

The History of Royal Icing

Christine Flinn, Cheshire, United Kingdom

Christine Flinn is from Great Britain and while chatting with her via FaceBook I convinced her to share her expertise in the field of Royal Icing. She is an avid collector of books and certainly loves to talk about it. She has kindly shared an article about the history of Royal Icing for the ICES Newsletter. – Anthony Pena, NY

A little bit of Royal Icing history – Royal Icing was only known as 'white icing' until it was used on Queen Victoria's wedding cake in 1840 after which it was referred to as "Royal Icing".

Royal Icing was the icing of choice in the United Kingdom until the early 1980s, but unfortunately has fallen out of favour with the cake decorators in the UK. Now we simply follow the rest of the world, with a dependence on sugarpaste or rolled fondant (as known in the United States) as both a covering and decorating medium.

In recent years, there has been resurgence of interest in Royal Icing, but with a larger focus on the piped embroidery style – there is so much more that can be done with Royal Icing than this one technique! I want to encourage interest in other styles, as with the decreasing number of skilled users of Royal Icing it seems these skills may be lost. Some of the Royal Icing work I have seen in recent cake decorating books is very poor, and is placed alongside incorrect information. Those new to this "form of cake decorating" can be fooled into thinking that these poor examples are what they should be aiming for.

To try and rectify this in 2012, I requested a display table at the British Sugarcraft Guild 7th International Exhibition, it has since been on display at Cake International (NEC in Birmingham, London and Manchester) – based on the various techniques within Royal Icing, the display table is a work in progress (I can see it taking a number of years to complete). Starting with the early 1900s style, the table progresses chronologically, finishing with a design for the modern – day customer. I must admit, I was taken aback at the level of interest shown for the two early 1900s style cakes featuring cushion work, piped scrolls and grapes.

Frequently asked questions were related to the time period and techniques. The cushion work cake, also referred to as "net work" took 40 hours to complete. The technique is simple and very repetitive – you merely pipe one line on top of another. On my cake, the cushion is roughly 20 lines deep. The piped scrolls and grapes cake was much less time-consuming, at around 20 hours. This cake has inverted scallops, and it should be noted that piped lines must be piped with regards to gravity – cakes undergoing this form of decoration will spend a fair amount of time upside down.

Most of the piping techniques we use today were created in the late 1800s to early 1900s, using very similar (if not identical) equipment. Whilst it is the nature of art to progress with the times, and for decorators to continually strive to push the boundaries of our art, we should also refer back to the techniques of the past lest they be forgotten. When we think of Royal Icing, it shouldn't merely be a thing of nostalgia.

Credit should be given where due to the great cake decorators (royal icers) which preceded us – Ernest Schulbe, Herr T. Willy, Edwin Schur, Fred Schur, Ronnie Rock, Alex Bransgrove, Eddie Spence, Audrey Holding, Lindsay John Bradshaw, Nadene Hurst, Colin Burge, Lesley Herbert. Each of these outstanding decorators had their own, distinctive style – no labels were necessary to identify their cakes.

In the style of Ernest Schulbe, from his book published in 1898, the piped decoration around the top edge of this cake is called cushion work. This form of decoration is created by piping a number of lines directly on top of the previous line the cushion work on this cake is twenty lines deep.





Another example of the Ernest Schulbe style of piping from his book published in 1898. All piped lines need to be piped with gravity (not against) and as such this cake is required to be upside down for part of the piping.

This stacked royal iced wedding cake with sugar flowers is in the style of George Cox from his book which was first published in 1901. This just goes to show that stacked cakes are not a new idea and neither are sugar flowers.



A royal iced cake in the style of S.P. Borella from his book, published in 1910.



This style is often called in the "Nirvana style" (a design with the main form of decoration created by run outs) has been around since the 1920s. This example would have been created as a competition piece and is made up of 55 run out pieces.

Ernest Cardnell wrote under the pseudonym name "Nirvana". There are a number of books, however this design is from his book which was published in 1954. He "did not invent" the idea of run sugar collars/pieces this technique had been around a number of years before his books were published

A royal iced cake in the style of Nirvana, which would have been sold to a customer (in the 1950's) was commercially viable in regards to the number of hours required to create it.

Audrey Holding, author of two books 'The Art of Royal Icing' published 1980 and 'The Practice of Royal icing' published 1987. Studied and attained a City and Guilds certificated 'Design and Decoration of Flour Confectionery' in

Manchester. She was a lecturer at Tameside Bakery College, and was an active member of the British Sugarcraft Guild and for a time was its Honorary President. Audrey lived in Glossop, Derbyshire, died a few years ago.



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Lindsay John Bradshaw – author of numerous cake decorating books. Studied and attained a City and Guilds certificate in 'Design and Decoration of Flour Confectionery' in Manchester. Was a lecturer at Salford College. He was an active member of the British Sugarcraft Guild and for a time was the Editor of its quarterly publication.

Lesley Herbert is well known for her extension work / sugar flowers. She developed the method of using greased pins for the bridgeless extension work. An author of Professional Touches, the Ultimate Book of Wedding Cakes, the Complete Book of Sugar Flowers, Pressure piping, Painting on Sugar and Bas Relief as part of the booklets sugar craft skills series She was a lecturer at Brooklands College (now retired) and currently is one of the main judges at Cake International and Hotel Olympia salon Culinaire exhibition in United Kingdom.



About the Sugarcraft designer

Christine Flinn Studied Cake Decoration and Flour Confectionery at Newcastle upon Tyne College of Arts and Technology, where She received a City and Guilds qualification in that medium in 1982. In 1989, She became an Accredited Demonstrator for the British Sugarcraft Guild. In 1994 she was approached to write a book on advanced piping techniques focusing on "Extension Work", which was later published worldwide in 1996.



In 2012 she judged at the Grand National Wedding Competition in Tulsa, Oklahoma which is the second largest cake show in the world, this show however offers the largest prizes in the world .

She has taught various classes as well as given demonstrations in the United Kingdom, where she regularly conducts workshops in Cheshire, internationally in Australia , Italy and the ICES conventions in the United States of America .

Her latest book "Piping on Cakes" is aimed for beginners – intermediate Royal icing enthusiasts.

Thank you to Christine Flinn for collaborating with Anthony Pena in the writing of this article. 🍷