

# The history of this ancient street is a piece of cake

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■ Westlegate is being developed as a very modern area, but its name has ancient roots.

Next time you're walking down Westlegate in Norwich, you might like to reflect on the fact that there's actually nothing very English about this street-name. The 'gate' part of Westlegate is Scandinavian in origin, and hasn't got anything to do with gates. We owe this part of the name to the Old Danish language of the Viking incomers who arrived in East Anglia in the 800s and formed a substantial part of the bilingual population of Norwich in the 900s.

'Gate' was the Scandinavian word for street – and it still is. There are streets in many Norwegian towns today called Kirkegate, 'Church Street'. Fiskergata in Stockholm is exactly the same name as Fishergate in Norwich – 'Fishermen's Street'. In Norwich we also have Pottergate, Colegate, Cowgate, Mountergate, Finkelgate. In Thetford we have Eastgate, Minstergate, Nunsgate, and Redgate...

The 'wastle' bit is even more interesting. It comes from the mediaeval Middle English word 'wastel', which meant 'finest white flour'. In mediaeval Norwich, there was a part of the market called Wastelmarket where this special product was sold.

The word itself came into English from

the Anglo-Norman French language of the invaders of 1066, like 40pc of the rest of our modern English vocabulary. But the French themselves originally got the word 'wastel' from the Germanic language of the Franks.

In the Old French dialect of Paris, unlike in Anglo-Norman, it was usual for the w at the beginning of Frankish words to become a 'g', as in guerre (war). In English we have a few pairs of words that come from Parisian Old French and Anglo-Norman respectively: guardian – warden; guarantee – warranty.

So in Old French the word 'wastel' became 'gastel'. In Modern French 'gastel' has become 'gâteau' (cake), which origi-

nally would have meant a cake made of the highest quality white flour. And today we have once again borrowed wastel into modern English, this time from modern French in the form of 'gâteau', meaning a particular type of layered cake with cream and fruit.

I don't know if they serve gâteau in the pub on Westlegate. I can't imagine anyone in the old days going up to the bar and demanding "a pinta mild'n'a slice a cherry gatoo", but maybe they do now – it would certainly be appropriate if so.

The Scandinavian word 'gate' is related to our word 'gait', referring to the way people walk. So you can, if you like, think of Westlegate as meaning 'cake-walk'.