The Bath Oliver: a Georgian doctor's cheese biscuit, and how it vanished in 2025

From the crackers.biz wiki

The Bath Oliver was a hard, dry round baked from flour, butter and milk raised with yeast, and it was eaten with cheese for around 270 years. It is credited to William Oliver, a physician who practised in Bath from about 1725 and is said to have created it around 1750 as a lighter alternative to the Bath bun for his rheumatic patients. He passed the recipe to his coachman, Atkins. The last maker stopped production in October 2020 and confirmed in February 2025 that it was discontinued.

A cracker with a doctor's name

Most crackers are named after a place, a shape or what goes into them. The Bath Oliver was named after a man. For around 270 years it sat on British cheese boards, a pale, hard, dry round, plain enough to leave the cheese to do the talking. Then, quietly, it disappeared. There were no more after 2020, and in 2025 its maker confirmed that none would be made again.

Its story takes in a Georgian doctor, a lucky coachman, the Crown Jewels and a surprising number of novels.

Dr Oliver of Bath

William Oliver was born at Ludgvan in Cornwall in August 1695. According to his Wikipedia biography, he went up to Pembroke College, Cambridge in 1714, studied at Leiden in the Netherlands, and took his doctorate in medicine in 1725. Before settling down he practised at Plymouth, where he introduced inoculation against smallpox.

Around 1725 he moved to the spa city of Bath, and within a very short time he had the leading medical practice in the city. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1730. Ralph Allen, a fellow Cornishman living at Bath, became his friend and introduced him to Alexander Pope and the other guests at Allen's house, Prior Park.

In 1740 Oliver was appointed physician to the Water or General Hospital, now known as the Royal Mineral Water Hospital, and he ran it until 1761. In 1742 William Hoare painted him with his colleague Peirce, a picture made for the hospital. He wrote on the use and abuse of warm bathing for gout in 1751, and a short sketch of the life of the late Mr Nash, the master of ceremonies at Bath. He died in the city in March 1764.

The bun and the biscuit

Here the story turns to baking. Wikipedia's article on Oliver says that he invented the Bath bun, a rich, sweet roll, and that it proved too fattening for his rheumatic patients. So he created a plainer thing to go with their diet: the Bath Oliver biscuit, which the Bath Oliver article dates to around 1750.

Its dough was flour, butter and milk, raised with yeast, and it was baked until hard and dry. That makes it an unusual cracker by today's standards. Most crackers on our shelf are raised with bicarbonate of soda, and some with nothing at all: the label of Carr's Table Water lists just flour, palm oil and salt. The Bath Oliver was a yeasted dough, closer in method to the Jacob's cream cracker, which also uses yeast, but made richer with butter and milk. Our article on how cream crackers are made explains what a long yeast ferment does to a cracker dough.

Next to today's cheese crackers

Set beside the labels of crackers still on sale, the Bath Oliver's recipe stands out:

- The Bath Oliver, as Wikipedia describes it: flour, butter, yeast and milk.
- Carr's Table Water: flour, palm oil and salt, with no raising agent at all.
- Jacob's Cream Crackers: flour, palm oil, salt, bicarbonate of soda and yeast.
- Nairn's Rough Oatcakes: wholegrain oats at 90 per cent, with sunflower and palm fruit oils, sea salt and bicarbonate of soda.

Dairy was the Bath Oliver's signature. None of the three crackers lists butter or milk; all of them use vegetable oils instead. The oatcake is also the only one of the three made mainly from oats rather than wheat flour.

The coachman's fortune

What happened next is the part everyone remembers. Before he died, Oliver confided the recipe to his coachman, Atkins. The gift came with money, 100 pounds of it, and ten sacks of the best wheat flour. Atkins went into business baking the biscuits, and Wikipedia names the later owners of the business: bakers called Norris, then Carter, and in the nineteenth century James Fortt.

A recipe that began as a doctor's diet biscuit had become a Bath speciality, and in time it became a national one. In its final years it was made by United Biscuits and sold as the Jacob's Bath Oliver. Our articles on United Biscuits and Jacob's crackers tell the story of those companies.

The Crown Jewels in a biscuit tin

The oddest chapter belongs to the Second World War. At Windsor Castle, according to Wikipedia, the royal archivist prised all the major stones out of the royal regalia and put them inside a Bath Oliver tin, so that they could be carried off quickly if the Germans invaded. Few crackers can claim to have guarded a nation's jewels.

A biscuit in books and on screen

The Bath Oliver was familiar enough to turn up in fiction. Wikipedia lists it in Rebecca, in Evelyn Waugh's Brideshead Revisited, in Michael Innes's detective story Hamlet, Revenge!, in Mary Norton's The Borrowers

and in Kipling's Puck of Pook's Hill, as well as in Hugh Kenner's The Pound Era and the mysteries of M. J. Trow. On television it appeared in the sitcoms Are You Being Served? and Porridge.

How it disappeared

The end came without fanfare. In October 2020, Wikipedia says, United Biscuits temporarily suspended production of Bath Olivers because of disruption caused by the Covid pandemic, without announcing it first. Shoppers who asked were told, in February 2025, by emails from United Biscuits Consumer Services, that the 225g pack was discontinued and was unlikely ever to return.

What to put the cheese on now

Nothing we sell is a Bath Oliver, and we would not pretend otherwise. But the job it did, a plain, crisp base that lets a good cheese shine, is one plenty of crackers still do well. Carr's Table Water is thin and neutral. Jacob's Cream Crackers share the Bath Oliver's yeast and are sturdy enough for a thick slice of Cheddar. Nairn's Rough Oatcakes bring more flavour of their own, and Jacob's Biscuits for Cheese puts eight kinds in one box for a board.

For the story of another old cheese cracker that is still made, see Carr's water biscuits and the Carlisle bakery, and for matching crackers to cheeses, our guide to the best crackers for cheese.

Quick facts

Dough	Flour, butter and milk, raised with yeast
Named after	Dr William Oliver (1695 to 1764), physician in Bath
Created	Around 1750
Recipe passed to	His coachman Atkins, plus 100 pounds in cash and ten sacks of flour
Wartime role	Its tin hid the Crown Jewels' major stones at Windsor
Production	Paused October 2020, declared discontinued February 2025

Questions people ask

Can you still buy Bath Olivers?

Not from their last maker. United Biscuits paused production in October 2020, and in February 2025 its consumer services team wrote that the Jacob's Bath Oliver 225g had been discontinued and would probably never be made again, according to Wikipedia.

Is there anything like a Bath Oliver today?

Nothing on sale is quite the same, because the Bath Oliver was a yeasted biscuit made with butter and milk. For a plain, dry base for cheese, try Carr's Table Water, Jacob's Cream Crackers or Nairn's Rough Oatcakes.

Who was Dr William Oliver?

A physician born in Ludgvan, Cornwall, in 1695, who studied at Cambridge and Leiden, settled in Bath around 1725 and served the Water or General Hospital there from 1740 to 1761. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society and a friend of Ralph Allen, who introduced him to Alexander Pope.

Why were the Crown Jewels kept in a Bath Oliver tin?

During the Second World War, Wikipedia says, the royal archivist prised the major stones out of the regalia and put them in a Bath Oliver tin at Windsor Castle, so they could be taken away quickly if the Germans invaded.

Did Dr Oliver invent the Bath bun too?

Wikipedia's article on him says so, and adds that the bun proved too fattening for his rheumatic patients, which is why he went on to create the Bath Oliver biscuit.

Where does the Bath Oliver turn up in fiction?

On television in Porridge and Are You Being Served?; in print in Brideshead Revisited, Rebecca, The Borrowers, Hamlet, Revenge! and Kipling's Puck of Pook's Hill, among others.

Sources

1. Bath Oliver, Wikipedia
2. William Oliver (physician, 1695 to 1764), Wikipedia
3. Original Table Water (5000168001104), Open Food Facts
4. Cream Crackers Original (5000137415970), Open Food Facts
5. Rough Oatcakes (061232203072), Open Food Facts

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