

Pie say!

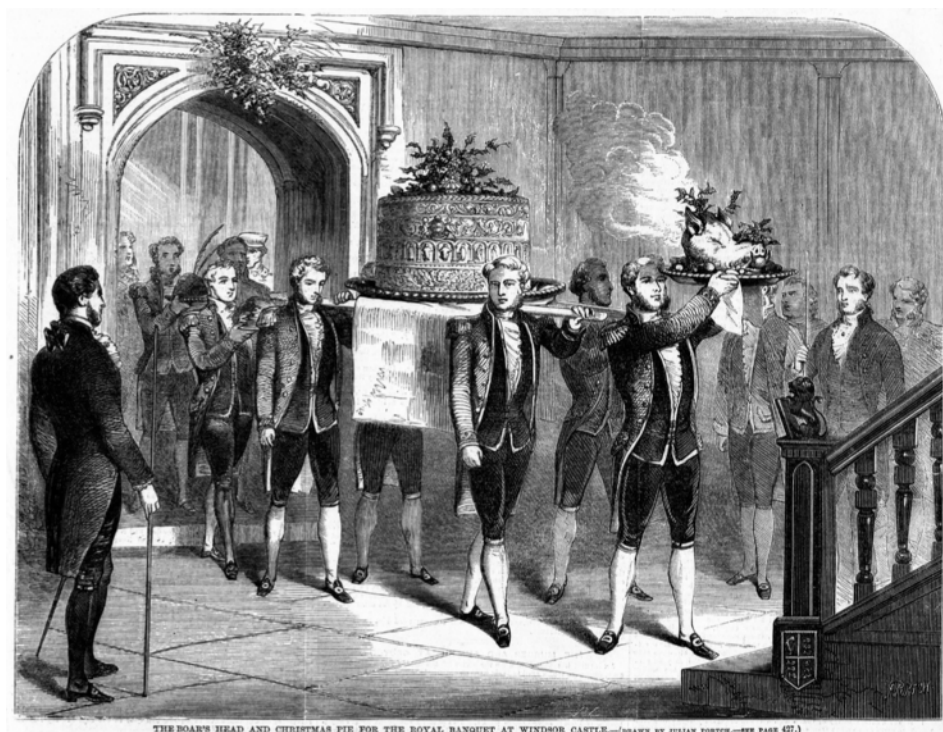
Today's baked goods pale in comparison to a Georgian festive speciality, says food historian Neil Buttery, as he lifts the lid on the Yorkshire Christmas Pye

THE pie is a true British institution, part of our cultural identity: a dish that's enjoyed every day of the year. However, as the weather turns colder and the festive season draws nearer, it becomes an occasion in itself. Elaborate pies have always been eaten at this time of year, but, during the Georgian era—a period of great pomp and excess—a tradition arose whereby wealthy Yorkshire landowners gave huge pies filled with a whole range of game and poultry from their estates to their friends in towns and cities, such as London, York and Bath. These pies, called Yorkshire Christmas Pyes, would become the upper-class, festive-sideboard essential right up to the late 19th century and were often huge. Really huge.

‘The largest Pye recorded, made in 1763, weighed 22 stone’

The first recipe for one appears in Hannah Glasse's 1747 classic *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*. Her pie is comparatively modest (as you will soon see) and requires five birds of increasing size: pigeon, partridge, chicken, goose and turkey. They were boned, heavily seasoned with nutmeg, mace, cloves and black pepper, then stuffed inside each other from smallest to largest, resulting in something that looked like a single, plump turkey, yet was, in fact, a rather grotesque Russian doll. Glasse tells us to pop it into 'a good standing Crust', advising 'that the Wall and Bottom [should] be very thick'. Once the five-bird

Calling card: three singing birds burst from a pie inside an 1890s Christmas card



THE BOAR'S HEAD AND CHRISTMAS PIE FOR THE ROYAL BANQUET AT WINDSOR CASTLE.—(DRAWN BY JULIAN FORTER.—SEE PAGE 427.)

Pie in the sky: an ornate Christmas Pye is carried aloft at a Windsor Castle banquet in 1857

monster was nestled inside its crust, any gaps should be filled on one side with jointed hare and 'on the other side... what sort of Wildfowl you can get'. This was topped with 4lb of butter, sealed with a pastry lid and baked. Once cool, the pie was popped into a horse-drawn cart and sent to the landowner's city friends.

Curiously, the pastry that covered the meat was a means of preservation and protection—it was not there to be eaten. If all was well, the pie could be kept in a cool larder, preserving its insides for up to two months. It was traditionally eaten on St Stephen's Day, December 26 (Boxing Day not yet having become a fixture). The lid was lifted, the game removed, sliced and eaten with the spiced butter and any jellied juices that had exuded from the meat as it baked—not for the faint-hearted.

These creations were difficult to make in a world before fridges, freezers and fan ovens with thermostats. They were painstakingly and beautifully decorated, too, so the pastry could not be burnt. To make things trickier, Glasse's pie was free-standing, although copper moulds would soon become available, making building these behemoths easier.

If you think that all sounds a bit much, you haven't seen anything yet. According to the January 15, 1808 edition of the *Stamford Mercury*, Earl Grosvenor, mayor of Stamford, threw

a party where 'there was a large Christmas pie, which contained three geese, three turkeys, seven hares, 12 partridges, a ham, and a leg of veal: the whole, when baked, weighed 154lbs'.

In the Victorian era, these pies were made by high-end confectioners or in house, in the case of Queen Victoria, whose Christmas Pye—served at Windsor Castle in 1857—was shown in *The Illustrated Times*. It was a whopper, 30in in diameter and 20in in height, and was carried grandly into the royal dining room by four footmen. Charles Elmé Francatelli, a former royal chef, describes the contents of a Christmas Pye in *The Modern Cook* (1846): there was a huge selection of poultry and game, all boned and stuffed with forcemeat, plus ox tongues and a York ham. He goes into great detail about how to fill the pie: 'First put the goose at the bottom with some of the small birds around it...' Any gaps were filled with forcemeat and truffles. Once baked, 'rich aspic jelly' was poured into the steam hole, to keep out air and, therefore, microbes, and bunged with a pastry rose.

The largest Christmas Pye recorded was made at Lowther Hall in the Lake District in 1763. Discovered by food historian Ivan Day, it contained 25 species of poultry and game (including 20 rabbits, 15 woodcock, a curlew and 46 yellowhammers), veal and half a ham: 'The Pye Weighed 22 stone.'

By the early 20th century, country houses had downsized their kitchens and this fashion for gargantuan pies would fade. Nonetheless, descendants of the Yorkshire Christmas Pye do live on in the special potted meats, pâtés, terrines and raised pies that are all essentials of the traditional festive sideboard today. 🍷