

Tom Smith Crackers

In 1847, almost by accident, Tom Smith invented the cracker. It was a simple idea which became an integral part of British celebration and tradition which still continues today, 150 years on. In its simple form a cracker is a small cardboard tube covered in a brightly coloured twist of paper. When the cracker is 'pulled' by two people, each holding one end of the twisted paper, the friction creates a small explosive 'pop' produced by a narrow strip of chemically impregnated paper. The cardboard tube tumbles a bright paper hat, a small gift, a balloon and a motto or joke.

Early History of the Cracker

In early 1830, Tom Smith started work as a small boy in a bakers and ornamental confectioners shop in London, selling sweets such as fondants, pralines and gum pastilles. He worked hard and took particular interest in the wedding cake ornaments and decorations, experimenting and creating new, more exciting and less crude designs in his spare time.

Before long he was successful enough to leave and start up his own business in East London. He was adventurous and forward thinking, often travelling abroad to search for new ideas, it was on a trip to Paris in 1840 that he first discovered the 'bon bon', a sugared almond wrapped in a twist of tissue paper. It was a simple idea which, over the next 7 years, would eventually evolve into the Cracker. He decided to bring the 'bon bon' to London and during Christmas that year they sold extremely well, but in January demand virtually ceased and once again he was reliant on sales of cake and table decorations and ornaments.

Anxious to develop the 'bon bon' idea further and stimulate sales, Tom decided to place a small love motto in the tissue paper and he encouraged his regular customers to take supplies, many did, and within a short while, orders were sufficiently high and sales profitable enough for him to increase his staff. By now, Tom knew that he had a unique and potentially very commercial idea. He decided to take a risk and concentrate on developing it further, while still running the wedding cake ornament and confectionery business which was by now very well established.

At this time, the majority of 'bon bons' were still sold at Christmas and he began to think up ways to capitalise on this short but very profitable season and make his 'bon bons' even more appealing. It was the crackle of a log as he threw it on his fire that gave him the flash of inspiration which eventually led to the crackers we know today.

Invention of the Cracker

A 'crackle' would add the necessary excitement and spark to his novelty 'bon bon' and it was now simply a matter of experimentation to find a compound which gave a satisfactory bang without going too far. The size of the 'bon bon' would also need to increase significantly to accommodate the 'cracking mechanism' but the shape remained the same and the motto was still included.

Eventually Tom perfected his chemical explosion to create a 'pop' caused by friction when the wrapping was broken. This eventually became the snap and the cracker was born. The trade jumped at Tom Smith's latest novelty, and he was snowed under with orders. Very quickly he began to refine his product - he dropped the sweet and the 'bon bon' name, calling his new crackers Cosaques, but he kept the motto and added a surprise gift. Delighted at his overnight success Tom decided to explore the export market and took his cracker abroad. At this time, only one design of cracker was being made and to his horror, an Eastern manufacturer seized his idea, copied it and delivered a consignment of crackers to Britain just before Christmas.

Not surprisingly, in true fashion, Tom immediately rose to the challenge; he designed 8 different kinds of cracker, worked his staff day and night and distributed stocks throughout the country also in time for Christmas. After this he never looked back. Tom Smith lived to see the new branch of his firm grow to swamp the original premises in London. The company moved to Finsbury Square in the City of London where it remained until 1953.