



Hansel and Gretel





# The stuff of fairy tales

Gingerbread will forever be associated with that little house in the woods, but it was also a firm favourite with Elizabeth I. Inspired by a collection of extravagant moulds, Rosie Goodwin of the Ryedale Folk Museum explores the origins of a festive favourite

**A**T its best, gingerbread is still regarded as the most Christmassy of treats—decorative domiciles are all the rage at this time of year, instigated by Victorian interest in the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel. But how did this foodstuff, neither quite biscuit nor fully cake, develop its association with the festive season, long before the notion of creating a gingerbread cottage caught on?

The short answer is that it was expensive. In medieval Europe, the cost of the exotic ingredients from the burgeoning spice trade—including (depending on the recipe) ginger, cinnamon, pepper and saffron—all positioned gingerbread beyond the reach of the everyday consumer, establishing its reputation as an elite and luxurious item. When it became more popularly consumed, it was for a suitably extravagant occasion, such as Christmas. The ‘heat’ of the spices may also have contributed to the baked good being viewed as a warming winter treat.

The impression given off by the gingerbread moulds in the Harrison Collection at Ryedale Folk Museum, on the edge of the North York Moors, is certainly one of decadence and wealth. Their sheer size speaks of opulence and things done on a grand scale. The largest is a pair of spectacular Dutch figures, several feet tall and with intricate carved designs, which would have been further embellished with edible gold leaf and icings. They are a long way from the childish, anthropomorphic figures with raisins or sweets for eyes more readily available today.

A likely interpretation is that the figures were created for a wedding feast: at the feet of the ‘wife’ is a small plant, starting from the ground, with a larger, healthy shoot growing beneath the ‘husband’, a symbol of marital fertility to which their extended index fingers appear to point. The connection with fertility and matrimony existed in England, too, where gingerbread men were thought to signify a girl’s future husband.

A wedding is an obvious cause for extravagance and celebration, but any wealthy Tudor host would have wished to convey their generosity to banqueting guests, whatever the occasion. This was a period with well-established customs and practices regarding hospitality that governed the behaviour of all classes of society, from the poorest to the elite and including royalty. Indeed, although ostentatious gingerbread displays were fashionable across Europe, it’s Elizabeth I who is generally credited as the woman behind the first gingerbread person—she reputedly curried favour with visiting dignitaries by requesting that the treats be made in their likeness.

The opulent gingerbread presented to Elizabeth’s guests, however, would have tasted very different from the biscuit we know today. During Tudor times, it was still made with breadcrumbs (swapped later for flour), mixed into a paste with honey and

a variety of spices, which differed according to the town or village in which each specialist variety was made. In the North York Moors, gingerbread was also commonly known as pepper cake, probably because of the addition of coriander. A traditional recipe from the moorland village of Kirkbymoorside includes allspice, caraway and ground cinnamon seeds—how exotic that gingerbread must have seemed. Consequently, it was not only highly esteemed, but also romanticised, as indicated when the comic figure of Costard in Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost* declares: ‘An I had but one penny in the world, thou shouldst/have it to buy gingerbread.’

**‘The impression is one of decadence and wealth, of things done on a grand scale’**



*Facing page: Irresistible: Hansel and Gretel defy danger for a taste. Above: A mould of 1797 designed to re-create George III’s Royal Arms by Essex baker John Mannall*

Bakers sought favour and prestige through their produce, with gingerbread often functioning symbolically (showing saints, for example) and even patriotically. Coats of arms feature heavily in existing historic moulds: Ryedale Folk Museum cares for those used by local Kirkbymoorside baker Sonley’s, including one bearing its coat of arms, as well as the baker’s cart that would have been taken around the villages to deliver the treats. Within the museum’s Harrison Collection, a commemorative George III Royal Arms from 1797 bears the motto ‘Long Live [the] King’—dating from a decade that saw Britain at war with republican France, it is believed to have been used by 18th-century gingerbread baker John Mannall in the premises he shared with his father-in-law in Colchester.

Representations of royalty in gingerbread figures may have served as visual storyboards, sharing the important news of the time, but there were more playful examples, ➤





Taste of life: moulds at Ryedale Folk Museum include intricate figures that may represent real people, saints or even Punch and Judy

too, such as an instantly recognisable Punch and Judy in the collection, complete with amusing beak-like noses and protruding chins. To ensure the details of the designs were fully realised, the mixture would have been applied to the moulds laboriously by hand, with strong pressure applied evenly.

With their large size and scale, these traditional gingerbread 'pictures' could not have maintained their shape had the final

product been the same texture as the tiny gingerbread men eaten by children today. They needed to be more chewy and less brittle—essentially, less inclined to snapping or breaking. This leads nicely to the ultimate question: was it cake, biscuit or bread?

## ‘Bakers sought favour and prestige, with gingerbread often used symbolically’

The 'bread' is easy to eliminate. *Gingerbras*, the original name, translates literally from the Old French to mean 'preserved ginger'—it seems to be only through the idiosyncrasies of pronunciation that it became known as gingerbread. Originally, it was more of a chewy biscuit, but, with time and the addition of flour, the texture varied according to geography, so some regions do certainly produce a cake.

The renowned Victorian bakery Botham's of Whitby still creates an almost unique gingerbread, its heritage ginger loaf. This 'block' product is

peculiar to the town and, indeed, most peculiar in that it looks like a loaf cake, but inside is hard, more like a biscuit. In true Yorkshire style, it is best served with a piece of cheese, the gingerbread thinly sliced and buttered—the website urges patrons not to return the product believing it to have 'gone stale'. Another Victorian Whitby bakery, Ditchburn's (which closed in 1952), used black treacle and fruit peel for its own speciality product.

In *History of Whitby*, published in 1817, the Revd George Young recorded that the seaside town alone produced 12 tons of gingerbread annually; other sources suggest some five tons of this were made specifically for Christmas—a popular export from the town that was ended by the Second World War. From Whitby, gingerbread found its way across the globe, packed in tea chests and sent abroad to ships' captains, but it was also increasingly consumed by local residents as ginger, spices and even sugar became more readily available. Gingerbread's connotations of prestige and exclusivity eventually faded, of course, but only once it was firmly established as a true Christmas treat.

Ryedale Folk Museum, Hutton-le-Hole, North Yorkshire (01751 417367; [www.ryedalefolkmuseum.co.uk](http://www.ryedalefolkmuseum.co.uk))

Too good to eat: gingerbread offers endless scope for the imagination

