

A HISTORY OF Dorset Buttons

Kate Larson



DEIRDRE CARTER

Horn disks from Dorset sheep were used in some styles of buttons. This Dorset ewe is about a year old. A sheep's horns will continue to grow throughout its lifetime but at a slower rate after about three years of age.

The rolling green pastures and fossil-laden cliffs of Dorset County lie in the south of England along the English Channel. Jane Austen readers will recognize Dorset as the site of Delaford in *Sense and Sensibility* and Lyme Regis in *Persuasion*. During Austen's lifetime (1775–1817), Dorset was also famous for its distinctive thread-wound buttons. The button-making trade, referred to in Dorset as buttony, employed great numbers of the county's local women and children for generations to come. Dorset's famous buttons used a ring of either horn or wire as a base, which was then covered in linen. These delicate, soft buttons were perfect for the linen and muslin fabrics worn by both men and women in Jane Austen's day.

Abraham Case is generally credited with bringing the buttony trade to Dorset in the early 1600s. He is thought to have based his first button designs on European needle laces he saw while traveling as a soldier. Thelma Johns explains in her book *Dorset Buttons* that one of the early designs, called Bird's Eye, "[is] based on the tiny soft lacework buttons in Brussels lace and the design also appeared within the lace itself being part of the spiders web embroidery found worldwide." Case made his start in Shaftesbury, a town on the north edge of Dorsetshire. Shaftesbury is an ancient site and is known locally (and to Thomas Hardy readers) as Shaston. The region provided Case with many of the materials needed to create what would be called Dorset buttons. The original button styles, such as Bird's Eye and High Tops, were made using a small disk of horn and sometimes small tufts

of wool from local sheep. Dorset and Horned Dorset sheep can today be found throughout the world and are still famous for their springy, down-type fleeces and substantial horns. Other necessary ingredients the county could provide were flax, which was processed and spun into fine linen thread and cloth, and communities of women and children in need of extra income.

The Dorset button we typically recognize today was introduced by John Clayton, who joined the Case firm in 1731. Wire was wound into a spring, which was cut into loops, and then the ends of the loop were soldered together to form a ring. This work was typically done by children. The rings were then wrapped with linen thread in complex and varied patterns. The Blandford Cartwheel was one such button and has become the quintessential Dorset button today. Clayton perfected the cottage industry system already in place by creating depots where the button makers could pick up the rings, thread, and small pieces of fabric needed for some styles that they could then use to make buttons at home. The finished buttons would then be returned to the depot where they were exchanged for payment and more button-making supplies. This model worked well for the small handworked pieces. Buttons could be made in the time between other household tasks. Often, a family would specialize in a particular style of button. John Clayton also developed a system of quality control and classing. Once the buttons were returned to the depot, they were sorted into matching sets and attached to cards for sale. The color of the card identified the buttons as superior, standard, or second quality. Dorset buttons were known and used widely throughout the country and were exported abroad to Canada, the United States, Australia, and Europe.

Like many other cottage industries that had provided employment to generations of families, the buttony trade did not survive the Industrial Revolution. A firm based in Birmingham, in the English Midlands, began to produce cheap metal buttons in the early 1800s. Then in 1851, England hosted an event the likes of which had never been seen before: the Great Exhibition of Works of Industry of All Nations, also known as the Crystal Palace Exhibition. Displays and exhibits of technology, modern invention, and culture from around the world were brought to London. At the event, Mr. John Ashton of Birmingham demonstrated a new machine that could quickly produce inexpensive buttons. The new buttons were quickly adopted by



ANNA MCDOWELL

Original Dorset buttons in the Birdseye design from the private collection of Anna McDowell. The yellow card that these buttons are mounted on indicate that they were made before the demise of the buttony industry in the nineteenth century and that they were thirds, intended for the local market only.



ANNA MCDOWELL

Anna McDowell of Henry's Buttons made these Dorset buttons over .08 gauge wire rings using size 50 cotton crochet thread in the cartwheel design.



ANNA MCDOWELL

Anna McDowell made these contemporary buttons using vintage thread and size 15 seed beads. The button on the left is based on the Swanston technique and the button on the right is made using a Daisy design.

a public eager for modern invention. The following decline of interest in handworked buttons displaced many families in Dorset that relied upon buttony for work. Many former button makers faced with destitution left the country in search of work. A Dorset County Museum publication states that 350 families from Shaftesbury alone emigrated to Canada.

The Case family firm begun by Abraham Case in the 1600s finally concluded with the death of Henry Case

in 1904. Buttony was still carried on for another decade by Lady Lees and the Christian mission in Lytchett Minster, Dorset, as a source of occupation and income for women in need. This endeavor ended by 1915.

Today, several businesses in Dorset, such as the Button Shop and Henry's Buttons, provide materials and education for those interested in carrying on the buttony tradition. Whether made with fine white linen and tiny brass rings or the vibrant handpainted yarns of

HOW TO MAKE A BLANDFORD CARTWHEEL



TIP

As you work, the working yarn will build up extra twist. Dangle the needle and working yarn every once in a while to allow the yarn to relax.

Dorset buttons, traditionally worked in white linen, were quite small. With the variety of yarns available today, the possibilities are endless.

There were over a hundred styles of Dorset buttons by the end of their production, but one of the most recognizable today is the Blandford Cartwheel. There are four main steps: casting, slicking, laying, and rounding.

YARN 2–3 yd (2–3 m) of thread or yarn.

NOTIONS Rings of brass, stainless steel, plastic, or other rustproof material; crewel or small tapestry needle; scissors.

Samples shown use Susan Bates plastic bone rings in $\frac{1}{2}$ ", $\frac{7}{8}$ ", and 1". Brass rings available from Henry's Buttons on Etsy.

Casting

Beg with about $2\frac{1}{2}$ yards of yarn and leaving a 2" tail, tie an overhand knot onto ring. Thread a crewel needle onto other end of yarn and beg working blanket st by

the modern knitting movement, Dorset buttons connect us to generations of women whose skillful hands perfected a craft that continues to transcend time, place, and tradition. ☺☺

Kate Larson keeps a flock of Border Leicester sheep in central Indiana where she spins, knits, teaches, designs, and drinks copious cups of Yorkshire tea. And she reads too many novels. You can find her at www.katelarsontextiles.com.

RESOURCES

British Button Society, www.britishbuttonssociety.org.
 Dorset County Museum, www.dorsetcountymuseum.org.
 Johns, Thelma. *Dorset Buttons: Hand Stitched in Dorset for over 300 years*. Christchurch, Dorset: Natula, 2012.
 Powell, Alison. "Facts about Shaftesbury: Dorset Buttons." Shaftesbury and District Historical Society, 2005.

taking needle down through center of ring, up through loop, and pulling new st tight. Cont to work even and firm sts around ring so a ridge forms on outside edge. Work last few sts over beg tail. Pass needle under first st to connect first and last sts. Trim beg tail.



way until there are 8 wraps around outside of ring. At this point, spokes intersect in center on WS, but intersection on RS is off-center, near edge of ring.

With RS facing, put needle through to WS between spokes across from where last wrap was made. (This should also be where spokes intersect near outside edge.) Tightening this last wrap will pull intersection toward middle of ring. Now, spokes on RS should align with those on WS. Make several sts in center to stabilize design. Center hub can be shifted or adjusted at this point, but not after next step.

Slicking

Rotate sts around ring so ridge is now in center.



Rounding

Beg with spoke at 12 o'clock and with yarn and needle on WS. Needle comes up to RS on left side of spoke and down on right side of this spoke. Next, work spoke at 11 o'clock in same way, bringing needle up on left side and down on right side. Working counterclockwise around ring, cont to wrap each spoke from left to right, making as many rnds as necessary to fill center. When center is filled, insert needle along a spoke to bring yarn tail back to center cross sts. Leave a 6" tail at center for sewing button in place later.



Laying

This step creates the spokes that pass through the center of the ring. A button with eight spokes is a good place to start, but as many spokes as you like can be added.

Think of ring as a clock face. Beg with knot at 6 o'clock position with yarn on RS. Wrap yarn up ring to 12 o'clock and down WS to 6 o'clock. Bring yarn up RS again, but wrap it between 1 and 2 o'clock. Yarn now moves down back to between 7 and 8 o'clock. Cont wrapping in this

