

DORSET BUTTONS

Today, in an age of easy care wash and wear fabrics we give little thought to buttons, those small items, usually plastic which fasten our clothes. The button is regarded as an insignificant, purely functional item but this has not always been the case. The history of buttons is a long and interesting one starting in the prehistoric age. They have been used for both decorative and practical purposes. Reaching their golden age in the eighteenth century, their changing forms have reflected wider changes in society, the materials in vogue at the time and developments in manufacturing techniques. Dorset buttons are part of this fascinating history. Many counties have unique styles of lace but how many can boast their own type of button - a button used on the waistcoat worn by Charles I at his execution in 1649 and on a gown worn by Queen Victoria? In their heyday, these buttons were sought after in most of the European cities and parts of America and Canada. "Buttoney" was at one time a substantial cottage industry in the eastern parts of the county. From small beginnings at the end of the 17th century this trade came to employ thousands in the county, flourishing until its demise after the introduction of button making machines in Victorian times.

It is thought that Abraham Case, a former soldier from the Cotswolds settling in Shaftesbury sometime in the 1620's, was the founder of the Dorset Button industry. Buttons have been made from a variety of materials – those of Dorset were made from horn bases, linen and thread. Metal rings were used in later designs. Case's first button, the "High Top" was a conical button in which a disc of sheep's horn was covered with linen and delicate threadwork. Case's choice of Dorset as a place to try his new

business was a good one. The area, which had turned largely to sheep farming after the plague, supplied good quantities of horn and the wives and children of farm labourers provided a ready supply of workers. The flax grown in the west of the county provided linen and thread. The wool from the sheep also encouraged the establishment of a clothing industry which would increase the demand for buttons.

The civil war had little impact on Case's business and in 1656 he moved into larger premises with his son, also named Abraham. To cope with increasing demand, the Cases took on other families, notably the Singletons who were to give their name to a type of button. After Case's death the firm was taken over by Abraham, his second son Elias and his grandsons. Elias moved to Bere Regis establishing a branch of the firm. By 1720 the firm had branches all over Dorset - Blandford, Milborne St. Andrew, Sherbourne, Poole, to name a few.

Despite continuing business success the company suffered from quarrels between the two sons and began to face problems related to competition for labour at busy times in the farming year. Buttoney paid better than farm labouring and at harvest time the Case's often found themselves in conflict with the local gentry. It became clear that the firm would have to reorganise and in 1731 John Clayton, a York businessman was engaged to bring about changes. Firstly, Clayton recommended the use of outworkers, free to work on harvesting or buttons but paid only for buttons made from materials supplied by the firm and to their quality standards. Secondly, Clayton recommended that marketing would be more effectively undertaken from London where an office dealing with sales, marketing and finance was opened in 1743. Exports to Canada, America, Australia and the continent were dealt with from a small office in

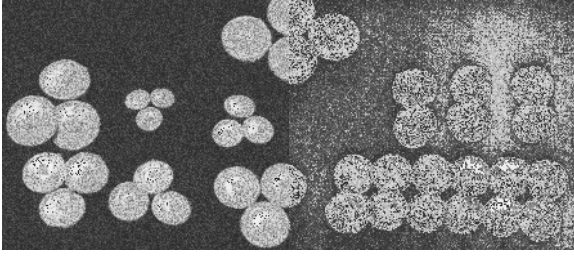
Liverpool, Clayton proving to be an astute businessman.

The company made a variety of styles of button. The "Knob," a flatter version of the "High Top" had been introduced sometime between 1685 and 1690. The "Birdseye," a small button used mostly on babies and children's garments, was first made in 1700. The "Singleton," a flat, padded button worked on a ring appeared in 1712. The "Crosswheel", made with a metal ring covered with thread is probably the most well recognised Dorset button today but this design came relatively late in the button's history being introduced 1730 - 1740. The "Blandford Cartwheel" appearing at the same time was made by Huguenot lace-makers using their fine lace thread after lace itself became less fashionable.

Peter, grandson of Abraham, while managing the export side of the business in Liverpool, invented a special alloy for the rings. Wire made in Birmingham, where Clayton had a factory, was sent to Dorset where children known as "winders," "dippers," and "stringers" would cut, twist and solder rings which were strung in lots of 144. Under Clayton's piecework system buttons were made in cottages and workhouses. The many county depots were attended by agents on a predetermined day each week when the women would bring their finished buttons and collect fresh supplies of raw materials, some of them walking 10 or 12 miles to sell their wares. They were usually paid in goods rather than cash until 1800. A small number of women were employed in Shaftesbury and Bere Regis to clean and sort the finished buttons and mount them on coloured card according to their quality. Yellow card was used for seconds, blue for standard quality and pink for superior. Interestingly, the card was purchased from a member of the Clayton family.

The business reached its peak in 1807 with a turnover of £14,000 seemingly unaffected by the

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as book marks and brooches, appearing at local craft fairs. Original Dorset buttons can be seen in some local museums. To a button collector these can appear quite plain and homely compared to, say, the lavish creations worn in the court of Louis XIV of France, but one still has to look in wonderment at the imagination and skill put into these simple items.

By Alison Powell 2005

Sources:

The History of the Dorset Button by M. Amy Jackson 1970.

Buttony, The Dorset Heritage by Mervyn Bright 1971.
Dorset "Buttony" Captain J E Acland. Discover Dorset Series, Dress and Textiles by Rachel Worth. Dovecote Press Ltd. 2002.

Further Information See Dorset buttons:

Dorset County Museum. Dorchester
Tel. 01305 262735
Cavalcade of Costume Museum, Blandford.
Tel. 01258 453006
Gold Hill Museum & Garden, Shaftesbury.
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Blandford Museum Tel. 01258 450388

death of John Clayton in 1766. Undoubtedly his shrewd business acumen contributed greatly to the growth of what started out as a small family business and he left it on a firm footing. Peter Case junior opened a central depot at Milborne Stileham and he was succeeded by his two nephews George and Henry. At Milborne trade increased rapidly and further depots were opened at Piddletrenthide, Hanley, Woodbridge, Langton, Iwerne and Shaftesbury. However this once thriving local industry was to suffer collapse, leading to severe hardship for many families. 1807 had seen the highest turnover for the company but also the establishment of Sanders button manufacturing in Birmingham where cheap metal buttons were mass produced. The demonstration of Ashton's Patent machine for making buttons at the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851 sealed the fate of the local hand-made button industry. Ashton's buttons became known everywhere. Meanwhile families in Dorset faced poverty and starvation. 350 families left Shaftesbury alone for Canada. The task of saving the workers fell to the local gentry, some of the very families that the company had competed with for labour. Passage to the colonies was provided for many and some provided employment for the Case family on their estates.

The family business finally ended in 1904 on the death of Henry Case. An attempt was made to keep the craft alive by Florence, dowager Lady Lees. She bought up all the remaining stock and equipment and buttons continued to be made by the Lytchett Mission until 1915. The buttons were sold from "The Old Button Shop" in Lytchett Minster which is now an antiques' shop. The first world war killed the industry once again.

Today the craft is being kept alive by a few dedicated individuals who have added their own twist on designs and uses. Coloured and beaded buttons based on the Crosswheel are now made



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