

Tom Smith and the Christmas cracker

From the sweeties.net wiki

Every Christmas cracker pulled at a British dinner table has a sweet in its family tree. The cracker began as a way to sell more sweets.

A boy in a sweet shop

Thomas Smith was born in 1823 in Newington, then in Surrey, the son of a grocer. In 1830, aged just seven, he started work in a London baker's and ornamental confectioner's shop, and over the years of his apprenticeship he became a master of his trade, trying out new designs in his spare time. In the 1840s he opened his own shop in Goswell Road, Clerkenwell, making wedding cakes and confectionery.

The French bonbon

In 1846 Smith visited Paris and came across the French bonbon: a sugared almond wrapped in a twist of tissue paper. He brought the idea back to London, and his version sold well, especially at Christmas. That twist of paper is where the shape of the cracker comes from.

Love notes, trinkets and a bang

When interest in his bonbons began to fade, Smith looked for ways to revive sales. First he put love messages inside the wrappers, a little like the messages in fortune cookies. Then he began replacing the sweet with small gifts such as fans, jewellery and trinkets.

The bang came later, and the story of how is part legend. It is often said Smith thought of it when he heard a log crackle on the fire. In fact, snapping novelties had been around for decades, since the chemist Edward Charles Howard discovered silver fulminate in 1800, and Smith bought the design and formula for his snap from a chemist named Tom Brown, who had worked for the firework makers Brocks. The paper wrapper had to be made bigger to hold the snap strip.

Bangs of Expectation

Tradition dates the cracker to 1847, and the Oxford English Dictionary records crackers being pulled from that year. Smith first called his invention Bangs of Expectation, and later the Cosaque, French for Cossack. But everyone called it a cracker, after the noise, and the name stuck as rival makers joined in. In the 1861 census Smith described himself as a manufacturing confectioner employing seven men and sixteen women. Tom Smith died in 1869, aged 46, at his home in City Road, London, and is buried in Highgate Cemetery.

Walter and the paper hat

The cracker as we know it owes a lot to Tom Smith's son Walter, one of three sons who took over the business. To make their crackers stand out from the competition, Walter added the paper hats and the gifts, sourcing little presents from across Europe, America and Japan. By the 1890s crackers were selling so well that the firm had 2,000 staff, many of them women, and moved to bigger premises in Finsbury Square, where a memorial fountain to Tom Smith and his family still stands. In 1953 Tom Smith and Company merged with Caley Crackers.

Crackers today

A cracker is a cardboard tube wrapped in decorated paper, like a giant sweet wrapper. Two people pull it, it splits unevenly with a bang from a friction strip, and in one version of the custom the person left with the bigger end keeps what is inside: usually a paper crown, a small toy or trinket, and a joke or motto. Crackers are part of Christmas in Britain, Ireland and Commonwealth countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa.

Cracker records

The biggest Christmas cracker on record was 63.1 metres long and 4 metres across, made by parents at Ley Hill School in Chesham, Buckinghamshire, on 20 December 2001. The longest cracker pulling chain, of 1,081 people, was set at the Harrodian School in London on 10 December 2015. In 2020 the comedian Alan Davies set a Guinness World Record while filming QI, pulling 35 crackers in 30 seconds, a record later beaten by Joel Corry with 41.

Taking crackers on a plane

Because crackers contain a small chemical snap strip, the rules on flying with them vary by airline and airport. On flights in and to the United States they are banned both in the cabin and in checked luggage, so check before you pack them.

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