm

Pictures: RICHARD DOUGHTY

THE fruits of summer are a distant memory and even the apples are past their best. But as the leaves fall and the verges die back ready for winter, England's hedgerows have one last reward for hardy types – sloes.

The blackthorn is the last to give up its rich bounty with a season that lasts until the first week in December. Which means now is the busiest time of year for Julia Brown, her husband Richard and their relatives who make Sloe Motion a real family business.

Between them they will handle tonnes of the blue-black fruits to produce 10,000 bottles of sloe gin liqueur, 20,000 boxes of sloe gin chocolates and, for the first time this winter, sloe gin cheese and chutney.

It all started when Julia decided to expand her hobby of making sloe gin as Christmas presents into a business at their farm at Westow, near Malton.

"We knew the farm had a lot of blackthorn but when we mapped out the potential volume of sloes we realised there was enough to make a lot of gin," explains Julia, who as mum to two young children was also looking for a business she could run from home.

They worked on improving the product last year and since then the business has grown rapidly. "Nobody was making sloe chocolates commercially and other sloe gin is usually based on juice rather than the traditional method. There seemed to be a gap in the market," says Julia.

But first you need your sloes. Blackthorn is recognisable as one of the first shrubs to flower in early spring with an abundance of white blooms. The sloes, which first appear in September, resemble tiny, sour damsons.

The Browns cut their hedges less frequently and less hard to help the bushes, which is also in keeping with their farming protocol to protect natural habitats by preserving meadows and leaving wide margins at field edges.

It's a wonderful environment for Georgia, who's four, and three-year-old Oakley. "They're the only kids I know who can tell the difference between a sloe and a bullace (the fruit of the wild plum)," says Julia, whose own childhood was at Kielder, where her father's family worked in timber.

Manor Farm produces a tonne of sloes and they harvest another tonne from neighbouring farms. This year's frost, however, meant a poor yield and the Browns

launched a nationwide appeal to farmers to harvest their hedgerows and send the sloes to North Yorkshire. Their call was answered from as far away as Devon and Northern Ireland. "We had people turning up with 150 kilos at a time. It's probably the best way forward," says Julia. "We'll pick several key farmers who are perhaps retired or have local children who can help pick and earn some money. It's labour intensive but very rewarding and the sloes just go to waste otherwise."

All the fruit is washed by hand and any leaves are removed. Then it's immediately frozen which also "pops" the sloes so they don't have to be pricked.

When needed, the fruit is put into 200 litre tanks (they have ten in a barn at Manor Farm) in layers with sugar and "a very neutral" gin to allow the flavour of the fruit to permeate. The tanks are pivoted so they can be turned regularly.

The recipe itself is a secret but the lovely mix is left for three months before being bottled. A very high ratio of fruit gives the gin its jewel-like colour and also reduces the alcohol content from 37.5 per cent for the "raw" gin to 20 per cent in the finished product. It's best drunk and savoured as a liqueur or in a long drink with dry ginger and lime, Julia recommends.

Richard's mum, Ann, is in charge of the gin while Julia's sister-in-law, Jill Taylor, runs their stands at fairs. Producing the chocolates is a different skill, overseen by chief chocolate maker Brenda Robinson, Julia's mum.

She and Julia's nephew went on a training course to learn the art of blending and tempering, the techniques that gives good chocolate its snap and shine.

The chocolates are made in a former garage on the farm which smells like Christmas. The fruit is spooned into large piping bags and squeezed out into the Belgian chocolate cups before a chocolate lid is added. They can make 500 boxes of 12 chocolates a day.

Sloe Motion products are sold in 70 carefully chosen shops and at the Blacksmith's Inn in Westow, which the Browns also own. There you can sample sloe sorbet and ice cream, and sloe sauce with savoury dishes. Julia explains: "The idea is that the farm supplies the pub and introduces people to sloes which feeds back to the farm. So far it's working well."

Sarah French

Sloe Motion products include a black gift box with bottle of gin and chocolates £23.95; chocolates from £6.25; gin from £9.95; sloe gin Wensleydale cheese made at Hawes Creamery £8 and sloe chutney £2.25. Products can be ordered from the website at www.sloemotion.com, which also has a list of stockists and lots more information about sloes.

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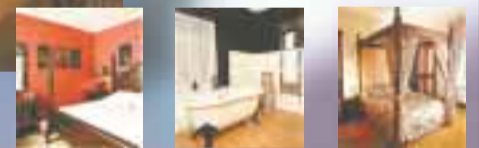
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Swift, safe and very smooth

Motoring Correspondent IAN LAMMING gets his teeth stuck into the latest tasty offering from Hyundai

Hyundai Tucson

NOTHING should come between an Englishman and his Sunday afternoon tea; not 50 miles of twisting roads nor the time constraints of life.

When cakes and sandwiches beckon and the driver has only the bit between his teeth instead of the food he craves, it would take a brave sheep or pheasant to set foot, hoof, or crawl in front of his test car hoping he would stop.

This is the life and death reality of a Sunday routine that ends in Leyburn at your favourite café. When the weekly walk takes 40 minutes longer than planned, then the car takes 20 minutes extra to load up, you find yourself an hour late and the planned potter though the Howgills and the Yorkshire Dales becomes a determined drive.

But 90 minutes later and half an hour before café's close, we find ourselves safely ensconced in Serendipity, steaming drinks tantalising the tastebuds, elaborate toasties a feast for eyes and stomachs alike. And how? Well it's down to the blessings of the road gods who keep the way clear and the supreme abilities of the Tucson, Hyundai's brand new mid-sized off-roader.

At first glance a tall off-roader could have been seen as the worst vehicle possible to make maximum progress along twisty country lanes. Generally grip is too limited and cabin roll too pronounced to be able to dash anywhere without dashing everyone and thing inside to pieces on the rocks.

But not so the Tucson, which drives very much like a car; cornering flatly, accelerating well out of bends and gripping to the leaf-mulch strewn asphalt with aplomb despite the best efforts of spilt slurry and wet mud from the fields.

Given the constraints of any large vehicle the driving style must adapt to suit and in the Tucson that is easy. The Hyundai actually makes you drive properly, like an advanced motorist should, looking and planning well ahead, braking and accelerating firmly but smoothly, straightening out the curves

where possible and picking the quickest line through them.

The height of the vehicle and huge swathes of glass allows peerless all-round vision. As a result progress is swift, safe and very smooth, which is just as well given the car is also packed to the gunwales with furniture.

The 2.0 diesel engine is an absolute peach. Would you believe it feels quicker off the mark than the Chrysler Crossfire sports car driven the week before? The common rail diesel churns out a healthy 111bhp and a lusty 245Nm of power in relentless waves from way down the rev range. It is smooth, refined and a joy to live with. It also sips rather than glugs at the fuel, even when maximum power is called upon. Ride is exemplary and the brakes are outstanding. The only small flies in the ointment are the gearbox and clutch, which could be slicker.

The Tucson sits in the range below the Santa Fe and is very much a shrunken version of that vehicle. It has the butch off-roader looks and proportions but also boasts a modern twist thanks to rounded edges and curvaceous lines.

Inside, the cabin is large and well appointed. It is neat and well laid out with an air of quality about the fixtures and fittings. A real plus is the design of the rear seats. Most cars nowadays allow you to drop the rear seats to increase the load bay. But seldom do you find the back seats actually lying flat and flush with the boot floor as the seats squabs get in the way. Not so the Tucson. The squabs hinge and shift forward in one fluid movement as the backs are lowered to fit snugly against the cushions. The result is a large and perfectly shaped area; just the thing for the kitchen table, chair bed and office chair to be easily slotted inside.

The Tucson is a tremendous addition to the Hyundai range, offering a good alternative to Toyota's RAV4, Nissan's X-Trail and Land Rover's Freelander and with seven models and prices ranging from £14,995 to £18,695, it is competitive too. In fact, I would go as far as to say, given the choice of tasty vehicles on the table, the Hyundai is definitely my cup of

NE christmas

Every picture tells a story

Glossy books with stunning photographs are always welcome as presents. JENNY NEEDHAM takes her pick

YORKSHIRE DALES LANDSCAPES by Dave Coates (Myriad, £16.99 www.myriadbooks.co.uk)

A STUNNING 128-page full colour hardback by leading regional photographer Dave Coates, the book is divided into five chapters, each of which looks at a particular dale. Born in Harrogate, Dave has lived in Northallerton for many years and is active in the local camera club. His interest in photography, coupled with his love of the great outdoors dates back to his teens when he first explored the rugged landscape of the Yorkshire Dales both on foot and by bike. He has been a serious photographer for more than 20 years and his photographs have won awards from the Royal Photographic Society.



FIVE THOUSAND DAYS: Press Photography in a Changing World (David & Charles, £29.99)

QUITE the most fascinating of the "coffee table" books to come our way in time for Christmas, this is a mesmerising record of the 5,000 days that have passed since the collapse of Communism in 1989. From front-lines to touch-lines, political downfalls to private triumphs, the British Press Photographers' Association has covered it all. Above, a pale Mrs Thatcher sits among the Tory Party grandees at the Party Conference in Bournemouth in 1994, while right, The Northern Echo's own Stuart Boulton caught this wonderful scene when Ronan Keating was signing T-shirts at TFM Radio in Thornaby on Teesside. Both are included in this visual feast, which has a foreword by Harold Evans, a former editor of The Northern Echo.



A HOME IN THE WORLD: HOUSES AND CULTURES (Abrams, £29.95)

WE tend to think of homes in terms of bricks and mortar, but throughout the world humans perch homes in trees and float them in lakes; some build them to last centuries, some make them portable enough to carry on their backs; they look for design inspiration in the landscape, in the human body and in flora and fauna. Through wonderful photographs, A Home In The World offers a fascinating perspective on home design by revealing how different cultures handle the essential task of building houses that reflect their ideals and values. At a time when home improvement is all the rage, the book sheds light on other, more global, meanings of the word "home".

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO ROSES by Roger Phillips and Martyn Rix (Macmillan, £20)

AN authoritative and personal guide to more than 850 roses, illustrated by pictures so stunning you can almost smell that perfume coming off the pages. Every rose is fully described in text detailing its origins, cultivation and alternative names and the book concludes with a striking visual presentation and advice on using roses in the garden.



Snowflake: Winter's Secret Beauty (Colin Baxter Photography, 01479 873999, £12.50)

HIGH above the earth a snowflake is born, but because it's so light, it may take hours to fall – finally landing where Patricia Rasmussen's amazing micro-photography can capture the fleeting beauty and complexity of nature's art. Her pictures are collected here, accompanied by words from scientist Kenneth Libbrecht, who chronicles the creation of the snow crystal, though even today we cannot fully explain why no two snowflakes are alike.



NE competition

TO help you in your quest to find Christmas presents for all the family, we have put together a collection of books worth more than £200 – fiction, non-fiction, adult and children's, audio, pictorial, serious stuff and stocking fillers. To stand a chance of winning, just tell us who wrote Jane Eyre. Answers on a postcard or the back of an envelope to Christmas Books Competition, Features, The Northern Echo, Priestgate, Darlington DL1 1NF. The closing date is Monday,

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