



*In 1933 Huntley & Palmers launched a large-scale promotion of Ginger Nut biscuits and this tin was probably part of that campaign. The John Ginger character helped to make Ginger Nuts one of the firm's top sellers. © Reading Borough Council (Reading Museum Service).*

## BISCUITS, WAFERS & GRIDDLE CAKES

Britain has long been a nation of tea drinkers. For many people a cup of tea is incomplete without a biscuit sidekick. Many of our much loved biscuit varieties like shortbread and digestives are based on recipes formerly baked in the home. The word 'biscuit' has been adopted from the French for 'twice cooked'.<sup>1</sup> Sixteenth-century physician Andrew Boorde believed they could be very nourishing if made with fine flour.<sup>2</sup> The varieties cooked in this period ranged from mass-produced 'hardtack' or ship's biscuits given to soldiers and sailors, to finer varieties which included eggs, sugar, spices and rosewater.<sup>3</sup> That gingerbread evolved into a more crisp incarnation should therefore come as no surprise.

Today, the most famous ginger biscuit in Britain is the Ginger Nut. Although sales of Ginger Nuts have fallen in recent years they remain one of McVities most popular every day biscuits.<sup>4</sup> The modern recipe is based on a mixture of golden syrup and granulated sugar, combined with flour, butter and ginger. The resulting biscuit is hard and spicy, leading the Ginger Nut to be described as the 'Chicken Vindaloo of the biscuit world'.<sup>5</sup> Its firm nature does make it great for dunking in a cup of tea, which may explain why the Ginger Nut's popularity has endured.

Mass production of biscuits in the nineteenth century came about as a consequence of the industrialisation of food production. Quaker businessman Joseph Huntley was one of the first manufacturers to exploit these technological advances at his bakery on London Street in Reading. By the late 1830s Huntley & Palmers were producing around twenty different kinds of biscuit (this would rise to 400 products by 1900). Huntley & Palmers' aim was to produce biscuits to suit every taste and budget, from fancy Rout Cakes at two shillings per pound to the more moderately priced Ginger Nut at a mere eight pence per pound.<sup>6</sup> A kind warder at Reading Gaol (which was situated close to the Huntley & Palmers factory) smuggled in a few Ginger Nuts on occasion for inmate Oscar Wilde to calm the author's temperamental stomach.<sup>7</sup>

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Huntley & Palmers cannot be given credit for inventing the Ginger Nut. Recipes for Gingerbread Nuts can be found in eighteenth-century – and no doubt earlier – cookery books, such as Hannah Glasse's *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*.<sup>8</sup> They have been described as 'travelling biscuits',<sup>9</sup> possibly due to their durable nature or the fact that ginger was believed to be good for digestion. The 'nut' element describes the shape rather than one of the ingredients:

### GINGERBREAD NUTS

To two pounds of sifted Flour, put two pounds of Treacle, three quarters of a pound of Moist Sugar, half a pound of Candied Orange-peel cut small, one ounce and a half of ground Ginger, one ounce of ground Caraways, and three quarters of a pound of Butter oiled: mix all well together, and set it by some time – then roll it out in pieces about the size of a walnut – lay them in rows on a baking-plate; press them flat with the hand, and bake them in a slow oven about ten minutes.<sup>10</sup>

Ginger Nuts would remain one of Huntley & Palmers most popular biscuits into the twentieth century. In 1933 Huntley & Palmers launched a sales promotion featuring the character John Ginger, clad as a traditional seventeenth-century Quaker complete with conical brimmed hat, designed to appeal to children. The John Ginger advertisements for Ginger Nuts often included the tag line 'There are none so good'. His image was still being used as a promotional tool right into the late twentieth century, appearing on mugs in New Zealand demonstrating the nation's nostalgia for interwar design and products.<sup>11</sup>

Historical gingerbread nut recipes produce a rather unforgivingly tough biscuit which challenges even the strongest of teeth. Some liberties have therefore been taken when reproducing them here to make them more palatable to modern tastes.

### A Note On Baking Biscuits

Don't be tempted to cook the biscuits for much longer than the time stated in each recipe. Most biscuits will still be a little soft when they

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come out of the oven but will harden as they cool on the baking sheet. Always leave them on the baking sheet for a few minutes to do this before transferring the biscuits to a wire rack. The exceptions to this rule are Brandy Snaps and Fairy Gingerbread Wafers, as they need to be shaped while they are warm and pliable. Most of these biscuits will store reasonably well in an airtight container.

### ORMSKIRK GINGERBREAD<sup>12</sup>

During the eighteenth century the Liverpool to Preston stagecoach would stop at the Talbot Inn in Ormskirk to allow its passengers to stretch their legs. On alighting the coach the travellers would be offered packets of gingerbread to buy. Many said this was the best gingerbread they had ever eaten.

Ingredients (Makes around 12 biscuits)

55 g / 2 oz golden syrup

55 g / 2 oz treacle

110 g / 4 oz soft unsalted butter

110 g / 4 oz soft dark brown sugar

2 tsp ground ginger

½ tsp ground cinnamon

Finely grated zest of 1 large lemon or 2 small lemons

275 g / 10 oz plain flour

### Method

1. Preheat the oven to 180 °C. Line a good sized baking sheet with non-stick baking paper or a non-stick silicone liner.
2. Gently warm the syrup and treacle together in a small saucepan or for a short while in a microwave.
3. Cream the butter and sugar together in a large bowl. Add the warm treacle and syrup to the bowl then add the spices, zest and flour.
4. Bring the dough together then roll out on a lightly floured board to a thickness of 5 mm. Using a 7.5 cm / 3 in biscuit cutter stamp out rounds from the dough, re-rolling the scraps.
5. Place on the prepared baking sheet and cook for 12–15 minutes.





*From front to back: Chocolate Orange Gingerbread, White Buttons and Ormskirk Gingerbread.*

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### WHITE BUTTONS

This is one of the many gingerbreads that used to be sold at county fairs, the most famous of which comes from Grantham in Lincolnshire. The Grantham gingerbread has a dome shape and is almost hollow inside. However, I prefer this crazed version (caused by the dough rising and falling in the oven) from Norfolk.<sup>13</sup> Frederick Vine<sup>14</sup> includes nutmeg in his version which I have also included here although you can omit it if you prefer.

Ingredients (Makes around 24 biscuits)

250 g / 9 oz plain flour

3 tsp ground ginger

¼ tsp ground nutmeg (optional)

½ tsp bicarbonate of soda

250 g / 9 oz caster sugar plus 25 g / 1 oz extra

100 g / 4 oz cold unsalted butter, cubed

1 large egg, beaten

Up to 2 tbsp whole milk

#### Method

1. Sieve the flour, ginger, nutmeg (if using) and bicarbonate of soda into a bowl then stir in the 250 g / 9 oz caster sugar.
2. Rub the butter into the flour and sugar. Add the beaten egg and enough milk to bring the mixture together as a firm, but slightly sticky dough.
3. Divide the dough into 24 pieces then roll into little balls (they should weigh around 25 g / 1 oz each). Roll each ball in the extra caster sugar. Place on a tray and refrigerate for at least one hour or longer. You can freeze the balls on a clingfilm lined at this point to cook later from frozen.
4. Preheat the oven to 150 °C. You will need to cook these biscuits in batches as they spread considerably while they are baking. Place some of the balls on a baking sheet lined with silicone or greaseproof paper ensuring they are well spaced. Bake for around 12–15 minutes or until the buttons are a pale fawn colour. If cooking from frozen, bake the biscuits for 15–18 minutes.

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### MRS DIXON'S HUNTING NUTS<sup>15</sup>

Mary Anne Dixon was the second wife of the Reverend W. H. Dixon who became the rural dean of York in 1842, a decade or so after his wedding. Mary Anne appears to have inherited a book of brewing notes from her mother which includes worm medicine, gout cordial and various dyes. Her book also includes recipes such as the one below, which is a gingerbread nut in everything but name. The editors of this collection of household recipes refer to these small biscuits as being particularly suited to travelling because they don't crumble, and add that the hunting nuts are 'liked by horses and hounds'. They're very much liked by people too.

Ingredients (Makes 12–14 small biscuits)

25 g / 1 oz sugar  
75 g / 3 oz treacle  
65 g / 2 ⅓ oz butter  
1½ tsp ground ginger  
½ tsp caraway seeds  
Pinch ground cloves  
½ tsp ground cinnamon  
125 g / 4 ½ oz flour  
¼ tsp bicarbonate of soda  
40 g / 1 ½ oz demerara sugar

#### Method

1. Put the sugar, treacle and butter in a saucepan along with the spices. Heat the mixture until the butter has melted and the treacle is liquid but do not boil. Allow to cool until it is lukewarm.
2. Mix the flour and bicarbonate of soda thoroughly into the mixture. Cover the bowl and place in the fridge for at least an hour (longer is fine).
3. Preheat the oven to 180 °C. Line a good sized baking sheet with non-stick baking paper or a non-stick silicone liner.
4. Roll the dough into walnut-size balls then roll each ball in the Demerara sugar. This adds a good crunch to the outside of the biscuit but you can skip this phase or do half rolled in sugar and leave half plain.





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5. Place on the baking tray and cook for 10 minutes. They will have spread a little but should be little cracked domes.

## CHOCOLATE ORANGE GINGERBREAD

The ‘germ’ of inspiration for this comes from the esteemed Regency cook Dr William Kitchiner’s recipe for Orange Gingerbread.<sup>16</sup> Chocolate marries beautifully with both ginger and orange although you will not find it in the original recipe (chocolate was primarily consumed as a drink at this time). This is a thoroughly modern interpretation of Kitchiner’s work producing a softer, cookie style gingerbread rather than a crisp biscuit. The word ‘cookie’ comes from the Dutch ‘*koekje*’ meaning ‘little cake’.<sup>17</sup> I use a mini food processor to finely chop the mixed peel but you can use larger chunks if you prefer.

Ingredients (Makes 12–14)

- 100 g / 4 oz unsalted butter
- 50 g / 2 oz treacle
- 100 g / 4 oz granulated sugar
- 150 g / 5 oz plain flour
- ½ tsp baking powder
- 2 tsp ground ginger
- ¾ tsp ground all spice
- 1 large egg
- A few drops orange essence (optional)
- 50 g / 2 oz candied peel, finely chopped
- 50 g / 2 oz dark chocolate, roughly chopped

Method

1. Preheat the oven to 180 °C. Line a good sized baking sheet with non-stick baking paper or a non-stick silicone liner.
2. Gently melt the butter and treacle in a small saucepan. Place the granulated sugar in a bowl then pour the melted butter and treacle over the sugar. Allow to cool slightly.
3. Sieve the flour, baking powder and spices.
4. Beat the egg into the sweet buttery mixture then mix in the spicy

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flour. Add a few drops of orange essence (if using) followed by the finely chopped candied peel and roughly chopped chocolate.

5. Drop tablespoons of the cookie dough onto the baking sheet leaving plenty of space between each mound. Bake for 8–10 minutes. They will be very soft when you take them out of the oven so leave them on the sheet to firm up before transferring to a wire rack.

## INDIAN GINGERBREAD<sup>18</sup>

One of my favourite recipe books is *The Indian Cookery Book* by a ‘Thirty-Five Years’ Resident’. Written at the pinnacle of the British Raj it is a fantastic combination of fairly authentic Indian curries (for the time at least)<sup>19</sup> and home comforts, like steamed puddings. There are a number of gingerbread recipes in the book, including one which uses a sugar syrup in place of treacle (golden syrup was not available until the 1880s in Britain) and another which includes cayenne pepper as one of the spices. I have picked elements from several of these variations to create this recipe, which is not dissimilar to a modern ginger nut. My husband says this is the best ginger biscuit he has ever tasted.

Ingredients (Makes 16)

- 125 g / 4 ½ oz self raising flour
- 1 tsp bicarbonate of soda
- 1 tsp ground ginger
- ½ tsp ground cinnamon
- A good pinch of ground cloves and cayenne pepper
- 50 g / 2 oz granulated sugar
- 50 g / 2 oz cold unsalted butter, diced
- 1 piece preserved stem ginger (around 25 g / 1 oz drained weight), finely chopped
- 15 g / ½ oz pistachio nuts, finely chopped
- 50 g / 2 oz golden syrup

Method

1. Preheat the oven to 180 °C. Line a good sized baking sheet with non-stick baking paper or a non-stick silicone liner.

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2. Sieve the flour, bicarbonate of soda and spices into a bowl.
3. Add the sugar then rub in the butter.
4. Stir in the chopped ginger and nuts.
5. Divide into 16 pieces and roll into balls. Place on the prepared baking sheet, well spaced apart. Bake for 8–10 minutes.

## PARLIAMENT GINGERBREAD (WITH APOLOGIES TO THE ENGLISH SUFFRAGISTS)<sup>20</sup>

This particular recipe comes from the *Original Suffrage Cook Book* published in 1915, although the recipe's origins are much older. Fundraising books like this were published to raise money to support the campaign for the vote for women, especially in America.

Meg Dods attributes a similar recipe for 'Parlies' to Mrs Fletcher in her *Cook and Housewife's Manual* (1827). F. Marian McNeill believes Mrs Fletcher is actually the Mrs Flockhart, a vintner in Edinburgh, who features in Sir Walter Scott's novel *Waverley*. As well as an array of spirits she supplied her customers with gingerbread 'in thin, crisp cakes called Parliaments – in round pieces, denominated snaps'.<sup>21</sup> According to Scottish lexicographer Dr Jamieson, members of the Scottish parliament were particularly partial to them, hence the name.<sup>22</sup> When this type of biscuit was sold at fairs they were often decorated with coloured comfits known as 'Glasgow Jam' (or 'hundreds and thousands' in today's parlance).<sup>23</sup>

Ingredients (Makes approx 24, 8 cm biscuits)

- 225 g / 8 oz plain flour
- 25 g / 1 oz butter
- 2 tsp ground ginger
- 2 tsp mixed spice
- 110 g / 4 oz caster sugar
- ½ tsp bicarbonate of soda dissolved in 1 tbs hot water
- 225 g / 8 oz treacle

### Method

1. Preheat the oven to 180 °C.



*Parliament Gingerbread (left) and Ginger Snaps (right).*

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- Put the flour in a bowl and rub in the butter, then add the spices and caster sugar.
- Add the bicarbonate of soda and water along with the treacle then knead to a smooth paste (or cheat and use a food processor!).
- On a lightly floured board, roll the dough out to a thickness of around 3 mm then stamp out the biscuits using a square, fluted cookie cutter. Make sure you have enough flour on the board as this is an exceedingly sticky dough.
- Place on a baking sheet lined with silicone paper (or well greased) then bake for 7–8 minutes. Leave on the sheet for a few minutes to harden before cooling on a wire rack.

### GINGER SNAPS<sup>24</sup>

In the early seventeenth century a ‘snap’ meant a light meal or a snack. From the Victorian era it was used to describe a thin, crisp ginger biscuit.<sup>25</sup> These and the Parliament Gingerbread are also delicious with cheese.

Ingredients (Makes 36, 8 cm biscuits)

225 g / 8 oz flour  
¼ tsp bicarbonate of soda  
1 tsp ginger  
1 tsp white pepper  
110 g / 4 oz demerara sugar  
55 g / 2 oz butter, cubed  
120 g / 4 ½ oz golden syrup  
50 g / 2 oz treacle

Method

- Preheat the oven to 150 °C. Line a good sized baking sheet with non-stick baking paper or a non-stick silicone liner.
- Sieve the dry ingredients into a bowl. Then add the sugar.
- Rub the butter into the spiced flour.
- Add the syrup and treacle then mix to a smooth paste.
- Roll out on a lightly floured board to a thickness of around 2–3 mm

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(you need them to be fairly thin but not transparent). Cut out the desired shape then place on a baking sheet. Brush with water and bake for 10–15 minutes.

### BRANDY SNAPS<sup>26</sup>

Golden syrup is used to make brandy snaps today but the original brandy snaps sold at fairs were made from treacle. You really do need asbestos fingers to create the rolled wafer effect (for which I use the handle of a wooden spoon). Alternatively, you could drape them over a rolling pin like the Fairy Gingerbread Wafers (see page 110) or just leave the lacy discs to harden as they are.

Ingredients (Makes 18–20)

50 g / 2 oz unsalted butter  
50 g / 2 oz treacle  
50 g / 2 oz demerara sugar  
A few drops orange or lemon extract (optional)  
1 tsp ground ginger  
50 g / 2 oz plain flour

Method

- Preheat the oven to 180 °C. Have a couple of wooden spoons ready to curl the snaps around when they come out of the oven.
- Melt the butter, treacle and sugar in a small saucepan. Add a few drops of orange or lemon extract (if using) then stir in the ginger and flour.
- Drop teaspoons of the mixture on a baking sheet lined with silicone or non-stick paper making sure they are well spaced (once again you will need to bake in batches). Bake for 6–7 minutes. As these wafers contain treacle it is very tricky to see whether they are burning so watch them carefully. If they look black they are probably burnt! Remove from the oven and wait for a minute or two for the biscuits to harden slightly. Quickly remove them from the baking sheet with a palette knife and wrap each one around the handle of a wooden spoon (you should be able to get at least two per spoon). Don't wrap them too tightly otherwise you won't be able to take them off without breaking



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them. If they start to get too hard on the baking sheet, return them briefly to the oven to make the mixture pliable again.

4. Within a few minutes the snaps will be hard. Slip the hardened brandy snap off the handle. Store in an airtight container. These actually seem to keep quite well so long as the weather is not too humid.

## PARKIN PIGS<sup>27</sup>

Pigs were a particularly popular shape for gingerbread biscuits. One of the best-known makers of parkin pigs in Yorkshire was a spice merchant called Chatterton from Bradford. Chatterton's *pièce de résistance* was a gingerbread representation of Daniel in the lions' den.

Ingredients (Makes 12–16 8 cm / 3 in pigs or shapes, depending on the size of the cutter)

50 g / 2 oz treacle

50 g / 2 oz golden syrup

25 g / 1 oz light brown sugar

25 g / 1 oz unsalted butter

100 g / 4 oz plain flour

100 g / 4 oz medium oatmeal

½ tsp bicarbonate of soda

1 tsp ground ginger

½ tsp mixed spice

### Method

1. Preheat the oven to 180 °C. Line a good sized baking sheet with non-stick baking paper or a non-stick silicone liner.
2. Gently heat the treacle, golden syrup, sugar and butter together.
3. Place the remaining ingredients in a bowl. Add the melted treacle mixture then mix to a firm dough.
4. Roll out on a lightly floured board to a thickness of 5 mm. Stamp out pigs or whatever shape you desire. Place on the baking sheet and cook for 8–10 minutes.

