

Below, from left Kate Middleton on her wedding day at Buckingham Palace, 2011; Fiona Cairns and her team put finishing touches on the cake in the Palace's Picture Gallery



QUEEN VICTORIA'S MEASURED three yards across, Queen Elizabeth II's was nine-foot tall, and the Duke of Cambridge's was so large that manoeuvring it required a door to be taken off its hinges in Buckingham Palace. Traditionally big, white, and backed up behind the scenes with a great many more slices than the main structure could possibly yield, royal wedding cakes come under (almost) as much scrutiny as the dress. For the marriage of a 20-year-old Queen Victoria to Prince Albert in 1840, a 300lb fruit cake was baked, 14 inches deep, and topped with

sugar figurines that included the happy couple dressed in the costume of Ancient Greece in the shadow of an edible Britannia, arms outstretched in blessing. Pity, then, the Palace's in-house confectioner, John Chichester Mawditt, whose creation was criticised by some members of the press for being boring. *'The Morning Post* reported that it looked a bit like a cheese, and was rather clumsy,' says the food historian Annie Gray. 'Tiers hadn't come in at all at that stage; you just had a big cake, and size mattered.' In fact, says Gray, the journalist 'much preferred' one of the

many other cakes supplied for the wedding, made by society caterer Gunter's.

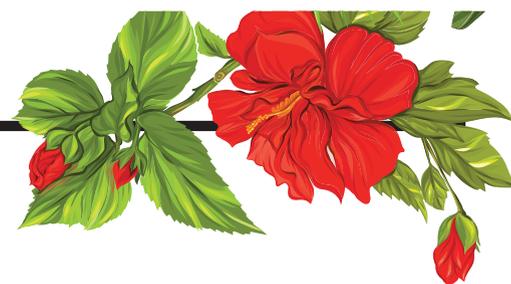
It's a tough gig being the royal cake-maker. When the engagement of Prince William and Kate Middleton was announced in November 2010, Fiona Cairns' customers immediately asked her if she had been chosen to provide the centrepiece. The Leicestershire-based creator of luxury tiers and intricate sugar flowers, who supplies Harrods and Fortnum & Mason as well as fulfilling bespoke orders for wedding cakes that cost anything from £500 to £20,000, gave the same answer every time: 'No,



A SLICE OF THE ACTION

Back-up tiers, police guards and goddesses made of sugar... Creating a royal wedding cake is anything but dull. By Amy Bryant

GETTY IMAGES



Lady Diana Spencer on her wedding day in 1981; the cake, made by chief petty officer cook David Avery



Princess Elizabeth with her father, King George VI, at her wedding in 1947; visitors at the Huntley & Palmers factory in Reading view a replica of her wedding cake

and I wouldn't want to do it anyway.'

'I really meant it,' she tells me. 'What a lot of pressure!' Pressure Cairns duly had to shoulder after, in February 2011, she received a call out of the blue asking if she would be like to be considered. 'All of a sudden I changed my mind,' she admits with a laugh. 'It was a huge honour.'

After a meeting with the future bride, during which she explained her brief, the process moved swiftly – it had to, with the wedding two months away. 'We developed at least half a dozen fruit-cake recipes, using different alcohol and nuts,' Cairns recalls. 'We submitted mood boards, scale drawings, and miniature cakes, showing samples of the icing, flowers, tones of cream – Kate's colour request – and piping techniques.' After a few days of waiting, a second phone call confirmed the commission and her bakery team spent six weeks working on the 17 cakes for the main display. Local police kept watch overnight to prevent break-ins. It was assembled over two and a half days at Buckingham Palace, and more than 900 sugar flowers – an expression of the 'language of flowers' made popular by Queen Victoria – adorned the eight tiers. Cairns' team also baked 4,000 slices to be sent out as gifts in commemorative tins, 600 slices for reception guests – 'The cake was sliced symbolically by William and



Kate, but there wasn't time to take it away and cut it into portions' – and extra tiers 'in case anything happened'.

At royal weddings, 'there are always a lot more people eating the cakes than those you see at the actual event', says Gray. It was after Victoria's that the structures got taller. (Prince Leopold's, in 1882, was the first to employ pillars, finished in satin.) For the then Princess Elizabeth's wedding cake in 1947, ingredients were flown in from around the Commonwealth, gaining it the nickname 'the 10,000-mile cake'. It weighed 500 pounds and the royal icing (which gained its regal status after featuring on Victoria's fruit cake) bore scenes of the couple's favourite pastimes. The decoration was presided over by Mr Schur, chief confectioner at McVitie & Price Ltd, the company that had produced the principal cake for the future King George V. In 2011, McVitie's collaborated on a chocolate biscuit cake for Prince

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William's wedding, a nod to the tiffin of his childhood. Carolyn Robb, who worked as a chef in the Royal household for the Prince and Princess of Wales and a young William and Harry, remembers making it for nursery tea. 'The boys often took some back to boarding school in their tuck boxes,' she recalls.

Family occasions were often marked with desserts loaded with fruit from Highgrove. For the Prince of Wales's 50th birthday, his teenage sons asked Robb for creamed chicken with leeks and mushrooms, followed by apple and blackberry crumble. 'I wasn't surprised to hear Harry and Meghan chose lemon and elderflower for their cake,' Robb says. 'It seems fitting and natural.'

And the commemorative slices? A boxed piece of the Prince and Princess of Wales's five-foot cake, made by the Naval Armed Forces, was sold in 2015 for £920. In the same year a slice from the Queen's cake was auctioned for £500. 'I keep mine,' says Cairns of her treasured portion from the royal wedding cake she made, 'in a safe place, locked away. It's a very special thing indeed.' ♦