

# Pasties in Pachuca: the role of women in preserving Cornish identity in Mexico

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## Introduction

Since the 1820s, Real del Monte and Pachuca in Hidalgo, Mexico, have been home to a Cornish mining community. Initially hired by the London-based Company of Adventurers, many of the miners stayed on even after the mines were taken over by a group of Mexican investors in 1848. Furthermore, the decline of the mining industry in Cornwall from the 1840s caused a new wave of migrants to make their way to this part of Mexico.

Cornish heritage in the region ranges from mining technology and machinery to tennis and football, from Methodism to Cornish pasties. The Cornish also created some of the oldest schools in the area, a Methodist church and a cemetery. In September this year the cemetery became the first overseas site to be recognised as part of the Cornish Mining World Heritage site.



Real del Monte; the clock tower in Pachuca (the clock was imported from England).

## Aims

- To examine which elements of Cornish identity were preserved, focusing on the role of the women of the community.
- To assess the role played by Cornish women in primary education in late nineteenth-early twentieth century Pachuca.
- To understand how the Cornish pasty spread beyond the Cornish community and evolved to become part of local cuisine

## Methods

The study was carried out by students of two separate disciplines, and paired anthropological fieldwork with oral history and archival research. Interviews with descendants of Cornish families and members of the local community were combined with textual primary sources such as memoirs, archival material and secondary literature both in English and in Spanish

## Findings: Pasties and food history



The most emblematic symbol of Cornish identity in Mexico is the Cornish pasty, known here as paste. Real del Monte houses the only Paste Museum in the world, and this year celebrated the fifth International Paste Festival. Paste shops in Pachuca and Real del Monte range from small family affairs to businesses with branches all over the region.

Mexicans pastes have evolved significantly since their arrival: the “traditional” meat and potato pasty is accompanied by a wide range of flavours. The first Mexican paste to appear was beans and sausage: a tasty and, crucially, cheap combination.

These pastes were, like their

Cornish counterparts, intended to sustain miners. The pasties available today on the other hand are noticeably smaller, tend to be spicy, and are considered a snack rather than a full meal.

Our research shows that the pasty generally spread beyond the Cornish community in two ways. The first was through inter-marriage, especially commonplace in Real del Monte.

Cornishwomen who married Mexicans would introduce their cooking, including pasties, to their new families, while Mexicans who married Cornishmen were taught how to make English food by a female neighbour or relative. Cornish families also hired local women to help out in the kitchen, who therefore learnt how to make Cornish food. The Cornish miners here had been enticed by the high wages offered, and, once in Mexico, could easily afford domestic help.



Cornish food was not limited to the pasty however: many interviewees remembered eating steak and kidney pie, or celebrating Christmas with mince pies, roast turkey or goose, and Christmas pudding. Such practices were not confined to family homes: Cornish women who were widowed or abandoned often set up guesthouses in which they would serve these foods to miners who were passing through or were new to the area. Other important occasions included Empire Day, celebrated by a yearly community outing and a picnic with food prepared by the women of the community as well as some Mexican dishes. The Ladies’ Aid Bazaar events saw similar celebrations in the 1910s-1920s. These symbols of Cornish identity were thus preserved, regardless of their adoption by the Mexican population.

## Findings: schools

Cornish women played a key role in educating their children: both the English School and the two Methodist schools were founded by/for the Cornish community in the 1870s-1880s. To this day the English school remains the only completely bilingual school in the region, and is one of the oldest schools in Pachuca along with the Methodist Julian Villagràn school (which eventually incorporated its “partner” school, Hijas de Allende).

These schools provided employment for Cornish women, teaching being considered one of very few “respectable” career choices open to women. The English School in particular saw three consecutive Cornish headmistresses, covering just over 100 years. Notions of “Englishness” and English traditions are particularly important

in the context of the English School. There is a palpable sense of pride in the English heritage of the school, clear in the school colours of red, white and blue. It was, however,

difficult to separate traditions: for example, the celebration of Halloween, with fancy dress and bobbing for apples, also resonates with the Mexican “Day of the dead” festivities. Moreover the school’s “Commencement song”, though sung to the tune of Auld Lang Syne, has perhaps more in common with US traditions. We can see therefore that while the English School represents a conscious attempt to preserve English (if not Cornish) identity and customs, it has also incorporated Mexican and US influences.

The Methodist schools, on the other hand, soon developed strong ties to the Methodist church in the United States.

Although there were Mexican and Cornish teachers, there were also many Methodist volunteers from the US who stayed for brief periods or became fully-fledged staff members. We can also see an emphasis on Mexican imagery represented in the school newspaper, named “Tzzin-Tzzi” after the Otomí word for hummingbird.



Students in the English School, circa 1900



## Conclusions

This study shows that Cornish women played a crucial role in preserving their culture. Their commitment to reproducing the food of their homeland in a very different environment ensured the survival of this important marker of cultural identity. Moreover, interaction with the Mexican community allowed the spread and evolution of pasties beyond the Cornish community.

The women of the Cornish community also played a crucial role in education, teaching either in the home or, after the 1880s, in established schools. The emphasis on preserving British culture was stronger in the English school, although a British observer might not immediately recognise some of these as inherently English today. The Methodist schools, on the other hand, were more open to US and Mexican influence.