

## BRITISH TRIFLES

### 1750–1800

It is 1751, and the world will never be the same again, not anyway for British cooks and party-givers and dessert-lovers. The fourth edition of Hannah Glasse's famous book *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* has just been published and so has the fifth edition of the important book which began life as *The Whole Duty of a Woman* in 1737 but acquired a new title, *The Lady's Companion* in later editions. There, in these two publications, without fanfare but staring everyone in the face, were the first printed recipes for a real trifle.

#### HANNAH GLASSE'S RECIPE

It would be a fine example of irony if Hannah, notorious for the ruthless way in which she plagiarized earlier authors (see Jennifer Stead, 1983, Priscilla Bain, 1986, and Fiona Lucraft, 1997, 1998) had in fact, this once, invented something. In default of any evidence to the contrary, she must have the benefit of the doubt and be hailed for her feat.

Feat it surely was. To leap from the fool-trifle to the modern trifle was to cross a wide chasm, so wide that one is tempted to think, as a biologist would, that there must have been a 'missing link'. Possibly this could have been the Floating Island, which does have some of the characteristics which one would have expected in any intermediate dish. Here again, Hannah Glasse seems to have been the first to put this into print, in the first edition of her book (1747).

Here, anyway, are Hannah's two recipes, in temporal sequence, so that readers may judge for themselves.

*The Floating Island, a pretty Dish for the Middle of a Table at a Second Course, or for Supper (1747)*

Take a Soop Dish according to the Size and Quantity you would make; but a pretty deep Glass Dish is best, and set it on a China Dish, first take a Quart of the thickest Cream you can get, make it pretty sweet with fine Sugar, pour in a Gill of Sack, grate the yellow Rind of a Lemon in, and mill the Cream till it is all of a thick Froth, then as carefully as you can, pour the thin from the Froth into a Dish; take a French Role [brioche-type roll], or as many as you want, cut it as thin as you can, lay a Layer of that as light as possible on the Cream, then a Layer of Currant-jelly, then a very thin Layer of Role, and then Hartshorn-jelly; then French Role, and over that whip your Froth which you saved off the Cream very well milled up, and lay at Top as high as you can heap it; and as for the Rim of the Dish set it round with Fruit or Sweetmeats according to your Fancy, this looks very pretty in the middle of a Table with Candles round it, and you may make it of as many different Colours as you fancy, and according to what Jellies and Giams, or Sweet-meats you have; or at the Bottom of your Dish you may put the thickest Cream you can get; but that is as you fancy.

*To make a Trifle (1751)*

Cover the Bottom of your Dish or Bowl with Naples Biscuits, broke in Pieces, Mackerons broke in Halves, and Ratafia Cakes. Just wet them all through with Sack, then make a good boiled Custard, not too thick, and when cold pour over it, then put a Syllabub over that. You may garnish it with Ratifia Cakes, Currant Jelly and Flowers.

The Floating Island recipe, in particular, is so full and colourful that it creates an impression of Hannah really being enthusiastic about this sort of thing. Incidentally, we applaud what she says about having any colours you fancy and about the effect of having lighted candles around the dish – advice very much in tune with our own feelings.

Certainly, Hannah followed up her first trifle with something grander, to wit the recipe for 'A Grand Trifle' which appeared in her *Compleat Confectioner* of c. 1760, see page 24.

We can only speculate whether publication of Hannah Glasse's first trifle recipe in 1751 resulted in lots of cooks starting to make trifles her way. However, there are two interesting pieces of evidence.

First, the author Beverley Nichols acquired in the 1930s a cookery manuscript which he found in romantic circumstances in a more or less hidden little cupboard in a cottage in the hamlet of Glatton in Huntingdonshire. This was published in 1968 in a book called *In an Eighteenth Century Kitchen* with an introduction by Nichols and a scholarly commentary by Dr Dennis Rhodes, from which we may infer that when the manuscript has a date beside a recipe, that was the date when the recipe was written in. Some of them are attributed to ladies such as 'Sister Mason'. In the first section of the manuscript, the outstanding contributor is 'Mrs Powell', who provides four recipes, all with the date 1752 beside them; and one of these is the trifle recipe reproduced below:

1752                      MRS POWELL                      WAY TO MAKE A TRIFLE

Take savoy biskakes dip Them in sack & lay Them in the bottom (almost double) of a Cheney [China] dish Then Take a pint of Cream & make a custard with four egg boil The Custard & pour it on The bisticakes : Then Take a pint of Cream & make a whipt sillybub & put it on the Custard.

N.B. when you eat it put your spoon into The Bottom of The dish.

The high degree of compatibility between Hannah Glasse's recipe and Mrs Powell's could lead to interesting speculations: is it possible that one was derived from the other? If Mrs Powell already had the recipe some years before it got copied into the manuscript (and this is a perfectly reasonable supposition), then could Hannah Glasse have got it from Mrs Powell and rewritten it somewhat to match her own style? The fact that a 'Mr Powel' was among sub-

scribers to the first edition of Hannah Glasse's book is suggestive, but more detective work would be needed to go into the matter properly.

The second piece of evidence is more exciting. Our publisher has in his possession a copy of a trifle recipe, of the modern sort, from an old manuscript recipe book; and it bears the date May the 8th, 1750. It is attributed to 'Sister Nanny'. The book, whose compiler is unknown, is thought to belong to Devon.

### A trifle

Lay some Savoy biscuits at the bottom of the dish Wet them with white wine Lay a custard over them until the dish is full but let the custard be cold before it be put on the biscuit Then on the custard a whipped syllabub as much as you can to make it high.

This is the earliest written recipe for our sort of trifle which has so far come to light. Here again, more detective work is called for, to establish the identity of Sister Nanny. Although her recipe is also compatible with Hannah Glasse's, and indeed with Mrs Powell's, they are far removed from each other in wording.

### THE LADY'S COMPANION RECIPES

As mentioned above, *The Lady's Companion*, one of the great recipe compilations of the eighteenth century, had begun life as *The Whole Duty of a Woman* in 1737: a volume of almost 700 pages distinguished by a beautiful typography and by an introduction of 100 pages addressed to 'the fair sex; containing rules, directions, and observations, for their conduct and behaviour through all ages and circumstances of life, as virgins, wives, or widows' (no other forms of existence were envisaged). Although this introduction, so incorrect by modern standards, is written in a lively style and with some humour, the main function of the book was to provide hundreds and hundreds of recipes, at that time the largest collection ever formed in English. And in subsequent editions the 'duty of a woman' aspect was quietly downplayed, while the number of recipes grew and grew. It was in 1751 that the fifth, expanded, edition of this

massive work first provided any guidance on making trifles; there had been none in the fourth edition of 1743. In fact, there were two recipes in the 1751 edition, reading thus:

*To make a Trifle*

Take a Quarter of a Pound of *Naples* Biscuits, put them in a deep *China* Dish, with as much Red Wine as they will take to soak them; smooth them with the back Part of a Spoon, then whip Half a Pint of Cream, as for a Syllabub with Sugar, lemon-juice, and a Spoonful of White Wine, and lay on the Froth by Spoonfuls till covered thick. If it dont froth stiff, add the Whites of two Eggs. You may garnish, when you serve it, with Apples, peeled Walnuts, or any Fruit that is in Season, as you like.

*Another Way*

Take the same Quantity of Biscuits as in the above Reciept, and place them as before directed; then warm Half a Pint of Sack or Red Wine, which you like, and pour over them; then take a Quart of Custard-stuff, made hot and put to them; then whip a Pint of Cream, or Milk, and lay on it by Spoonfuls till all the Cream is in.

It may be possible eventually to determine in what months the two publications of 1751 took place, and which of the two books can claim to have provided the first printed recipe for a trifle as we know it. Since Hannah Glasse, in her book, had plagiarized quite extensively an earlier edition of *The Lady's Companion*, it might seem tempting to speculate that again in 1751 she borrowed from the rival publication. But her recipe and those in *The Lady's Companion* are not similar.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

Hannah Glasse's 'A grand trifle', in her book *The Compleat Confectioner* of 1760, is also intriguing. Is this the first time a jelly is the base of a trifle? It would seem so, and this point is of some significance in connection with a question which has intermittently and sometimes heatedly been debated in recent times, namely: is the use of jelly

in a trifle sanctioned by tradition and permissible, or is it a vulgar solecism such as purists should eschew?

We have not been able to trace any other references to matrimony cakes, but they were clearly of a kind with Naples biscuits, etc. Mention of the King's table in the recipe serves as a reminder that it was in 1760 that George III succeeded George II, continuing the Hanoverian dynasty which had been established in 1714. Indeed it was under a German monarchy that the English trifle blossomed.

Anyway, here is Hannah Glasse's recipe:

### *A grand trifle*

Take a very large china dish or glass; that is deep, first make some very fine rich calves-foot jelly, with which fill the dish about half the depth; when it begins to jelly, have ready some Naples biscuits, macaroons, and the little cakes called matrimony; take an equal quantity of these cakes, break them in pieces, and stick them in the jelly before it be stiff, all over very thick; pour over that a quart of very thick sweet cream, then lay all round, currant jelly, raspberry jam, and some calves-foot jelly, all cut in little pieces, with which garnish your dish thick all round, intermixing them and on them lay macaroons, and the little cakes, being first dipped in sack [sack].

Then take two quarts of the thickest cream you can get, sweeten it with double-refined sugar, grate into it the rind of three fine large lemons, and whisk it up with a whisk; take off the froth as it rises, and lay it in your dish as high as you can possibly raise it; this is fit to go to the King's table, if well made, and very excellent when it comes to be all mixed together.

The 1750s were indeed the decade of the trifle, and not only in England. North of the Border, Elizabeth Cleland (*A New and Easy Method of Cookery*) published in 1755 an engagingly Scottish recipe for trifle, into the text of which we have inserted explanations of Scottish terms which she used and the references she made to her other recipe, Yellow Cream (which in turn connects up with her recipe for Floating Island).

### To make a Trifle

Cover your ashet [platter, from the French assiette] with Sponge Biscuits; then pour over them a Mutchkin [a Scottish measure, a little more than 400 ml] of Malaga, or white Wine, then a yellow Cream [which is made with cream, egg yolks, cinnamon, orange rind, to be eaten cold]; then lay on it Heaps of coloured Sweet-meats; roast six or seven Apples, and rub them through a Search [variant of 'searc', meaning sieve, strainer]; put a little Sugar to them, and mix them with four Eggs, the Whites only, and wipe them up very high, and put this by Spoonfuls over the rest; but let a little of the Cream and Sweet-meats be seen. Raise it up as high as you can so send it to the Table.

Returning to England we find that Martha Bradley, whose *The British Housewife* (c. 1758) is one of the two or three greatest English cookery books of the eighteenth century, has a good trifle recipe, here followed by a detail from the frontispiece of her book:

### A Trifle.

Break into a large Bowl some Naples Biscuits, Macaroons, and Ratafia Cakes; cover the Bottom of the Bowl with these, and pour over them as much Sack as will just wet them through.

Make a boiled Custard, but moderately thick; set it by to cool, and when quite cold pour it over them; then pour in a Syllabub over that, and garnish with Currant Jelly and Ratafia Cakes.



However, although Martha Bradley's recipe is a good one, Elizabeth Raffald in *The Experienced English Housekeeper* (we refer to the third edition of 1773) has those little extra touches which we all recognize when we see them, which give us a 'real feel' for how a dish is made:

*To make a Trifle*

PUT three large maccaroons in the middle of your dish, pour as much white wine over them as they will drink, then take a quart of cream, put in as much sugar as will make it sweet, rub your sugar upon the rind of a lemon to fetch out the essence, put your cream into a pot, mill it to a strong froth, lay as much froth upon a sieve as will fill the dish you intend to put your trifle in, put the remainder of your cream into a tossing pan, with a stick of cinnamon, the yolks of four eggs, well beat, and sugar to your taste, set them over a gentle fire, stir it one way till it is thick, then take it off the fire, pour it upon your maccaroons, when it is cold put on your frothed cream, lay round it different coloured sweetmeats, and small shot comfits in, and figures or flowers.

Another trifle of the late eighteenth century comes from the little known north-country writer Sarah Mason in her *The New Experienced English House-keeper* (c. 1790). We like her reference to laying the froth on 'a tiffany', for which see the Glossary.

*To make a Trifle*

TAKE macaroons, or round Savoy biscuits, put them into the bottom of a dish, season with a little grated nutmeg, and as much white wine as will cover them, then lay round them a few different sorts of sweet-meats, make a boiled custard, when cold, pour it over them about two inches thick, then heap it up neatly with frothed cream; if in a long dish it is proper for a corner, if round, as a middle dish. To froth the cream, take a pint of the thickest cream you can get, grate the rind of a lemon, and fine sugar, mix all together with the whites of two eggs, wisk them half an hour, before you skim



it, lay the froth on a tiffany to drain, lay it on your trifle just before you send it up.

Generally, trifle recipes from northern parts are often of special interest. This certainly applies to the recipe which Fuchsia Dunlop has sent us, from the 1786 edition of *Mrs Maciver's Cookery and Pastry*. As will be seen from the text of the recipe, below, it is different from any of the other earlier ones which we have found. (Mrs Maciver ran a cookery school in Edinburgh with her colleague Mrs Frazer, who continued to run it after Mrs Maciver's death in about 1790. Since the ladies were close colleagues, it is interesting to see that the trifle recipe which Mrs Frazer published in 1795, and with which this chapter closes, is of a different sort altogether.)

#### *A Trifle.*

Take some white wine and sugar, dip some sugar-biscuit in it; lay the biscuit in the bottom of a dish, and bring it by degrees to be high in the middle: when the biscuit is a little softened with the wine, pour some thick sweet cream over it; let it stand until the bread has suck'd up the wine and the cream: if there is any of the liquor left, pour it off. If you have apples, roast some of them, and order them in the same way as in the last receipt; lay a covering of apples on the biscuit; then cover it all over with whipt cream, and drop some currant-jelly on it.

We close this chapter with another recipe from Scotland, referred to above, which Ivan Day kindly sent us. This is from Mrs Frazer's *The Practice of Cookery, Pastry, Confectionary, Pickling, Preserving ...*, 1795. He says that he has made this a number of times, once with the suggestion of preserved gooseberries around the base, which look very attractive. Note that by 'the shape of a small sugar loaf' is meant something like a pyramid, which looks very impressive. For her use of myrtle, see the Glossary.

*A trifle.*

Make a sponge cake agreeable to the receipt p. 185 [see below], cut it in thin slices, and dip it in some white wine and sugar mixed. Then cover the bottom of a plate with some of the slices, and spread over them preserved raspas, strawberries or sliced apples. Then put on lairs of cake and fruit till you get the trifle into the shape of a small sugar loaf. Then stick a sprig of myrtle into the top of it.

Then take a choppin [two and a quarter litres] of cream, half a mutchkin [200 ml] of wine, three ounces of sugar, the paring of a lemon, and a stick of cinnamon; whisk it up to a strong snow, and as it rises, lift it up and drain it on the back of a sieve; after it has stood an hour, lay it all over the trifle, and heap it as high upon the head of it as you can.

Garnish the trifle all over with currant cream, angelica, and whole red currants, stick in a bunch of them in the myrtle. You may also lay green and preserved gooseberries around the borders of the plate it is served upon.

Mrs Frazer's separate recipe for Red Currant Cream, one of her suggested garnishes, is charming and reads as follows:

Cast the white of an egg to a snow, and add to it two table spoonfuls of red currant jelly; but take care that there are no raspas in it, as they prevent the cream from rising; then take a small whisk, and whisk it close one way, till it is of a fine pale pink colour, and so thick that it will not drop from the whisk. — This is a beautiful garnish for all milk and cream dishes.

It remains to add that Mrs Frazer's sponge cake is made with 12 eggs, 1 lb sugar and a half pound of flour. It is seasoned with 'the grate of three or four lemons'.