

Pontefract cakes

From the sweeties.net wiki

Pontefract cakes are small, roughly round black liquorice sweets, about 19 mm across and 4 mm thick, stamped with a picture of Pontefract Castle. They come from the West Yorkshire town of Pontefract, once the centre of English liquorice growing.

A town that grew liquorice

Liquorice was being grown in England by the 16th century, and by the 1600s Pontefract was known for it. Townspeople grew the plants on plots behind their houses: a map of the siege of Pontefract in 1648 shows liquorice growing on either side of Micklegate, between the market place and the castle. By 1780 English liquorice growing was concentrated almost entirely in Pontefract and around Godalming in Surrey.

From medicine to sweet

In the 18th century liquorice was a medicine, for both people and horses. The first Pontefract cakes were small black lozenges used to make liquorice water, stamped with the castle as a mark of quality. That stamp has been used on the cakes since at least 1612, when the initials GS, thought to be those of the local landowner Sir George Savile, appeared on it.

In 1760 a Pontefract apothecary, George Dunhill, added sugar to the medicinal liquorice, and the cake began its journey to the sweet jar. By the late 19th century demand had outgrown local supply, and the town's 12 liquorice makers were relying mainly on liquorice extract imported from Turkey.

The cakers

The castle design was once stamped by hand. The workers who did it were called cakers, and each could stamp upwards of 30,000 cakes a day. Today machines do the job. The stamp shows Pontefract Castle with a bird on top.

Sealing the first secret ballot

On 15 August 1872, Pontefract held the first parliamentary election in Britain to use a secret ballot. The ballot box was sealed with a Pontefract cake stamp from Frank Dunhill's liquorice factory, showing a castle and an owl.

Who makes them now

George Dunhill's business eventually became part of Haribo, which entered the British market in 1972 by buying Dunhill's and still makes Pontefract cakes in the town. The cakes were once called Pomfret cakes, after the old Norman name for Pontefract, and Elizabeth Gaskell mentions pomfret cakes in her 1866 novel

Wives and Daughters.

A word of warning

Liquorice contains glycyrrhizin, which can affect the body's potassium levels. In 2004 doctors warned against overdoing it after a 56 year old woman who ate about 200 g of Pontefract cakes a day was admitted to hospital with dangerously low potassium and muscle failure. That year the European Commission recommended limiting glycyrrhizic acid to 100 mg a day or less. A few cakes are fine; a bag a day is not. See [liquorice and blood pressure](#).

For a softer liquorice, try our [SW049](#).

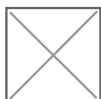
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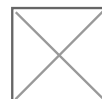
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