

Biscuits

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The biscuit was invented, in 1822, by the famed Georgian architect William Henry Jonathan Arthur Blanchard Biscuit. His invention was completely accidental.

In the early 1800s the population was booming,¹ and more houses were needed as a result.² Architects everywhere were desperately searching for ways to make the building process faster. William Biscuit realised that one of the most time-consuming parts of the process was plastering the walls. He set about looking for a way to make the process faster.

His first invention was ultimately unsuccessful. It consisted of a watering can filled with liquid plaster. Air was then pumped into the body of the watering can, and pressure should have forced a spray of plaster out of the nozzle onto the bare wall. Unfortunately, the pressure required was extreme, and any pecuniary advantage made by making the process faster was more than offset by the cost of feeding the team of eight-six orphans needed to drive the bellows.

William was not a man to be daunted by failure, and after eleven years working on his so-called “Hygh Pressure Spraying Devise” he changed tack entirely. He reasoned that, rather than feeding the orphans, a process that needed to go on indefinitely, he would abandon them and instead try to plaster walls using the food he would otherwise have been giving to them. Furthermore, William had, as a young boy, visited Matthew Boulton’s Soho Manufactory and was impressed with the efficiencies that it made. In 1820 he purchased his own manufactory building and installed a mixing vat, roller press, and kiln. The oat, wheat, and rye flours that would have gone into the orphans’s³ gruel was fed into the vat to be mixed. From there it was poured onto a conveyor belt, and squashed flat by the rollers, and fed directly into the kiln where it was baked into a hard, flat substance.

¹ Lots of little explosions were happening everywhere.

² That is what happens when there are lots explosions everywhere.

³ For readers who have not seen one before, “’” is an apostrophe used to denote possession.

Initial results were promising. Great sheets of “Mr. Biscuit’s Wall” were used to finish the interior of a small dwelling that had been built next to the manufactory. Disaster struck when William tried to move his product offsite. The roads in England at the time were just not good enough,⁴ and it proved impossible to transport without everything ending up being broken up into tiny pieces. No matter how he tried, William could not get sheets of Mr. Biscuit’s Wall to any destinations.

Approaching bankruptcy, and unable to afford food, one night William decided to eat some of the fragments to stave off hunger pangs. What he discovered changed the world: Mr. Biscuit’s Wall was not only edible, but it tasted delicious, especially with tea. William began to sell these fragments to the people of London, and the new treat quickly caught on. Soon he was producing Mr. Biscuit’s Wall to sell as food, rather than continue with his plan to speed up the building process. The final piece fell into place when his manufactory foreman, Ebenezer Digestive, suggested that the product should be cut into regular circles before being baked in the kiln. The biscuit as we know it today was born.

Over the next few years, the name changed to “Mr. Biscuit’s”, then “Biscuit’s”, and finally just “Biscuits”, the apostrophe being dropped as a result of the 1837 European Apostrophe Famine.⁵

William retired in 1850, devoting the rest of his life to the ornithology of the southern hemisphere. His business was taken over by his son, William Chocolate Biscuit, and his grandsons, Paul Custard Cream Biscuit and Richard T. Biscuit, all of whom made their own significant contribution to biscuitology. The association between biscuits and house-building remains strong, which is why even today you see builders dunking biscuits in their tea during breaks.

⁴ For Mr Edgard Purnell Hooley’s patented Tarmacadam had not yet been patented. That was to come in 1901.

⁵ During the 1837 European Apostrophe Famine, apostrophes became so rare that only the very richest of shopkeepers could afford to use them in their signage. As soon as the famine began to lift, less prosperous shops began to buy apostrophes and they became a sign of conspicuous consumption. Eventually the lower class vegetable shops could afford as many apostrophes as they liked. To this day many greengrocers use considerably more apostrophes than they actually, strictly speaking, require. It is of etymological interest to note that the word “prosperous” is actually a shortened form of the word “apostropheous”, which means “person who can afford many apostrophes”.