

WHEEL OF FORTUNE

Before the advent of mechanisation, the tiny hamlets of Dorset were world famous for their thread buttons. Writer Annie Phillips discovers how a long-forgotten craft has been brought back from the brink of obscurity.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNIE PHILLIPS



Hundreds of years ago, all buttons were handmade and the vast majority in England and Europe came exclusively from a string of villages in the north and east of the English county of Dorset, where Huguenot refugees, who were skilled in lacemaking, turned their talents to producing woven thread buttons, so that by the end of the 18th century, ninety percent of the female population of Dorset could claim to do "buttony." These beautiful and intricate "Dorset buttons" were exported from this tiny area to all the principal countries of the world.

The industry started in the small town of Shaftesbury in 1622, when Abraham Case made the first buttons. They were conical in shape and made from sheep's horn, cloth and linen thread - all readily available in a traditional sheep farming county - and known as "High Tops". Largely decorative rather than functional, they were used to adorn gentlemen's fancy waistcoats including, it is said, the waistcoat worn by Charles I to his execution. Queen Victoria also once wore a dress completely decorated with High Tops. The flatter version, the Dorset Knob, evolved from this first button and later on, small soft buttons called Bird's Eyes were made for children's clothes.

Abraham Case's grandson Peter eventually introduced a larger flatter button which could be used for fastening as well as decoration. Worked in thread on a steel alloy ring, this was known as the Dorset Crosswheel and has inspired many variations.

The many outworkers who inhabited the villages in this region became dependant on buttony and by 1793 there were 4000 outworkers in Shaftesbury alone. Some women made the buttons - often as many as 144 in a day - whilst others cleaned, polished and mounted them on cards: pink for best quality, blue for grade one and yellow card for seconds. Once a week, on Button Day, the women walked up to 12 miles carrying their week's completed work to collection centres to receive new materials for the following week.

Sadly, in 1851 the great cottage industry of buttony ground to an abrupt and devastating halt when Ashton's Automated Button Making Machine was put on display at the Great Exhibition in London's Crystal Palace. Almost overnight, the demand for Dorset buttons diminished as this faster way of making cheaper buttons took its toll and within nine years the Dorset button industry had completely collapsed. Hundreds of families lost their livelihood and, with mass emigration to Canada and



Button maker, Marion Howitt. "I'm just addicted to fiddling and making things when I should be doing something else!"



*Opposite and left: **The Old Button Shop**, Lytchett Minster, as it is today and as it was at the end of last century. Now owned by button maker Thelma Johns, the shop was used for button making during the Dorset button industry's heyday.*

Photograph at left from the collection of Thelma Johns.

19th century button workers at South Lytchett. Photograph from the collection of Thelma Johns.



Examples of original High Tops and Dorset Wheels on display at **The Old Button Shop**, Lytchett Minster.

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Dorset Wheel

High Tops

Australia, whole villages were abandoned. The Dorset button, so popular for so long, became nothing more than a memory.

By the 1930s the Dorset button had been virtually forgotten until a twist of fate brought Amy Jackson to live in Twyford, one of the former button making villages. Puzzled by the very high street numbers, when there was only a handful of cottages in the whole village, Amy sought an explanation from an elderly resident and was shocked when he

described how busy the village had once been with buttony, and its subsequent demise.

"He then took me round, showing me lilac, evergreens and gooseberry

bushes, all of which appeared to be growing in hedgerows, but which in 1850 had been in cottage gardens," she later wrote of her discovery. "They were now the silent witnesses of a vanished community. The story touched me. I felt sorry for those long dead victims of progress, so there and then I decided to find out all I could about this forgotten craft."

Amy carried out a great deal of research and learned how to make many of the buttons herself, but although the skills required to make the Crosswheel style buttons were resurrected, no one could recall how to make the tiny and complicated High Top. Fortunately, during the 1970s, a weaver named Elizabeth Gilbert became interested in Dorset buttons and skilfully unpicked a valuable antique High Top using a microscope. By making careful notes and diagrams, she was able to discover how these intricate buttons were made.

Today the craft of buttony, which is both unique and steeped in little-known history, is growing once more, thanks to the efforts of Amy Jackson and the skills and determination of a few dedicated Dorset women, such as Marion Howitt who has been

involved with Dorset buttons for many years and has worked hard to promote them. A skilled embroiderer, Marion readily admits she has turned them into an art form using her imagination and flair for colour to make not only traditional buttons but designs of her own, many of which also incorporate beads. Marion uses buttons to make elegant brooches, earrings, collages and paperweights and, in her tireless efforts to raise awareness of the craft, she runs one day workshops teaching anyone who is interested how to make Dorset buttons. She stresses the basics are easily grasped.

"You can learn all you need to know in half a day, if you're prepared to go home and practise," she says. "The simple Dorset Crosswheel buttons are easy to make. Once you've got the basics, you can make them as complicated as you like. I think that's how they developed in the old days," Marion adds. "They would sit and make buttons, then someone might make a mistake and think 'Oh, that's pretty, I'll do that again'. Or, of course, they may have changed the designs because they got bored."

Boredom could well have had something to do with it. Marion remembers that the first time someone asked her to make a hundred brooches, she was so bored by the time she got to 50, that she started inventing some new versions.

Marion has made High Tops, but says they are "quite a feat", because of their pointed shape and tiny size. "You have to make them in a mould first," she explains. "I haven't worked out how to make the fine ones that you see in the museums, using very fine thread. They are so neat. I've tried but haven't been able to make them as well!"

Over the years, Marion has made literally thousands of buttons, but how would she feel about turning out 144 a day, like the button workers hundreds of years ago?

"I should think it would be very tedious," she replies. "I think they might have made them on a production line. One would do the slicking, someone else doing the laying and so on. I can make a simple Crosswheel button, depending on the thickness of the thread, in about 10 minutes. The ones in the paperweights take about an hour to make and use eight metres of thread!"

Besides making buttons on commission - she recently made 44 Dorset Knobs in silk for a wedding dress - Marion also makes buttons for her own clothes, cutting off the original buttons and replacing them with traditional Dorset ones.

Another promoter of Dorset buttons and friend of Marion Howitt is Thelma Johns, who owns *The Old Button Shop* in Lytchett Minster. This is at the heart of the traditional button-making villages and at one time, buttons were actually made in the shop. Thelma has acquired several original buttons over the years and offers some of them for sale. She also makes buttons and was recently asked by the BBC wardrobe department to make authentic Dorset buttons for some of the costumes in their production of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Between them, Marion and Thelma have been a major force in promoting buttony.

"The word is spreading," says Marion, "although a lot

of people who actually live in Dorset have still never heard of them. The Dorset Arts and Crafts Society has a major show every year in Puddletown and we set up children's workshops there. We teach children from the age of six or seven how to make buttons. It keeps the tradition going."

The ancient button makers of Dorset would no doubt be pleased, if not a little surprised, to learn that their craft has now become accessible to all.

For Marion, maintaining the tradition and continuing to turn out superb handmade Dorset buttons is full-time work. Nevertheless, she still insists, "I'm just addicted to fiddling and making things when I should be doing something else!"

Marion and Thelma have both produced booklets outlining the history of Dorset buttons, as well as Fact File and Button Kits showing how to make several different buttons. They also make buttons to order.

For further information, write to Marion Howitt, Swanston, Russell Ave, Swanage, Dorset, England BH19 2EB, or Thelma Johns, *The Old Button Shop*, Lytchett Minster, Dorset, England BH16 6JF.

And if you'd like to try your hand at making a simple Dorset Crosswheel button, turn the page.

Marion Howitt makes buttons specifically to match particular fabrics and wools.



HOW TO MAKE A DORSET CROSSWHEEL BUTTON

MATERIALS

- Fine metal ring, such as a curtain ring
- Wool, cotton or silk thread, as desired
- Blunt ended rug needle or tapestry needle



METHOD

CASTING It is important to cut a length of thread which will be sufficient to make the whole button, as joining is difficult. Only trial and error will ascertain the length needed as this will vary according to the thickness of the thread and the size of the ring. Tie the thread onto the ring with a single knot (Pic 1). Cover the ring with blanket stitch, working the first few stitches over the loose end (Pic 2). Push the stitches close together so that you cannot see the ring underneath. Slip the needle through the first stitch when you have completed the ring.

SLICKING Turn the ridge which has formed on the outside into the middle of the button where it will show (Pic 3). This is the traditional method. If you prefer the ridge not to show, then push it to the back of the button.

LAYING With the thread at the back of the ring, bring it down to the bottom of the ring, then up in front in the exact centre (Pic 4).

Turn the ring slightly and continue to make evenly spaced spokes all round the ring, making sure that each is put exactly across the centre of the button (Pic 5). After making the last spoke, bring the thread to the front and make a tight cross stitch exactly in the middle. This will bring the front and back spokes one behind the other, and anchor all the spokes together.

ROUNDING Starting with the thread at the front and keeping it taut and even, use back stitch over each of the spokes, that is, go back over one spoke, behind that spoke, behind the next one and come up in front (Pic 6).

Continue around all the spokes and go round and round in this way (Pic 7) until the entire button is filled.

FINISHING Take the thread to the back of the work, oversew and cut off or alternatively, take it to the back of the button and leave for sewing on. The button is now finished. When you are proficient at making this simple Crosswheel button, you may like to try different numbers of spokes or different types of thread to vary the effect. At this stage, you may then like to try more than one colour of thread. The best time to change colour is when the slicking is finished and you can oversew the thread into the ridge and start again with a new knotted thread, the short end of which can be incorporated into one of the spokes. ☆



Marion constantly experiments with different designs, producing a variety of different and intricate patterns.

