

What is the oldest sweet in Britain?

From the sweeties.net wiki

There is no single oldest sweet in Britain, because the answer depends on what you count: the oldest kind of sweet, the oldest sweet still made in the same place, or the oldest sweets you can still buy by name. Here is the story in order.

Sweets that began as medicine

Sugar reached Europe as a preservative and a medicine, a use influenced by Arabic medicine. Sugarcane had been known in Europe since Roman times, but honey was the usual sweetener. Sugar became more common in Europe from the 1420s, when Portuguese colonies began growing sugarcane, and its price dropped sharply in the mid 16th century once imports from the New World took over.

That cheap sugar had a terrible cost. It was grown on plantations worked by enslaved Africans, and the Atlantic slave trade fuelled sugar imports into England until the trade was abolished in 1807.

In Renaissance England, the main sellers of sugary preparations were apothecaries, the chemists of the day, until confectioners began selling sugar as a food later in the period. Apothecaries sold lozenges, floral sugars and sticks of pulled sugar called alphenics, which were taken for coughs and are the precursors of modern cough drops.

Comfits: among the very first

The comfit is one of the first confections of all. A comfit was a spice, seed or nut coated with layers of sugar. It began in the Middle East as a medicine for indigestion, reached Europe through Italian merchants, and became the main speciality of confectioners in Renaissance England. The most popular comfits were coated caraway, aniseed, fennel and coriander seeds, and almonds.

A late medieval recipe for comfits is based on anise seeds, and these aniseed comfits seem to be a precursor of the modern aniseed ball: see [aniseed balls](#) Sugared almonds are comfits too. They are thought to descend from the honey coated almonds eaten in ancient Rome, and when sugar became more readily available in the 15th century, the nuts were coated in sugar instead.

Marzipan, made from almond paste, rosewater and sugar, was another Renaissance sweet. Its original English name was marchpane, a word that appears in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

The oldest sweet still made in the same town

Pontefract cakes have one of the strongest claims. By the 16th century liquorice was grown in England, and William Camden's *Britannia* of 1607 noted it at Pontefract in Yorkshire. The small black cakes were at first a liquorice medicine, stamped with the town's castle emblem to show their quality. That stamp has been used

on Pontefract cakes since 1612, when it carried the initials GS, thought to be those of Sir George Savile, a major local landowner. Liquorice was only used widely for confectionery in the 19th century: see [Pontefract cakes](#)

Old sweets with long histories

Several familiar sweets go back a long way.

- **Everton toffee** was made in Everton village, now part of Liverpool, by Molly Bushell in the 18th century, according to later Liverpool newspapers.
- **Humbugs** are recorded from as early as the 1820s: see [humbugs](#)
- **Jelly Babies** were invented in 1864, the story goes, by an Austrian immigrant working at Fryers of Lancashire, and were first sold as Unclaimed Babies.
- **Kendal Mint Cake** dates from 1869, when, legend has it, Joseph Wiper left a batch of glacier mint mixture overnight and found it had turned cloudy and set.

For the oldest chocolate, see [what is the oldest chocolate bar in the UK?](#)

And the oldest sweet shop

The Oldest Sweet Shop in Pateley Bridge, North Yorkshire, has traded since 1827 in a building dating from 1661: see [the oldest sweet shop in England](#)

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