



Chocolate traditions

With Easter upon us, I've been given the arduous task of investigating the festivities associated with certain confectionery. The shops are bristling with all sorts of chocolate in various forms, eggs, rabbits, chickens and for some reason fish and bells with wings.

For a chocoholic like myself, Easter is a kind of nirvana, so it wasn't hard to persuade me to embark upon my own personal journey of enlightenment. My quest for knowledge started with the origins of all those delightful confectionery creatures. After all you should always know where your food comes from.

Chocolate Easter eggs and birds given as presents during the Easter holidays have a very ancient history indeed. Of course they weren't chocolate to begin with. The egg is one of the oldest symbols for fertility and rebirth in the world. In fact the Egyptians, Persians and Phoenecians all believed that the earth was hatched from an egg. Pre-Christians throughout the Northern hemisphere celebrated the Spring equinox by giving decorated eggs as presents to children and young couples. The goddess Astara who represented fertility and the cycle of rebirth was most commonly associated with the beginning of the festival which we now call Easter. Organised Christianity borrowed the symbol of the egg as the metaphor of the stone blocking the sepulchre being rolled away. The forty days of fasting during Lent meant that Christian communities had an awful lot of boiled eggs going begging at the end of the festival, hence the current practice of giving Easter eggs at Easter. Hunting for painted eggs is a common infant pastime in France on Easter Sunday as is throwing and catching raw eggs. The child that drops a raw egg has to forfeit a chocolate one. So, if you've a toddler handy for the Easter period you should be able to acquire a few extra choccy treats by lobbing raw eggs at them.

The rabbit, a symbol of fertility and reproduction for obvious reasons, is again closely linked to Pre-Christian beliefs. This representation of sex has been carefully ignored by the Church at Easter. In some Northern European countries the special Easter Rabbit lays eggs as a present for children – well, no less plausible than a fat man in a red suit climbing down your chimney. Chocolate bunnies are, in fact, a tiny experiment with irony as chocolate has a very similar effect on the pleasure centres of the brain as having a bit of a cuddle with your wife. Fertility goddesses everywhere should now be smiling. However, some of the more unfamiliar chocolate figures in the chocolate shop do have a direct link with the Christian Easter practice. The bells with wings. Listen out from Maundy Thursday until Easter Sunday morning, you won't hear a single church bell. They are silent until the resurrection. Children, bless them, believe that church bells grow wings and fly to Rome. On their return they bring back chocolate for all the children. Instead of giving up the real eggs for Lent many give up chocolate, so flying bells would sound good to me after forty days of abstention.

That explains the bells but what about the fish? The more astute of you will have made connection between chocolate fish and the symbol of the early Christian Church and you'd be wrong. These confectionery beauties hit the shops on April Fools Day or, as they

say around here, 'Poisson d'avril'. Once upon a time it was common practice on this day to send the naïve and gullible down to the fish market to buy a fish that was not in season, and so, unavailable. Every bit as amusing as sending your son down to the shops for a tin of elbow grease or a long wait. However, nowadays the little tykes have turned the tables and spend the day trying to stick paper fish on the backs of unsuspecting passers-by, then their parents buy them chocolate fish. Amazing !

However, none of this explains how presents at Easter came to be chocolate shaped – whatever ! Back in the old days, or BC as I like to call it, before chocolate, any kind of food was pretty special, which kind of explains turnips. Anyway, during Lent, anything remotely enjoyable was banned so a slap up feed was in order as soon as the forty days were up. The higher status you were, the more expensive the feast and the gifts more extravagant. In Russia royalty gave jewel encrusted Fabergé eggs which were brilliant except, of course, they weren't edible. Anyway, Europeans gave each other sweets in an egg-shaped containers until some genius in France, in the nineteenth century, developed a way of manufacturing solid chocolate eggs. Decades later they developed the technology to create more modern hollow egg. A backward step in my mind, but you can't halt progress.

Our own beloved Cadbury's pinched the idea forty years later and the UK have been happily wolfing down Easter confectionery ever since. Last year (2011) Britain munched its' way through six million Easter bunnies, one hundred and fifty million Easter eggs and an astounding two hundred and thirteen million Cream eggs. I couldn't find figures for the sale of superior French chocolate but I would like to think that our hosts are a little more refined.

Well, that's about it. I've been staring at these chocolate fish long enough. Mmmmm, oh, oh, oh this is delicious. Would you like a small piece darling.....?

