

Feed your soul

The medieval practice of 'souling' believed that, for every bit of bread given to the poor, a soul could be redeemed, but how did the tradition arise, asks Neil Buttery

A SOUL cake! A soul cake! Have mercy on all Christen souls for a soul cake! The now-forgotten song was chanted by children across the country on the second day of November—All Souls' Day—the third and final day of Soul Mass, a time of remembrance of the dead that began on Halloween. It was believed that, on those days, the spirits of the dead could interact with the living and visit old haunts to be recognised by their loved ones and leave their Purgatory and ascend to Heaven. All festivals have their associated foods and, on All Souls' Day, soul cakes were baked and distributed among the community.

The day is seldom marked now, but it was very popular in pre-Reformation Britain—a much more superstitious time than today. Cakes were solicited to provide Masses for the souls trapped in Purgatory and were baked by the community, with households taking it in turns to produce huge numbers of them, tables groaning, before they were blessed and distributed. It was believed that, for every cake given on All Souls' Day, a soul was saved. They were given largely to the poor, making the act doubly virtuous because it aided both the living and the dead.

This practice has its roots planted firmly in Pagan Britain, pre-dating Christianity and

the idea of Purgatory by centuries. One Pagan mascot, sadly lost, that accompanied the revellers was the Hoodening horse. Picture it: a terrifying figure of a horse's skull held aloft on a pole, covered in a dark cowl, its bony face poking out, jaws snapping. It was supposed to symbolise fertility and good fortune. In reality, what it did was terrify the young and elderly, frightening one woman from Broadstairs to death in 1839, so it may come as no surprise that they were outlawed in many towns.

Pagan behaviour such as this was repackaged after Christianity came to the country, the spirits of the dead replaced by souls stuck in Purgatory. From that time, a soul cake bought a blessing, a payment for a tormented soul's entry into Heaven. These cakes were still being made into the early 20th century in some parts of northern England. Recipes varied, but, typically, they were a type of oat bannock, a griddle-cake shaped into rounds or triangles. They went by several names: dole-cake in Carmarthenshire, dirge-cake in Aberdeen and tharf-cake in Yorkshire. The word *tharf* is Old English and means unleavened, solid or tough.

The ingredients were oat-meal, lard and treacle plus sugar and ground ginger,

if they could be afforded. This may seem rather austere, but these cakes are the precursor to the delicious sticky gingerbread parkin, which is still eaten in early November all over northern England. The cakes were considered good-luck charms and some, instead of being eaten, were tied to the rafters to bestow their luck upon the home. In 1830, one elderly Whitby woman reportedly had had one dried cake hanging up for at least a century, which was considered very much a family heirloom.

After the Reformation, All Souls' Day and the making of soul cakes were rejected at first as superstitious claptrap, although it was one of the most important festivals of the year. The Protestant Church took umbrage over the fact that, in being given a soul cake, one was essentially buying a soul's entry to Heaven. This was all far too Papist for its liking. Despite this, the practice hung on, mainly because of the charity aspect—charity being a most Christian act. The Church turned a blind eye and folk carried on with their traditions: it knew that to keep the populace happy and to accept new ways, it had to allow the folk a few of the more harmless elements of their previous, heretical ways. 🐉

Soul food

Soul cakes were cooked on a griddle or skillet, but to achieve success requires a great deal of practice, so it is much easier to bake them. They are fairly hefty, with something of the digestive biscuit about them, and are, therefore, good served with cheese.

Ingredients

300g fine oatmeal, plus extra for rolling
1tbspn caster sugar
½tspn baking powder
½tspn ground ginger
Pinch of salt
60g lard (or if you must, butter)
2tbspn treacle

Method

Preheat your oven to 180°C/350°F/gas mark 4. In a bowl, mix the dry ingredients together, rub in the fat and mix the treacle, so that, when thoroughly combined, a stiff dough is formed. Roll it out on an oatmeal-strewn worktop to a thickness of 5mm and cut into rounds. Prick them all over with a fork, place on a lined baking sheet and bake for 20–25 minutes. Remove and cool on a tray.

