

My mother used to hurry to ring me early on December 22 to say, 'The days are getting longer now!'

For millennia, people have waited for the light at this darkest time of the year.

Not far from the farm in the Orkney Islands where my husband's family comes from stands Maeshowe, a Neolithic tomb. You enter it through a narrow, low, 30-foot-long passage, which is so angled that it catches the last rays of the sun as it sets behind the hills on the shortest day of the year. It beggars imagination to think how they worked this out, 5,000 years ago. And when you think how dark the world was in those days, thousands of years before electric light, you realise how precious daylight must have been to them.



Even if you visit the tomb at the right time of the year, you can never predict whether you will see it happen – even if it's a sunny day, a cloud may cover the sun at the crucial moment. But when John and I visited, we were lucky. It was an extraordinary experience to stand in the dark tomb watching as a bright ribbon of light slowly crept down the passage and then hit the wall at the back.

Christmas is nearly here, with its promise of new life and hope in dark days and dark times. The days are getting longer now.

Mary Lean