

Liquorice in Pontefract

It is not known who brought liquorice to Pontefract, but it was either crusaders returning from their campaigns or more likely Dominican monks in the 14th century who settled at Pontefract Priory close to the Castle.

The plant needs deep soil to grow because the roots can run to 4 feet in length, and the soft loam of Pontefract proved to be perfect. They didn't flower in the colder English climate, but that didn't matter because it was the root of the plant that provided what was needed.

The sap was extracted from the roots of the plant and used medicinally by the monks along with other herbs for easing coughs and stomach complaints.

By 1614 the Extract of Liquorice was being formed into small lozenges and Sir George Saville applied a small stamp to each round 'cake'.

This was an early form of what would become the famous Pontefract Cakes, although they were still used as a medicine.

Large areas of the town and surrounding areas were growing liquorice. Even the castle yard was turned over to its cultivation after the Civil War.

It was not until 1760 that a Pontefract apothecary, George Dunhill, hit upon the idea of adding sugar to the recipe and began to produce 'Pomfret Cakes' commercially as a 'sweet'. Within a few years Dunhill's became one of the most well-known English manufacturers of liquorice, and Pontefract (as well as Pomfret) would become inextricably linked with the product.



More liquorice factories started business in the nineteenth century, resulting in a shortage of the raw material grown locally, production of which was on the decline anyway. Most of the liquorice fields had gone by the end of the 19th century although it was still grown at Stump Cross in Pontefract until the mid-20th century.

The last liquorice harvest in Pontefract took place sometime in the 1960s or early 1970s.



The lack of home grown liquorice meant that it had to be imported, firstly from Spain (which is the origin of the local nickname for liquorice, 'Spanish'), and later from Italy and Turkey. At one time there were 13 liquorice factories in the town, there are now only two:

- 1) Haribo (formerly Dunhills)
- 2) Tangerine (formerly Monkhill Confectionery, a division of Cadbury Trebor Bassett)

Other liquorice growing and refining companies once active in Pontefract:

- 1) John Hillaby, Lion Liquorice Works
- 2) Robinson and Wordsworth
- 3) Sampson and Gundill
- 4) W.R. Wilkinson and Co. Ltd
- 5) J.H. Addingley and Sons
- 6) R. Austerbury and Co
- 7) Ewbanks Ltd
- 8) Wroe's

Another local company not in Pontefract, but just down the road:

- 1) Bellamy's Confectionery, Castleford

