

A short history of sweets in Britain

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Sweets in Britain began as medicine and luxury, became an everyday treat, and passed through rationing to the pick and mix of today. This is the story in brief, with links to the full articles.

Medieval: a costly spice

Sugar reached Europe in the Middle Ages, brought back by crusaders and traded through Venice. In Britain it was an expensive fine spice, and physicians prescribed it as a medicine: see [how sugar came to Britain](#)

1500s and 1600s: comfits and marchpane

In Renaissance England, confectioners and apothecaries sold comfits, seeds, spices and nuts coated in layers of sugar, along with preserves, syrups and marchpane, an old name for marzipan. From about 1500, sugar from the Americas began to make sugar cheaper, and syrups and preserves spread beyond the rich: see [what is the oldest sweet in Britain?](#)

1700s: sugar for everyone

Caribbean plantations, built on the labour of enslaved people, made sugar cheap, and Britain ate five times as much in 1770 as in 1710. In Pontefract, liquorice was a medicine sold as small stamped cakes, and in 1760 the apothecary George Dunhill added sugar: see [the history of liquorice in Pontefract](#)

1800s: boiled sweets and the first bars

In 19th century England, old favourites such as barley sugar gave way to an array of new sugar sweets in a wide variety of flavours. Humbugs are recorded from the 1820s, and Doncaster butterscotch was being sold by 1851: see [humbugs](#) and [butterscotch](#). Food was often adulterated, and in 1858 peppermint lozenges made with arsenic by mistake killed around 20 people in Bradford: see [the Bradford sweets poisoning of 1858](#). Chocolate changed too. Fry's of Bristol made what is often called the first chocolate bar in 1847, and Fry's Chocolate Cream followed in 1866: see [what is the oldest chocolate bar in the UK?](#)

Early 1900s: pick and mix and chocolate bars

The first British Woolworths opened in Liverpool in 1909, selling sweets at tuppence a quarter pound, and its counter became known as pic'n'mix: see [Woolworths pick and mix, the story](#). The Mars bar was invented in Slough in 1932: see [Forrest Mars and the Mars bar](#)

1942 to 1953: rationing

Sweets were rationed from 26 July 1942, starting at 2 oz a week, and rationing did not finally end until February 1953: see [sweet rationing in Britain](#)

Late 1900s to today

Loose sweets went metric in 2000, Woolworths closed its British shops in January 2009, and in October 2022 new rules stopped larger shops in England from placing less healthy sweets by checkouts: see [the history of pick and mix](#) and [why sweets were moved away from the checkout](#)

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