

What were sweets called in Victorian times?

From the sweeties.net wiki

The Victorians loved sweets, but many of the names they used have faded, and some that survive meant something different then. Here is the Victorian sweet vocabulary, taken from the writers and records of the time.

The general words

The old word for a sweet was sweetmeat, from Old English swete mete, sweet food. Sweets, meaning individual sweets, is recorded from 1851, and in Scotland sweeties has been used since at least 1721: see [why do the British call them sweets?](#)

On the streets of London, sweets were sweet stuff. Henry Mayhew, who interviewed London's street traders for London Labour and the London Poor in 1851, found that sellers described themselves by what they sold, so a man who sold sweets was simply a sweet stuff. Mayhew counted about 200 sweet stuff sellers in London, selling rocks, candies and hardbakes at a halfpenny an ounce, and he estimated that Londoners bought nearly two and a half million halfpenny worths a year in the streets.

There were regional words too. In Yorkshire, sweets are spice, and a sweet shop is a spice shop. In the North East, they are kets: see [why are sweets called ket?](#)

The sweets in the window

In 1825, twelve years before Victoria came to the throne, the writer William Hone described confectioners polishing their tall glass jars for Twelfth Day, filled with peppermint drops, elecampane, sugar sticks, hardbake, brandy balls and bullseyes, alongside fresh lollipops.

Several of these names turn up again in Victorian writing:

- **Hardbake** was a hard sweet of boiled brown sugar or treacle with almonds, flavoured with orange or lemon juice. Dickens has a washerwoman selling it from her parlour window in David Copperfield, published in 1850, and in Thackeray's Vanity Fair of 1848, two characters share a taste for hardbake and raspberry tarts.
- **Brandy balls** were boiled sweets like bullseyes, flavoured with peppermint, cinnamon and other spices. H. Rider Haggard mentions them in his 1887 novel She.
- **Bullseyes** and **humbugs** were striped boiled sweets, often peppermint. Humbugs are recorded from as early as the 1820s: see [humbugs](#)
- **Elecampane** shares its name with a tall herb whose roots have been used as a medicine.

- **Peppermint drops** and **lozenges** were everyday sweets. Mayhew lists lozenges, and also cough drops and horehound, among the sweet things sold on the streets.

Words that have changed

Some Victorian sweet words meant something different from today.

- **Lollipops** were not on sticks. The word, recorded from 1784 as lolly pops, meant a soft, coarse sweetmeat of treacle and sugar, usually with butter and flour. The sense of a hard sweet on a stick only came in the 1920s. Lolly, short for lollipop, is recorded from 1854.
- **Toffee** was still settling its spelling. It was written tuffy or toughy in 1825, as a southern variant of taffy, and the modern spelling is recorded by 1843.
- **Sherbet** could mean a drink. In 1816 John Richards of the Strand, London, sold an effervescent sherbet powder to be mixed with water, and Mayhew wrote about street sellers of ginger beer, sherbet and lemonade.

The dark side

Victorian sweets were not always what they seemed. Between 1850 and 1856 the chemist Arthur Hill Hassall examined 3,000 samples of food and found that 65 per cent contained adulterants. Adulterators used nicknames for their cheap fillers, such as daff, duff, multum and, in Bradford, daft.

Sugar was relatively expensive, so the Bradford sweet maker Joseph Neal replaced some of it with powdered gypsum, which he called daft. In 1858 Neal sent his lodger to buy more, and a druggist's assistant sold him arsenic trioxide by mistake. The peppermint lozenges made with it were sold by a stallholder known as Humbug Billy. Around 20 people died and more than 200 were poisoned: see [the Bradford sweets poisoning of 1858](#)

For how Victorian sweets were weighed and sold, see [what is a quarter of sweets?](#)

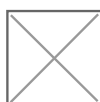
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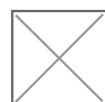
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