

The Bradford sweets poisoning of 1858

From the sweeties.net wiki

In the autumn of 1858, a batch of peppermint lozenges made in Bradford was accidentally made with arsenic. Around 20 people died, many of them children, and more than 200 were made ill. The case helped change the law on what could be put in food.

A trick called daff

Food adulteration was common in Victorian Britain. Between 1850 and 1856 the chemist Arthur Hill Hassall examined 3,000 samples of food and found adulterants in 65 per cent of them. Sugar was expensive, at about 6½d a pound, while cheap fillers cost about ½d, and traders gave them nicknames such as daff, duff, multum and, in Bradford, daft: see [what were sweets called in Victorian times?](#)

Joseph Neal made sweets in Stone Street, Bradford. His peppermint lozenges were made by mixing peppermint oil into a paste of sugar, water and gum, drying it on boards and cutting it into lozenges, and he replaced some of the sugar with powdered gypsum.

The wrong barrel

In the week before the Saturday market, Neal ran out of his filler and sent his lodger, James Archer, to a druggist in Shipley, Charles Hodgson. Hodgson was ill in bed, and his new assistant, William Goddard, was told the daft was in a barrel in the attic. There were two identical barrels. Goddard took 12 pounds of powder from the one that held arsenic trioxide, which was labelled only on its base.

The sweet maker James Appleton mixed the lozenges and noticed the mixture felt different, and he fell ill while he worked. The finished sweets were darker than usual.

Humbug Billy's stall

The lozenges were sold by William Hardaker, known to locals as Humbug Billy, from his stall in Bradford's Greenmarket. He collected 40 pounds of them on 30 October 1858, noticed the odd colour, and bargained a discount. By the time the stall closed that night, about a thousand sweets had been sold, and Hardaker himself had been taken ill.

A town in panic

The first deaths, on the Sunday morning, were put down to cholera, whose symptoms were similar. A police constable made the link to the sweets and seized the remaining stock. The chief constable sent bellmen round the town and had warning notices printed overnight. An analytical chemist later found up to 16 grains of arsenic in a single lozenge, when about 4½ grains could kill an adult. In the end around 20 or 21 people

died, many of them children. Punch magazine responded with a cartoon called The Great Lozenge Maker.

No one to blame

Neal, Goddard and Hodgson were sent to the York assizes charged with manslaughter. The judge dismissed the cases against Neal and Goddard, and Hodgson's trial ended with a directed verdict of not guilty. All three walked free.

What changed

The deaths led to the Adulteration of Food or Drink Act 1860, although historians have called it weak: it only punished selling adulterated food as pure, and the fine was just £5. The case was also a factor in the passage of the Pharmacy Act 1868. For more on how sweets were once coloured with dangerous minerals, see [how are sweets coloured?](#), and for the humbug itself, see [humbugs](#).

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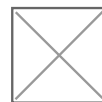
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