

# How sugar came to Britain

From the sweeties.net wiki

Sugar is so ordinary now that it is hard to imagine it as a luxury. But for centuries it was rare and costly in Britain, sold by apothecaries as a medicine as much as a treat.

## From the crusades

Sugar was first made from sugar cane in Asia. Crusaders brought it back to Europe after their campaigns in the Holy Land, where they met caravans carrying sweet salt. Early in the 12th century the Republic of Venice set up estates near Tyre to produce sugar for export, and by the 15th century Venice was Europe's chief sugar refining and trading centre. Until then, honey had been the only sweetener most people knew.

## A spice and a medicine

By the end of the Middle Ages sugar was known across Europe, but it was very expensive and counted as a fine spice. Physicians of the time thought it was a warm food, good for the stomach, for colds and for the lungs. In Renaissance England, sugar was used in preserves, syrups and marchpane, and the comfit, a seed or nut coated in sugar, was a speciality of confectioners and sold by apothecaries too: see [what is the oldest sweet in Britain?](#)

## Cheap sugar, and its cost

From about 1500, new technology and sugar from the Americas began to turn sugar from a spice into a cheap bulk commodity. Plantations in the Caribbean, worked by enslaved Africans, grew enormous amounts of cane, and in Barbados and the British Leeward Islands sugar made up 93 and 97 per cent of exports. As production rose, prices in Europe fell. Great Britain ate five times as much sugar in 1770 as in 1710, and by the 18th century people of every class were buying it: see [how is sugar made from sugar cane?](#)

At first most sugar in Britain went into tea, which became a daily habit for working people as well as the wealthy. Later, sweets and chocolate took a growing share. Sugar was sold as a sugarloaf, a hard cone, and people broke off pieces with sugar nips, a tool like a pair of pliers.

## Faster and cheaper refining

In 1813 the British chemist Edward Charles Howard invented a way of boiling sugar in a closed pan, heated by steam and under partial vacuum. Because water boils at a lower temperature at reduced pressure, it saved fuel and lost less sugar to caramelising, and vacuum pans are still used to crystallise sugar today.

## Britain grows its own

Sugar beet came late to Britain. A Beetroot Sugar Association was founded in 1832, but British beet did not take off, and at the end of the 19th century 46 per cent of British sugar came from Germany and Austria, where beet sugar was booming. A British Sugar Beet Society was set up in 1915, a 1925 act of parliament subsidised the industry, and by 1930 there were 17 beet sugar factories in England and one in Scotland. By 1935, home grown sugar made up 27.6 per cent of what Britain ate. Today, home grown beet supplies just over half of the sugar eaten in the UK: see [how is sugar made from sugar beet?](#)

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