

# THE HISTORY OF PIE & MASH

## Eels from the Thames



European Eel

If you're looking for someone or something to blame for Pie & Mash then look no further than this fellow, *Anguilla anguilla*, better known as the common European eel. It was fished on the Thames for hundreds (if not thousands) of years until the early 19th century, when the river was becoming too polluted for them to survive. Eels were a staple food for many of the poorer in London and the recipes for their preparation and cooking were widely known and published. If you care to take a look at the [recipe page](#) you'll see extracts from half a dozen books from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with copious recipes for eel pie, stewed eels, pitchcocked eels, eel soup and potted eels, to name but a few.

Fishing took a variety of forms from spearing them with tridents to catching them in vast arrays of "eel-bucks". These were large basket affairs into which eels could swim but could not escape and, in some cases, spanned the entire river and presented a formidable obstacle to river boat navigation. Eels in vast quantities were also brought up the Thames by Dutch eel barges known as "eel schuyts." These had been in operation since at least the mid seventeenth century and were commended for helping to feed the populous of London during and after the Great Fire of London in 1666. So grateful was the Government for this assistance that an Act of Parliament on 10th May 1699 gave them special privileges. More of that in a moment. One thing has to be made clear however: the Dutch eels were considered to be vastly inferior to the Thames caught ones but had the advantage of quantity rather than quality.



Eel Bucks



Now, as all Londoners know (and perhaps half the world) Billingsgate is the site of the capital's great Fish Market. But the market, which had been thriving since the tenth century, originally sold corn, coal, iron, wine, salt, pottery as well as fish. As George Henry Birch writes in *London on Thames in bygone days* (1903)

Billingsgate for many ages has been the great mart for fish. There was a natural haven here not unlike Queenhithe, but not so large, at which boats could unload. Its derivation from Belin's Gate is correct enough, but the building of the gate by " King Belin " is of course purely mythical. Originally it was not exclusively used for fish, but as a general wharf for small trading vessels, but the Fishmongers' Company, which included the Stockfishmongers, had their Hall in the neighbourhood and gradually absorbed the trade. The Old Fishmarket was in Old Fish Street. It was long famous for its fish dinners, and was a favourite resort of the citizens. Moored just off Billingsgate one still sees the Dutch eel-boats.

It was that 1699 an Act of Parliament that declared it a "free and open market for all sorts of fish whatsoever" ... except for eels. Eels could only be sold by Dutch fishermen moored in the Thames. That was their reward for helping to feed the people of London during the Great Fire.

## Piemen



"Live Eels"

Live eels were sold to the general public on the streets, as was anything that was portable. Andrew White Tuer, in his *Old London Street Cries* of 1885 recounts much older calls of "Large silver eels ! Large silver eels, a groat a pound, live eels !" and "Buy my Dish of great Eeles ?" as well as "Who's for a mutton pie, or an eel pie ?", "Hote eele pyes !" and "Piepin pys !"

So, eels and eel pies are where it all started. Street vendors, known as piemen, would sell these "penny pies" through the streets and taverns of London through the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries.

At the height of this there were reputed to be some six hundred such piemen plying their trade. A text from Francis Grose in 1796 tells us that "some trades have from time immemorial invoked musical assistance,---such as those of pie, post, and dust men, who ring a bell."



PIE MAN

Just a little note here. If you've read the blurb on the internet claiming that pie and mash shops began in the 18th century then forget it. For some reason a lot of people seem to think that the 18th century ran from 1800 to 1899 ... it didn't! The

18th century ran from 1700 to 1799 and the first eel-pie shops didn't appear until the early 19th century (1800 - 1830) - just before Victoria came to the throne. At the same time eels were on the wane to a certain extent. By the first quarter of the 19th century the Thames was so polluted that not only could it not support its own eel population, but was also responsible for killing vast quantities being carried on the Dutch eel boats to Billingsgate as they used the local water as a supply to their stock. As Walter Thornbury tells us in *Old and New London: Volume 2* (1878):

... in 1828. The masters of the Dutch eel-ships stated before the same committee that, a few years before, they could bring their live eels in "wells" as far as Gallion's Reach, below Woolwich; but now (1828) they were obliged to stop at Erith, and they had sustained serious losses from the deleterious quality of the water, which killed the fish. The increase of gas-works and of manufactories of various kinds, and of filth disgorged by the sewers, will sufficiently account for this circumstance. The number of Dutch eel-vessels which bring supplies to Billings gate varied, in 1842, from sixty to eighty annually. They brought about fifteen hundred weight of fish each, and paid a duty of £13. Mr. Butcher, an agent for Dutch fishermen, stated before the committee above mentioned that, in 1827, eight Dutch vessels arrived with full cargoes of healthy eels, about 14,000 pounds each, and the average loss was 4,000 pounds. Twelve years before, when the Thames was purer, the loss was only thirty pounds of eels a night; and the witness deposed that an hour after high water he had had 3,000 pounds of eels die in an hour. (How singularly this accounts for the cheap eel-pie!)

Back to the piemen. These characters would fill their pies with whatever they could lay their hands on. They sold eel pies (which were less prevalent because of the demise of the eels), "meat" pies and fruit pies. The meat was often of dire quality and they were known to use dead eels which were sold very cheaply by the Dutch, rather than fresh live ones. They would disguise the awful quality by dosing the fillings with large amounts of pepper. This, coupled with the fact that they did not "cover" their pies securely enough with the crust, meant that they were often responsible for outbreaks of food poisoning which in those days could be fatal. Here are a few paragraphs drawn from *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) by Henry Mayhew:

#### **OF THE NUMBER OF COSTERMONGERS AND OTHER STREET-FOLK.**

The hot pie-can is a square tin can, standing upon four legs, with a door in front, and three partitions inside; a fire is kept in the bottom, and the pies arranged in order upon the iron plates or shelves. When the pies at the bottom are sufficiently hot they are taken out, and placed on the upper shelf, whilst those above are removed to the lower compartments, by which means all the pies are kept "hot and hot."

"We never eat eel-pies," said one man to me, "because we know they're often made of large dead eels. We, of all people, are not to be had that way. But the aristocrats eats 'em and never knows the difference." I did not hear that these men had any repugnance to meat-pies; but the use of the dead eel happens to come within the immediate knowledge of the costermongers, who are, indeed, its purveyors.

The more honest costermongers will throw away fish when it is unfit for consumption, less scrupulous dealers, however, only throw away what is utterly unsaleable; but none of them fling away the dead eels, though their prejudice against such dead fish prevents their indulging in eel-pies. The dead eels are mixed with the living, often in the proportion of 20 lb. dead to 5 lb. alive, equal quantities of each being accounted very fair dealing. "And after all," said a street fish dealer to me, "I don't know why dead eels should be objected to; the aristocrats don't object to them. Nearly all fish is dead before it's cooked, and why not eels? Why not eat them when they're sweet, if they're ever so dead, just as you eat fresh herrings? I believe it's only among the poor and among our chaps, that there's this prejudice. Eels die quickly if they're exposed to the sun."

If a costermonger has an hour to spare, his first thought is to gamble away the time. He does not care what he plays for, so long as he can have a chance of winning something. Whilst waiting for a market to open, his delight is to find out some pieman and toss him for his stock, though, by so doing, he risks his marketmoney and only chance of living, to win that which he will give away to the first friend he meets. For the whole week the boy will work untiringly, spurred on by the thought of the money to be won on the Sunday. Nothing will damp his ardour for gambling, the most continued ill-fortune making him even more reckless than if he were the luckiest man alive.



(A quick note here about Victorian gambling and "Tossing the Pieman": the piemen knew that most of the local population, as well as the hawkers and peddlers, were inveterate gamblers and had been since they were children. They would therefore gamble for their pies. Tossing the Pieman meant tossing a penny coin along with a call of heads or tails. If the pieman won he would take the penny and if he lost he gave a pie. This was often the only way a pieman could get rid of his stock and make some money as many people would toss the pieman, even though they didn't actually want one of his mangy pies.)

As a result of the poor reputation earned by the piemen the new pie shops began to catch on and the piemen began a decline in trade which, by the 1850's had reached hopeless proportions. Meat pies could also be bought at coffee-stalls which were well established by the 1850's as well as at the pie shops where they could be eaten on the premises or taken away.

The following newspaper article published on 30 April 1850 pulls all this together and makes a fascinating read about the piemen of the mid-nineteenth century:

## **LABOUR AND THE POOR.**

### **THE METROPOLITAN DISTRICTS.**

**(From the Special Correspondent of the Morning Chronicle.)**

#### **Letter XIV.**

Of the hucksters of provisions, but one class remains to be described, and even that is seldom to be met with now-a-days. The penny-pie trade has passed from the streets into the shops. The following statement may be taken as a fair average of the class at present:

The itinerant meat and fruit pieman is another class of street provision merchant. The meat pies consist of mutton and beef ; the fruit, of apple, and, occasionally, mince-meat. These are sold at 1d. each. A few years ago the meat and fruit pies used to sell very well, but lately too many of the people are out of work, and they have not any money to spend. Fairs and races are generally the best places for the sale of pies in the summer. In London the best times for the sale of pies are during any grand sight or holiday-making - a review in Hyde Park, the Lord Mayor's show, the opening of Parliament, Greenwich Fair, Whitsun Monday - and, indeed, whenever anything is going on that brings the people together in large crowds. The piemen in the streets of London are seldom stationary, they go along, with their pie-can on their arm, crying "pies all hot! meat and fruit pies all hot!" This can is somewhat similar to a potato-can, but it has no boiler inside it. The pies are kept hot by means of a charcoal fire beneath, and there is a partition in the body of the can, to separate the hot from the cold pies. There are two tin drawers - one at the bottom where the hot pies are kept, and above these are the cold ones. As fast as the hot pies are sold, the cold ones above are placed on the drawer below. There is a pieman who goes about Billingsgate-market, who has pony and "shay cart." He does the best business in the pie line in town. It is believed he sells £1 worth every day ; but the generality of piemen throughout London do nothing like this " I was out myself, last night," said one to me, "from four in the afternoon til half-past twelve, and went from Somers Town to the Horse Guards, and looked in at all the public-houses on the way and I didn't take above 1s 6d. I have been out sometimes all those hours, and haven't taken more than 4d ; and out of that I have had to pay a penny for charcoal. The piemen usually make the pies themselves. The meat is mostly bought as 'pieces,' and paid for at the rate of 3d per lb. " People, when I go into houses, often begin at me, crying ' Meiwow'- and ' Bow-wow' at me, but there's nothing of that kind." The piemen usually make about five dozen of pies at a time. To do this, he takes one quartern of flour, at 6d , two pounds of suet at 6d ; one pound and a half of meat at 3d. amounting, in all to about 2s. ; to this must be added 3d for the expense of baking, 1d. for the cost of keeping hot, and 2d. for pepper, salt, and egg with which to wash them over. Hence the cost of the five dozen would be 2s. 6d. and the profit the same, The usual quantity of meat in each pie is about half an ounce. There are not more than a dozen hot-piemen now in London. There are some who carry pies about on a tray slung before them ; these are mostly boys, and, including these, the number may amount to 25 in the winter time, and to double that number in the summer, In the summer time the most business is done-the trade then is nearly double as brisk as in the

winter. This is owing to the markets being better attended ; the people generally have more money to spend. The penny-pie shops have done the street trade a great deal of harm. They have got mostly all the custom. They make them much larger than those sold in the streets. The pies in Tottenham-court road are very highly seasoned. " I bought one there the other day, and it nearly took the skin off my mouth. It was full of pepper," said a pieman to me. " The reason why they put in so large a quantity of pepper is because persons can't exactly tell the flavour of the meat with it. Piemen generally are not very particular about the flavour of the meat they buy, for they know that they can season it up into anything. The usual part of beef used is what are called ' the stickings ' This is what is mostly used for sausages, and costs about 3d per pound. In the summer time, a pieman about the streets thinks he is doing a good business if he takes 5s per day, and in the winter if he gets half that. On a Saturday night, however, he generally takes 5s in the winter and about 8s in the summer. At Greenwich fair he will take about 14s. At a review in Hyde Park, if it is a good one, he will sell about 10s worth. The generality of the customers are the boys of London. The women seldom, if ever, buy them in the streets. At the public-houses a few are sold, and the pieman makes a practice of looking in at all the public-houses on his way, Here his customers are found principally in the tap-room. ' Here's all hot," they cry, as they look into the tap-room. ' Toss or buy , up and win 'em.' This is the only way that the pies can be got rid of. If it wasn't for tossing we shouldn't sell one." The pieman never tosses, himself, but always calls head or tail to the customer. At the week's end it comes to the same thing, whether they toss or not. " I've taken as much as 2s 6d at tossing, which I shouldn't have had if I hadn't done so. Very few people buy without tossing, and the boys in particular. Gentlemen ' out on the spree ' at the late public-houses will frequently toss when they don't want the pies, and when they have won they will amuse themselves by throwing the pies at one another, or at me. The boys have the greatest love of gambling, and they seldom, if ever, buy without tossing. Sometimes I have taken as much as half-a-crown, and the people has never eaten a pie." For street mince-meat pies the pieman usually makes about 5lbs of mince-meat at a time ; and for this he will put in 2 dozen apples, 1 lb of sugar, 1 lb of currants, 2 lbs of "critlings" (critlings being the refuse left after boiling down the lard), a good bit of spice to give the critlings a flavour, and plenty of treacle to make the mince-meat look rich. The ' gravy' which used to be given with the meat pies consisted of a little salt and water poured out of an oil can. A hole was made with the little finger in the top of the meat pie, and the " gravy" poured in till the crust rose. With this gravy a person in the line assured me that he has known pies four days old to go off very freely, and be pronounced excellent. The street pie- men are mostly bakers, who are unable to obtain employment at their trade. " I myself," said one "was a bread and biscuit baker. I have been at it now about two years and a half, and I can't get a living at it. Last week my earnings were not more than 7s. all the week through, and I was out till three o'clock in the morning to get that." The piemen seldom begin business till six o'clock, and some remain out all night. The best time for the sale of pies is generally from ten at night to one in the morning.

Remember the old children's nursery rhyme "Simple Simon met a pieman going to the fair."?

Andrew White Tuer (1885) can help us again here:

Years ago the tin oven of the peripatetic penny pieman was found to be too small to meet the constant and ever-increasing strain made upon its resources ; and the owner thereof has now risen to the dignity of a shop, where, in addition to stewed eels, he dispenses what Albert Smith happily termed "covered uncertainties," containing messes of mutton, beef, or seasonable fruit. Contained in a strong wicker basket with legs, or in a sort of tin oven, the pieman's wares were formerly kept hot by means of a small charcoal fire. A sip of a warm stomachic liquid of unknown but apparently acceptable constituents was sometimes offered gratuitously by way of inducement to purchase. The cry of "Hot Pies" still accompanies one of the first and most elementary games of the modern baby learning to speak, who is taught by his nurse to raise his hand to imitate a call now never heard.

## **Pie and Mash Shops**

The pie shops of the mid-nineteenth century sold pies filled with meat (predominantly beef or mutton) or eels and stewed eels and began to serve the pies with mashed potato, as this was a cheap staple food. The first recorded Eel and Mash shop was being run by a Henry Blanchard at 101 Union Street (SE1 0LQ) in 1844. The shop sold both eel and meat pies at a penny each with mash and live eels. By 1874 there were 33 such shops listed.

These new eel pie and mash shops became very popular with the poor working classes, as they served hot nourishing meals very cheaply. To ensure repeat custom (and not kill their clientele) they could not afford to serve the unhealthy quality of food that had been on offer by the pieren. The shops began to flourish and spread across the Eastend of London, where the main body of poor working class lived and worked. Pie and Mash shops opened all over, chains of shops formed and Pie and Mash became entrenched in Eastend culture.

The oldest Pie and Mash shop in London today is Goddard's Pie Shop, opened in 1890 by Albert Goddard and still going strong today.

However, national tastes have changed over the years, as has the ethnic makeup of the Eastend. Pie and mash shops have been steadily displaced by fast-food burger bars, Indian and Chinese takeaways and restaurants. Today there are less than 80 shops operating, spread over the South East of England, but still concentrated in the Eastend.

Each successive wave of immigrants has brought elements of their own culture with them to enrich our own cultural heritage. From the French and Dutch Huguenot silk weavers of the early 1700's, when one quarter of the area spoke only French, through the Jewish wave in the mid to late nineteenth century to the modern day influx of Asian people, each has left an indelible mark.

Incidentally, it was a Jewish man named Joseph Malin who opened the first fish and chips shop in London (Cleveland Street, Bethnal Green) in 1860. These early fish and chip shops stank because the fish was fried in a large vat or cauldron filled with animal fat, heated by a coal fire. In Dundee, Scotland the first shop was opened in the 1870's by Belgian immigrant Edward De Gernier and in Ireland the first fish and chips were sold by an Italian immigrant, Giuseppe Servi from a handcart outside pubs.

**So, where does the liquor come in to it?** Well, if you go back to those old cook books on the [recipes page](#) you'll see plenty of references to liquor. It was, quite simply, the liquid left over from stewing or boiling eels. This was often made into a sauce or gravy by addition of herbs, particularly parsley which was a natural accompaniment to fish dishes. It was quite a natural step for them to serve this green gravy with their eels and mash.

**Fork and Spoon:** a lot of pie and mash fans will tell you that they only use a fork and spoon and that it's hardly de rigueur to use a knife. Why? Well, according to an interview with Fred Cooke in 1989 there was a shortage of knives during World War I and customers of such establishment nicked the knives, so only forks and spoons were available. However, in a subsequent Channel 4 interview with an Emily Giggins, who was born in 1908 and has eaten at Cooke's since she was a young girl, she says that "knives were banned because of fighting between the customers." Well, whatever the reason it has become a tradition.

## Chronology

1844	First recorded occurrence of an eel and mash shop run by Henry Blanchard in Union Street.
1860	First fish and chip shop opened by Joseph Malin.
1889	Robert Cooke opened his first Eel and Pie shop at Clerkenwell, then one in Watney Street E1 and Hoxton Street N1.
1890	Alfred Goddard opens his shop in Evelyn Street, Deptford.
1900	Fred Cooke started selling jellied eels on Broadway Market.
1902	Michele Manze, who emigrated to London from Ravello in Italy in 1878 at the age of three, married Cooke's daughter Ada (Michele was her second husband) and opened a shop in Tower Bridge Road.
1908	Manze's second shop opened in Southwark Park Road, Bermondsey.
1910	Cooke's eel and pie business, from Shoreditch, opened a branch at 41 Kingsland High Street; as F. Cooke's.
1914	Mrs Emily Louise Arment and her husband William Peter Arment purchased an eel &

	pie house at 386 Walworth Road, SE17 from the Evans family.
1915	Irish immigrant Samuel Robert Kelly opened his first shop in Bethnal Green Road.
1919	Tubby Isaacs first seafood stall setup in Petticoat Lane.
1927	Michael Manze opens his fifth and final shop at 105 Peckham High Street
1929	Luigi Manze built and opened the shop at 76 High Street, Walthamstow. Mrs Grace Ida Taylor opened her eel pie-making business at 207 Hammersmith Road, W6
1931	William Arment died.
1932	Michele Manze died.
1936	Lil Castle opens her Pie & Mash shop at 229 Royal College Street, Camden Town.
1945	Emily Arment died.
1952	Goddard's open shop in Greenwich.
1985	Manze's in Peckam burned down in the riots.
1988	Lionel Manze died.
1990	Manze's shop in peckham re-opened Dave Goddard died.
2006	Goddard's in Greenwich closes when sold.
2010	Poison The Bar in Basingstoke serves up Goddards Pie, Mash & Liquor.

Poison the Bar welcomes you all and hopes you enjoy our Pie, Mash & Liquor, and if you did we would just like to say

**“Spread the word”**