



# Let them eat CAKE

The Victoria sandwich is a WI icon and the story of this simple sponge reflects a century of rapid change

Words: MARY GWYNN, author of *The WI Cookbook: The First 100 years* Pictures: MARIE-LOU AVERY Home economist: LINDY WILDSMITH



Is there a more potent symbol of the WI than the Victoria sandwich? Buttery and light, filled with a layer of raspberry jam and with its golden surface dusted with a

fine coating of caster sugar, its very simplicity denotes the challenge it presents to bakers and oven manufacturers.

Back in 1915, were the earliest members making sponges before singing Jerusalem at WI gatherings? It seems not. The truth is far more complex.

The NFWI requested suggestions for a 'national Institute song' in 1922. This led to much debate on the letters page of the WI magazine, *Home & Country*. Jerusalem was chosen for its call for a better future and sung for the first time by delegates at the 8th AGM in 1924. The magazine said 'the delegates sing hopefully of the New Jerusalem which every institute member is helping to build'.

The development of the Victoria sandwich reflects the story of the WI as it progressed from its origins in the dark days of the First World War to today's modern organisation.

The earliest recipe for a sponge sandwich (no royal connection) appeared in *Home & Country* the same year as the debate over a

national song. In July 1922, three years after the magazine was first published, a short note in the household tips column finds the first of three short recipes: 'Sponge Sandwich - 2 oz. butter or Margarine, ¼ lb of sugar. Beat up to a cream. Add 2 eggs well beaten then stir in ¼ lb flour, 2 teaspoonfuls of baking powder and 1 tablespoonful of milk. Bake in a quick oven for a quarter of an hour.' It's recognisably the ancestor of the recipe we use today.

The original Victoria sponge goes back to the first years of the young Queen's reign. She was known for her sweet tooth and gave her name to all kinds of foods – from the popular plum variety to a type of rhubarb, a pea and



a sweet suet pudding made with apples, dried cherries and apricot jam. The first recipe to appear in print for 'Victoria Sandwiches' was in *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management*, 1861. Her recipe is based on four eggs with their weight in 'pounded sugar, butter and flour'.

The mixture contained no raising agent but is beaten for 10 minutes to add air before it is cooked in a Yorkshire pudding tin. The cake is then split, spread with 'nice preserve' and cut into long 'finger pieces'.

Baking had been transformed by the arrival of refined white flour and sugar, along with the invention of baking powder in the 1840s. It allowed the making of rich, buttery cakes with a fine crumb, ideal for serving with that other sign of luxury, leaf tea, made in a silver pot and served in the finest bone china.

Victoria and her ladies-in-waiting enjoyed this new meal as the perfect filler for the long gap between luncheon and dinner – and afternoon tea parties became all the rage.

## This protection of our culinary heritage has been one of the most vital functions of the WI

The social side of meetings was very important in the 20th Century for the members of the newly established WI. A Mrs Nugent Harris wrote in *Home & Country* in 1919 that 'members of an Institute get to know each other best when they meet for social intercourse'. In her view, the simplest way to achieve that is with 'the Institute tea'.

She reminds readers that 'tea-time should be the informal part of the meeting, when a real neighbourly chat can be enjoyed'.

As ingredients such as sugar, eggs and butter, restricted by war, began to come back into the shops members started to bake and preserve once more, and also educate those whose domestic skills might be lacking.

Federation news of those early years includes details of 'guessing the weight of the cake' and bottling and preserving fruit.

This desire to educate and preserve essential skills and traditions saw local federations produce their own cookery books in the inter-war years. These recorded all kinds of regional recipes and dishes. This protection of our culinary heritage has been seen as one of the most vital functions of the WI. The celebrated food writer Elizabeth David, in her 1977 *English Bread and Yeast Cookery*, acknowledged that 'recipes have been preserved, recorded and published... owing to the initiative of the ladies of the Women's Institute'.

Amongst the many recipes for cakes of all styles that appear in WI publications are countless variations on sponges. In 1950, Yorkshire Federation proudly published the 25th edition of its cookbook, *Seven Hundred*

*Recipes*. It contains three sandwich cakes and an orange cake that is in essence the classic Victoria cake recipe we use today.

Surprisingly, neither Victoria sponge nor sandwich are name-checked in any WI publication until 1957. As butter and meat finally came off the ration books in the summer of 1954, the nation faced a new worry. Many women, drafted to work in factories in support of the war effort, had lost the skills that their mothers and grandmothers took for granted. Years of restrictions on ingredients such as fat, flour, eggs and butter meant basic recipes such as crumble, batters and cakes were no longer commonplace.

The WI leapt to fill the gap. In 1954, a 54-page booklet entitled *County Fare* was handed out from the WI stand at The Ideal Home Exhibition with over 130 recipes for regional specialities, such as Guernsey Gache and Monmouth Pudding, alongside detailed leaflets on breadmaking and pastry skills.

Mrs Beeton's classic recipe for a Victoria sandwich once more appeared in print in the pages of *The Constance Spry Cookbook* (1956) and a year later a chocolate version appeared in Norfolk Federation's 1957 cookbook *More Good Recipes*. Finally, a year later, the classic Standard Victoria Sandwich makes its first appearance on page 64 of *The Berkshire Federation Cookery Book*.

WI members have been cooking it ever since. As a competition cake, it is the ultimate test for bakers – the simple ingredients and method allow no hiding place for sloppy techniques or poor quality ingredients. It's also used to check how new ovens perform. Detailed guidelines for making the Victoria sandwich for competition are set out in the NFWI Education Committee's handbook *On with the Show*:

- *May be baked in one or two tins*
- *No cooling rack marks on top or bottom surface*
- *Traditional filling raspberry jam, sufficient and evenly spread*
- *Light sprinkling of caster sugar on top*
- *Pale golden colour, evenly baked*
- *Texture fine, even*
- *Flavour delicate, characteristic, with no strong flavour predominating*

A cup of tea and a slice of cake are just as integral to the success of many WI meetings today as in 1919. Although Mrs Nugent Harris might be taken aback by 21st Century WIs meeting in cocktail bars, let alone sharing their baking successes or disasters on Facebook, a good cake is still appreciated by members old and new.



**Do you know of an earlier example of the WI Victoria Sandwich? If you have a published recipe dated before 1957, please email [wilife@nfwi.org.uk](mailto:wilife@nfwi.org.uk) with the subject line 'Victoria Sandwich', tweet @WILifeMagazine using #VictoriaSandwich or write to: 'Victoria Sandwich', WI Life, 104 New King's Road, London, SW6 4LY**





Edwardian  
Silver cake

Edwardian  
Gold cake

## VINTAGE RECIPES

These recipes are from WI federation cookbooks. The original appears first, followed by an updated version. The first reference to Queen Victoria's taste for sponge cake is in this recipe from *Secrets of some Wiltshire Housewives*, 1927.

### Gold and Silver cakes

(These cakes are said to have been great favourites with Queen Victoria)

#### INGREDIENTS

- 1/4lb butter
- 1/4lb powdered sugar
- 6oz finest sifted flour
- whites of 5 eggs, well beaten to a stiff froth
- large tsp baking powder

#### TO MAKE THE SILVER CAKE

**1** Beat the butter to a cream and add the sugar. Then add the flour and whites of eggs in alternate spoonfuls.

**2** Mix very well, add a teaspoonful of essence of almonds, and some finely powdered almonds.

**3** Baking powder to be put in last.

#### TO MAKE THE GOLD CAKE

Take the yolks of the 5 eggs, beat up thoroughly and make exactly the same as the silver cake, adding two (not one) teaspoonfuls of baking powder. Flavour with a glass of whisky, or add ½ teaspoonful of sal volatile. *H Longden, Milton*

### Modern Silver cake

Makes one 18cm round cake Prep 20 minutes  
Cook 30 minutes

#### INGREDIENTS FOR BOTH CAKES

- 125g butter
- 125g caster sugar
- ½ tsp almond essence
- 175g plain flour
- 1 tsp baking powder
- 5 large egg whites
- 2 tbsp ground almonds
- 2-3 tbsp milk

**1** Preheat the oven to 180°C/fan oven 160°C/gas mark 4. Cream the butter with the sugar until pale and light, then stir in the almond essence.

**2** Sift the flour with the baking powder. Whisk the egg whites until holding peaks, then fold into the creamed mixture alternating with the flour, ground almonds and milk to give a soft-dropping consistency.

**3** Spoon into a buttered and base-lined 18cm round sandwich cake tin. Level the surface. Bake for 30 minutes until firm and pale golden. Turn out and cool on a wire rack. Serve as is, dusted with silver powder, or split and sandwich with lemon curd and whipped cream.

### Modern Gold cake

Makes one 18cm round - or square - cake  
Prep 20 minutes Cook 30 - 40 minutes

To make the gold cake follow the silver cake recipe above but omit the almond essence and use 2tsp baking powder. Instead of adding the egg whites, beat in the yolks of 5 eggs after creaming the butter and sugar. Fold in the flour and baking powder with three to four tablespoons of whisky. Finish and cook as above. You can make this cake in a square 18cm tin as an alternative. Cool and serve plain, dusted with gold powder, or topped with whipped cream and sliced strawberries.





## 1950s Chocolate Victoria sponge

*Taken from More Good Recipes, 1957 by Norfolk Federation. The Victoria sponge (not sandwich!) received its first name check in a WI publication.*

### INGREDIENTS

- 6 oz self raising flour
- ¾ lb fine sugar
- 1 tbsp hot water
- 1 tsp almond essence
- ¾ lb margarine or butter
- 2 large eggs
- 1 tbsp chocolate powder
- Pinch of salt

### ICING

- ¾ lb icing sugar
- 1 to 2 tbsps milk
- 1 tbsp chocolate powder

### METHOD

- 1 Place margarine or butter in a mixing bowl and cream well. Add well beaten eggs and a little flour at a time to prevent curdling. Fold in other ingredients.
- 2 Place mixture in a greased tin (previously sprinkled with flour and sugar), and bake in a moderate oven for 15 to 20 minutes.
- 3 Sift icing sugar, add chocolate powder and milk and mix well. Spread on top of the cake.

*Mrs Stone, Kenninghall*

## Modern Chocolate fairy cakes

*I've chosen to turn the recipe into simple fairy cakes. Makes 16. Prep 15 mins. Cook 18 - 20 minutes*

### INGREDIENTS

- 125g caster sugar
- 125g butter
- 1/2 tsp almond essence (you can use vanilla instead)
- 2 large eggs, beaten
- 175g self-raising flour
- 1 tbsp cocoa powder
- 1-2 tbsps milk

### ICING

- 75g icing sugar, sifted
- 90g plain chocolate
- 15g butter
- chocolate flakes or chocolate coated almonds to decorate

### METHOD

- 1 Preheat the oven to 180°C/fan oven 160°C/gas mark 4. Arrange paper cases in bun tins. Cream the butter with the sugar and almond essence until pale and light. Add the eggs a little at a time and a little flour to prevent curdling. Sift the flour and cocoa and fold in, adding the milk to give a soft consistency.
- 2 Spoon the mixture into the paper cases and bake for 18 - 20 minutes until well risen and firm to touch. Cool on a wire rack.
- 3 For the icing, melt the chocolate in a basin set over hot water (don't allow to boil). Stir in the butter until melted, then add the icing sugar to give a smooth shiny icing. Dip the cakes in the icing to coat. Put a chocolate flake or almond on top and leave to set.



## WI Cookbook: The First 100 Years

**BY POST:** To order the WI Cookbook please make a cheque payable to WI Enterprises and send, along with this completed coupon, to:

**WI Cookbook, NFWI Unit, Marcham, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX13 6NW**

**ONLINE:** [www.wishop.thewi.org.uk](http://www.wishop.thewi.org.uk)

**Delivery: from 13 February 2015**

For queries regarding your order contact **01865 391788**

WI Cook Book £16 freepost.	Qty	Total

Please complete your details below as this will be used as your delivery label

NAME .....

.....

ADDRESS .....

.....

.....

POSTCODE .....



### 1970s Chocolate and peppermint cake

*From the Derbyshire Federation Recipe Book 1974. This is a Victoria sandwich in all but name - the method and ingredients all fit the classic model.*

#### INGREDIENTS

- 6 oz soft margarine
- 6oz sugar
- 6 oz self raising flour
- 1 tbsp cocoa
- 3 eggs
- 1 ½ level tps baking powder
- Green colouring
- Essence of peppermint

#### METHOD

- 1 Mix main ingredients together for two minutes. Divide in half.
- 2 To one half add green colouring and two or three drops of peppermint essence.
- 3 To the other half add one tbsp cocoa with one tbsp hot water.
- 4 In two sandwich tins (seven or eight inches) pipe alternate rings of the two colours or just spoon into the tins.
- 5 Bake for approximately 25 minutes 350°F. Regulo 4 a third of the way down the oven.
- 6 Allow to cool and decorate with chocolate butter icing and vermicelli or green and brown icing.

### Modern Chocolate and peppermint cake

*Make this cake as colourful and fun as possible for a real taste of the 1970s. Makes one 20cm cake. Prep 15 mins. Cook 25 mins*

#### INGREDIENTS

- 175g softened butter or soft margarine
- 175g caster sugar
- 3 large eggs
- 175g self raising flour
- 1 tsp baking powder
- 1 tbsp cocoa
- 2-3 drops peppermint extract or to taste
- green food colouring
- FOR THE CHOCOLATE BUTTERCREAM:**
  - 40g butter, softened
  - 85g icing sugar, sifted
  - 1 tbsp cocoa, sifted
- FOR THE CHOCOLATE GLACÉ ICING:**
  - 125g icing sugar
  - 1 tbsp cocoa
  - chocolate curls to decorate

#### METHOD

- 1 Preheat the oven to 180°C/fan oven, 160°F/ gas mark 4. Grease and then base-line two 20cm sandwich tins with baking parchment.
- 2 Cream the butter and sugar together until very pale and fluffy. Beat the eggs then gradually add to the mixture a tablespoon at a time, beating well with each addition.
- 3 Sieve the flour and gently fold into the mixture to give a soft dropping consistency. Divide the mixture in half. Mix the cocoa to a paste with a tablespoon of boiling water and fold it into one half, then add mint extract and green colouring to the other to give quite a good strong colour. Put the mint mixture into one tin, the chocolate into the other, and level the surface, making a slight hollow in the centre to allow the cakes to rise.
- 4 Bake for 25 - 30 minutes on the same shelf in the oven until well risen. The cakes should have shrunk from the sides of the tin and spring back when touched. Remove from the tins. Turn onto a wire rack to cool.
- 5 For the buttercream, beat the butter until softened, then beat in the icing sugar and cocoa. Continue beating until pale and fluffy. When the cakes are cold, sandwich with chocolate butter icing.
- 6 For the glacé icing, mix the icing sugar and cocoa and add a tablespoon or so of hot water to give a coating consistency. Pour over the top of the cake and spread to the edges. Decorate with chocolate curls or a crumbled mint chocolate bar or make two-tone butter icing and a green and chocolate glacé icing for a 1970s effect.