



# Pontefract Cakes

No one is sure how Liquorice first arrived in Britain. The Romans could have brought it into the Country, as it grew in abundance in Europe. It could have been brought back from the Crusades by members of the De Lacy family, who built Pontefract Castle. Or Monks, who were famous for their medicines, could have brought it to Pontefract. As the Benedictine monks had been in Pontefract from 1090, it is likely they would have grown Liquorice for its therapeutic properties in the Monastery grounds from around the Middle Ages.

The first mention of Pontefract and Liquorice was in the 15,00's. The 17th century Pontefract Siege Plans shows a Liquorice Garth (field) between the Castle and Siege works. The Parliamentarian army dug the siege works. In 1750 there were 47 Liquorice Growers in Pontefract.



Pontefract's rich loamy soil and deep topsoil made it perfect for growing Liquorice.

After the Castle was razed to the ground in 1649 at the request of the townspeople, the land inside was used for Market Gardens, and records show Liquorice was grown there.

The Dunhill family rented land in the Castle to grow Liquorice, around 1720. George Dunhill, who became a chemist, claims to have made the first Liquorice Confectionery, by adding sugar in 1760.

It became a booming cottage industry, with families contracted to sweet firms. They soaked the roots in hot water in their homes; having passed it through their household mangles, they then boiled the Liquor on the kitchen cooking range. At harvest time all the family became involved, with the men digging up the roots and the women and children picking it.

In 1872 Pontefract became the first Town to hold a secret ballot. But it obviously wasn't looked on too highly by some, as instead of the wax seal being that of the Borough of Pontefract, they had used a Pontefract Cake stamp, as pictures show the emblem of Frank Dunhill's liquorice factory on the top.

By the 1920's Pontefract had at least 10 Liquorice Factories. With 70% of the labour force being women. They were cheaper labour than the men, and by now many of the men folk where down the Pit. In the 1930s at a Wilkinson Christmas dance, they held a fancy dress competition and asked volunteers to dress up in Liquorice as a way of advertising it. There is a wonderful picture of Emily Money dressed from head to toe in Liquorice. In 2004 the Liquorice Festival revived this idea and held a live catwalk fashion show, where all the garments and accessories were made from Liquorice.

By the 1940s Pontefract was producing 400 tons of Liquorice per week, and exporting it all over the world. But as land use came under pressure, a crop that took so long to mature became less attractive. Supply soon outstripped demand and Liquorice started to be imported from Spain and later from Turkey.

**Photo Right:  
Long before machines took over the job,  
every one of the Pontefract Cakes  
would have to be stamped by hand**



**Pontefract has two Sweet Factories remaining;**

One being Monkhill Confectionery, formerly know as Wilkinsons, They are a subsidiary of Cadbury Trebor Bassett and continue to preserve a small garden of Liquorice Plants. Haribo, being the other one, formerly the Dunhill factory, having been bought by the German Company Haribo in the 1990's.

**Pontefract Liquorice Festival**

In the year 2000 the Pontefract Liquorice Festival, which was turned into a Trust in 2003, started working to revive Pontefract's rich Liquorice history, with the aim to once again make it a world centre of Liquorice.



## **Pontefract Cakes - Did you Know ?**

- There are many different varieties of Liquorice. From the very sweet to a sharp almost peppery flavour. If you don't like one, you can try another.
- Liquorice was found in the tombs of ancient Egyptian Pharaohs.
- Recently a sample of historic Liquorice from 756 A.D. was analyzed and found to still have active principles.
- Native Americans used it to alleviate pain in difficult childbirth.
- Liquorice has been a mainstay of traditional Chinese Medicine for over 3,000 years.
- In Buddhist religion an infusion of the Liquorice root is used to ceremonially bath the statue of the Buddha on the morning of his birthday, the eighth day of the eighth-month.
- Liquorice is 50 times sweeter than sugar, but only contains 100 calories, per ounce and is widely used in the food industry.
- Miners Sucked Liquorice Wafers whilst down the pit to quench their thirst.
- The waste root of Liquorice is crushed and made into, chemical wood pulp, pressed into boards and made into boxes; it is also incorporated into Mushroom Pulp.
- Liquorice is one of the most effective flavourings in Cigarettes greatly enhancing the quality of the final product.
- According to the British Association of Tobacco Manufacturers, quality flavourings play a vital role in masking the bad taste of low quality tobacco, thus making it a more pleasurable experience.
- During the Second World War women would lick the red Liquorice Comforts sweet and rub the red colouring onto their lip as a lipstick substitute.
- Liquorice is used by Brewers, in Stout, Porter and Beer to give it thickness and blackness.
- Liquorice can be found in many skin care products.

**It is highly likely that you eat or use Liquorice  
in one form or another every day of your life !**