

# Gingerly

Roddy Phillips

There was an American family standing next to us admiring the plaintive ancient church of St Oswald's. The extra tall Dad was in charge of the guidebook.

"And this," he boomed with confidence, "must have been where William Wordsworth bought his gingerbread."

"Cool..." chorused the kids, roused no doubt by the notion of eating gingerbread freshly made in a 13<sup>th</sup> century church.

"In fact," continued the Dad stopping abruptly and pointing his nose in the air, "is that fresh gingerbread I smell?"

The strange thing was if anyone had asked me if I fancied some gingerbread right at that precise moment I probably would have passed on it, but suddenly we were all looking at one another and saying things like 'mmm... fresh gingerbread, I'll have some, in fact I'll have a whole coach load!'

The Americans however were in the way. "Is it made by the monks?" asked mom as they jostled through the gate.

It only takes a handful of people to form a queue at Sarah Nelson's Gingerbread shop in Grasmere and the tiny shop is in fact an annexe of the church. In 1850 the gingerbread lady rented the small cottage known as 'Gate Cottage', which had originally been built in 1630 by public subscription as the village school. Here she set up shop and invented her world famous gingerbread. The business is now owned and run by the Wilson family, and Sarah Nelson's secret recipe is a national treasure, securely locked away in the National Westminster Bank in Ambleside.

We heard all this from the American dad courtesy of his guide book while some of us queued up for a taste of that authentic gingerbread, meanwhile the rest of our party had been sent on a toilet recce.

"Tom Cruise, Nicole Kidman, Virginia McKenna, Jimmy Oliver..." the dad was reeling off a list of famous customers and we were growing more excited by the second.

"Who's Jimmy Oliver?" shouted one of the American kids.

"Precisely!" growled an elderly gentleman from behind us.

With the queue upfront at a standstill it was only a matter of time before some serious grumping broke out in our party and soon there was talk of bailing out to the Wordsworth hotel, or the Wordsworth tearoom or the Wordsworth Tattoo Parlour – daffodils a popular speciality. They should really just get on with it and re-name Grasmere - Wordsworth. It probably causes no end of confusion for the tourists who apparently constantly ask the local tourism office for directions to the Beatrix Potteries.

The excitable Americans had vanished into the shop but it must have been smaller than we thought because they seemed to fill it in an instant creating a health and safety nightmare. We tried to get a peek at what was going on but it was useless. Whatever it was it stunned the Americans into an unearthly silence. I've been in holy shrines and sacred places that have a similar effect.

My wife turned up and decimated our party by announcing she had discovered a herbal remedy shop that was having a sale.

"What about the gingerbread?" I shouted as everyone trooped off behind her, "what about Tom and Nicole and Jimmy?"

The giant American dad never actually made it into the shop, wedged in the doorway he had to peer over the heads of his family and then he had to un-wedge himself and turn sideways to get out. Consequently he backed me up against a group of retired upholsterers from Bolton and I went into Sarah Nelson's Gingerbread shop as if I was going round a revolving door.

I wasn't banking on simultaneously going back in time so I sort of stuttered and laughed out loud when I found myself in 1850.

"Good afternoon Sir, how can I help you?" asked one of the smiling bonneted, aproned maids from behind the gingerbread laden Victorian counter. I took a moment to get my bearings, taking in the sheer depth of nostalgic detail that I was surrounded by. This was a tiny shop but it seemed to be packed with fascinating stuff, particularly if you collected 19<sup>th</sup> century confectionary packaging. I could see why the Americans fell into a sort of dumbstruck awe.

"Um, can you tell me what time it is, I mean what year it is?" I muttered, "loving the milkmaid rosy cheeks by the way nice detail."

"It's 1851 son and some of us feel as if we were alive then so get on with it!" rasped a grumpy old Bolton voice from behind me in the queue.

There were two assistants, the older 19<sup>th</sup> century woman with the rosy cheeks who smiled a lot and a vaguely disaffected 21st century teenage girl with piercings and a mermaid tattoo on her neck who really wanted to be anywhere else at that precise moment and preferably not in a frumpy milkmaid's costume.

"Aren't your piercings and that lovely mermaid tattoo anachronisms?" I asked, making the young girl play with the stud on her lower lip. To my left there was a small square hole in the wall through which I could see two gingerbread bakers. They were having a chat, shooting the breeze, smoothing their hipster beards. Probably comparing man-bun oil, I thought.

"Shouldn't they be busy baking?" I asked the assistants. The older one smiled sweetly while the young one stared at the ceiling, no doubt hoping a hole would open and a ladder would drop through from a hovering helicopter. I made a close inspection of some of the gingerbread, which to me looked suspiciously biscuit-like.

"Surely for it be to real gingerbread it would have to rise?" I asked, surprising even myself. I felt a big sigh from the queue behind me flow out into the street like a long, slow gust of gingerbread flavoured wind.

"Kendal Mint Cake is the same I suppose," I continued, "it's not really a cake because it doesn't rise, technically it's a biscuit. So really what we have here are ginger biscuits. Lots of ginger flavoured biscuits that take a really long time to make."

There was a deathly silence in the little shop. The older assistant had obviously heard all this guff before and steeled herself with a brown-toothed smile that made me take a silent step back.

"We call it Cumbrian Gingerbread round here," she announced slowly and darkly, "how much would you like today Sir?"

"It depends," I replied, "is it 19<sup>th</sup> century prices?"

One of the ginger bakers poked his head slowly out of his hatch, he had an interesting scar above his left eyebrow and I'm sure he was sharpening a knife. I bought quite a lot of Cumbrian Gingerbread as it happens and left gingerly before the stoning began. Sometimes a tourist has to do what a tourist has to do.