

A Celebration of the Sandwich...



...on its 250th Anniversary!

I never saw anything remotely wrong with the infamous British Rail sandwich. In fact I liked nothing better than to tuck into a BR cheddar cheese sandwich, an individual fruit pie and a cup of tea at one of their innumerable buffets as I spent my bachelor days exploring the rail network of the British Isles. Waxing lyrically for a moment: what I really liked about the sandwich was its plainness, the fact that it was bread, butter and cheese — and a slab of cheese, not this grated nonsense that ends up everywhere except in your mouth.

I'm drifting back to the late 1970s, early 1980s here, and the sandwich industry has changed a lot since those days, and so have our railways. You can just about get any flavour of sandwich these days, with increasingly inventive combo varieties, lathered in oodles of mayonnaise. You might struggle, however, to get anything "plain".

This year sees the 250th anniversary of the humble (or maybe not so humble) British sandwich. I was first alerted to this by a small piece in the *Daily Mail* of Monday 14th May entitled "From ham to prawns, a sandwich tour of the country".

Apparently we get through 55,600 tons of chicken sandwiches every year, nearly three times as much as our next most preferred variety, my old pal the cheddar sandwich. According to a survey carried out by the British Sandwich Association (www.sandwich.org.uk) to mark the anniversary, it seems that other favourite fillings differ across the country.

Prawn mayonnaise makes up a quarter of sandwiches sold in the south west, while the classic ham and mustard hits the top

Below: The refreshment room at Carlisle Station during the 1950s. **Above:** The Earl of Sandwich.



ten only in Scotland and the north east. The favourite sandwich in Yorkshire is chicken and bacon, while those in the south prefer egg and cress. Regional variations abound.

Although competition is building from overseas, with four per cent picking wraps and two per cent enjoying paninis, the majority (58 per cent, including me) still enjoy a sandwich lunch, featuring traditional square sandwich bread. Rolls and baguettes help make up the 252,000 tons of bread we, as a nation, get through in a year.

The BSA says that the commercial sandwich industry is worth £6 billion to the economy every year and employs some 300,000 people: more than the UK agricultural industry. In spite of pressure on consumer spending the sector continues to grow. So, 250 years after its invention, the great British sandwich is still going strong.

It is believed that John Montagu, the 4th Earl of Sandwich, invented the snack in 1762 after asking for beef between two slices of bread so that he didn't have his important card game interrupted by having to stop for food.

Montagu (1718-1792) was a British statesman who succeeded his grandfather as the Earl of Sandwich in 1729, at the age of ten. During his life he held various military and political offices, including Postmaster General, First Lord of the Admiralty

Below: Sandwiches and beer in the park.



DERRICK FURLONG



Boats on the River Stour at Sandwich in Kent.

and Secretary of State for the Northern Department, but he is perhaps best known for the claim that he was the eponymous inventor of the sandwich.

The exact circumstances of the sandwich's invention and original use are still the subject of debate. A rumour in a contemporary travel book called *Tour to London* by Pierre Jean Grosley formed the popular legend that bread and meat sustained Lord Sandwich at the gambling table. Because John Montagu was the Earl of Sandwich others began to order "the same as Sandwich", hence the "sandwich" was born.

'Sometimes I will be interrogated when I ask for a plain cheddar cheese sandwich'

A sober alternative is provided by Sandwich's biographer, N. A. M. Rodger, who suggests Sandwich's commitments to the navy, to politics and the arts meant the first sandwich was more likely to have been consumed at his work desk. I think I prefer the gambling origin; it's far more interesting and entertaining.

The first written usage of the English word appeared in historian and parliamentarian Edward Gibbon's journal of 1763, referring to "bits of cold meat" as a "sandwich". It is believed that sandwich making dates from well before this time but was largely a food eaten by peasants. The Earl's request elevated it from the fields to the tables of the aristocracy and certainly gave it the name by which we know and love it today.

The Earl also funded Captain Cook's exploration of the Pacific and was rewarded when Cook named the first land he discovered, in 1778, the Sandwich Islands (now known as Hawaii).

It is worth mentioning the town of Sandwich. The historic settlement on the River Stour in Kent has a population of around 6,800. It was one of the famed Cinque Ports and still has many original mediaeval buildings, including several listed public houses and gates in the old town walls, churches and almshouses. Once a major port, it is now two miles from the sea, but its historic centre is preserved. The derivation of the town's name is from the Saxon meaning for "Sandy Place" or "Place on the Sand".

Pleasingly there is a nearby hamlet to the south of Sandwich called Ham. A fingerpost some miles away in the village of Worth pointed towards both Ham and Sandwich, thus reading "Ham Sandwich". The sign has subsequently been removed due to repeated thefts. Presumably there were passionate devotees of the ham sandwich who just had to have such a sign in their back gardens.

And what of the sandwich today? Well, British consumers managed to eat their way through over 11.5 billion sandwiches last year and more than half of these were made and eaten in the home. Cold meat is the favourite sandwich filling in home-made sandwiches followed by hard cheese. Some 3.2 billion sandwiches are carried out of the home each year in lunch boxes, including all those made lovingly for me by my wife. Meanwhile well over 3 billion sandwiches were purchased from retail or catering outlets last year to the value of over £6 billion, making the average

price of a sandwich almost £1.91.

The record for creating the most expensive sandwich ever made is claimed by chef Tom Bridge whose Lancaster Cheese Sandwich was sold on ebay in 2006 for £345. The creation included white Umbrian truffles at £1700 per kilo. The full recipe can be found on the British Sandwich Association website.

The world's largest "pre-packed" sandwich is believed to be one created by Roberts Bakery in Norwich that was just over eight feet long and encased in 1/2 inch-thick perspex packaging. It was filled with Marmite, Princes Tuna and Hellmann's Mayonnaise and weighed the same as 1,000 loaves.

Britain's biggest sandwich retailer since 2006 has been the American franchise chain Subway, which will please my eldest grandson who is a "sub" devotee.

And for myself? Well, I may regret the passing of the British Rail sandwich but I have never lost my love affair with this British institution. I do find it harder to pick up a plain sandwich than I would like, but I can usually find something "traditional" if I look hard enough. Sometimes I will be interrogated in sandwich shops when I ask for a plain cheddar cheese sandwich; it's clearly something that isn't requested that often these days.

"Are you sure you wouldn't prefer mayo with that, sir?"

As a man who has taken a packed lunch to work for more years than I care to remember, the British sandwich remains something very close to my heart. I really like nothing better than partaking of a sandwich lunch in a traditional English tea room, with a generously sized pot of tea. That is my idea of sandwich heaven. I also achieved an ambition in 2008 when I was finally able to eat a sandwich in Sandwich. The 4th Earl would have been proud of me.

STEVE ROBERTS

Do you have a favourite sandwich?

Is it plain and traditional or a complicated creation you concocted yourself? Do you prefer brown bread or white? What, exactly, are the readers of *This England* munching? We need to know, so please don't chicken out and be scared of eggs-cressing yourself! Lettuce know by writing to: My Favourite Sandwich, This England, PO Box 52, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire GL50 1YQ.