General information
Welcome
Mission statement
Recording guidelines
Photography tips
Scanning tips
Uploading a coin
Uploading an artefact
Search tips
Site map
News releases
Newsletters
Forum
Contact us
Links
Ceejay's website
Privacy policy
Copyright information
Terms & conditions
The hobby and its detractors

Reference Articles
A-S strap-end mods
Barrel padlocks
Buckles through the ages
Buckles visual catalogue
Button makers
Cornwaylis
Cruel belts
Edwardian farthings
Edwardian halfpennies
Edwardian Pennies
Gaffey halfpence
Gunter's chain
Hennies pendants
Long Cross Pennies
Nuremberg jetons
Papal bullae
Pocket sundials
Roman seal boxes
Seal matrices
Thimbles
Tombrels

Thimbles

It used to be thought that the earliest metal thimbles found in Britain dated to the Roman period, but the present view is that they are all very much later. In fact, although examples dating as early as the mid- to late 1700s and early 19th century AD have been found at Corinth and in Asia Minor, the use of thimbles in this country did not become widespread until the fourteenth century.

Fig 1: A shallow cup-shaped thimble or 'skep' of the 14th century with pierced crown. UKDFD 182

Thimbles of the medieval period were usually either cast, or made by hammering sheet metal into a series of progressively developed dies, and their indentations or 'pits' were manually punched. They often have one or two circumferential grooves at their base, but only a very small proportion of them have any other form of decoration. Until the beginning of the fifteenth century, the majority were of a shallow cup shape, reflected by their present-day nicknames of acorn-tops, skeps or beehive thimbles. The earlier examples often have a small hole and/or a tonsure-like patch on their crown.

Fig 2: A 14th century thimble hammered from sheet metal (as indicated by internal lapping), but nevertheless with a small hole in the crown. UKDFD 5031

One purpose of the hole may have been to facilitate support of the core during the casting process, but hammered thimbles with this feature are also known (Fig. 2). In any case, the pierced crown, which is said to be indicative of English manufacture, is not found on thimbles produced after about the end of the fourteenth century. Tonsured crowns, however, persisted throughout the fifteenth and into the early sixteenth century.

Fig 3: By about 1400, thimbles were becoming a little taller, and the last of those with pierced crowns are of this type. UKDFD 95

By the early fifteenth century, thimbles began to acquire a taller and more familiar form, although their crowns usually retained the domed or hemispherical shape of earlier types, and they remained rimless. Their indentations were manually produced and may follow a spiral, vertical linear or parallel ring pattern up the thimble. The size of the indentations varies considerably, the larger ones designed for use with coarser needles and thicker fabric or leather.

Fig 4: A 15th century thimble with large indentations and a 'tonsured' crown. UKDFD 169

The use of precious metals for thimble manufacture during the medieval period appears to be extremely rare and copper-based alloys, predominantly brass, were invariably employed. Although there was no large-scale brass-working industry in England, many thimbles were produced locally. Some, however, were imported from the continent, principally from Nuremberg, which was a major brass-working centre.

Fig 5: A 16th century thimble with spiral indentations and a maker's mark. UKDFD 910

Thimbles of the sixteenth century continue the trend towards a taller and more slender shape, and their crowns tend to be flatter, and sometimes slightly conical. Sheet-metal types gained in popularity during this period at the expense of the heavier cast variety. Makers' marks are also occasionally found from about the 1520s, usually at the bottom end of a spiral indentation pattern. These include daggers, flowers, keys and spurs, but their attribution to particular manufacturers is not yet possible. From about 1550, the use of decorative features also became more common. The first references to thimbles in precious metals are to be found in documents of this period, although actual examples are very rare. Nuremberg, already well established as a thimble-making centre, became dominant in the middle of the century as a result of improved production methods and the development of better quality brass. These advances led to the manufacture of sheet-metal thimbles from two separate parts, a rolled cylindrical body and a pre-formed cap or crown, which were soldered together. The sheet metal could also have a pattern applied prior to forming, as well as its indentations. The resulting thimbles are very attractive and surprisingly modern looking, and contrast sharply with both the traditionally cast and hammered sheet-metal types.

Fig 6: Two mid to late 16th century Nuremberg thimbles with characteristic decorative small medallions. Right-hand thimble: UKDFD 1304

As well as thimbles of the conventional 'domed' type, 'sewing rings' or 'tailors' thimbles' were produced, as they had been since the earliest times. In fact, all the ninth and tenth century thimbles found at Corinth are of this form.

Fig 7: Two 16th century sewing rings or tailors' thimbles, the left one with maker's mark.

By the mid-seventeenth century, thimbles are characterised by almost parallel sides, waffle or ring-shaped body indentations and strap-work decoration, often in the form of a chevron or 'Z' shape. They are usually made in two parts from rolled sheet metal soldered at the seams, the body often ending with one or two incised lines, and the top sometimes having a clock-dial pattern. Some strikingly tall examples of the period are known, both in silver and brass. The more ready availability of silver, resulting from discoveries in the New World, led to its increased use for small domestic items, and traditional thimble makers found themselves in competition with silversmiths.

Fig 9: A late 17th century thimble with engraved initials within a cartouche. UKDFD 115

In fact, by this time, silver thimbles were to be found in many ordinary households. Decoration of thimbles, whether of brass or silver, also became commonplace, and inscriptions are often found around the base or within strap-work patterns. During the Commonwealth period, in particular, many such inscriptions are of a religious or moralistic nature. Indentations on English thimbles continued to be manually produced until the late seventeenth century, and the resulting lack of uniformity provides a useful indicator for their dating. Towards the end of the century, thimbles became shorter and more tapered, and the indentations took on a more modern appearance. Silver examples of this period often have a cartouche or shield for engraving the owner's initials.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Netherlands progressively eroded the pre-eminence of Nuremberg, and the majority of later imported brass thimbles were produced in Holland.

Fig 10: Two 17th century brass thimbles. The left-hand one is of two-part construction, and dates circa mid 17th century. It is an imported Dutch type, and one of the earliest to have mechanically produced indentations. The right-hand one is cast and dates circa mid to late 17th century. It is either an imported Dutch thimble or an early product of John Lofting.

Two such thimbles dating circa seventeenth century are illustrated in Fig.10. The first is of two-piece construction, its body and top clearly having been produced separately. The second is of similar appearance, but has been cast in one piece. Both thimbles have been finish turned on a lathe - evidenced by internal machining marks - and have regular indentations, produced by knurling. The second one may be either a Dutch import or an early product of John Lofting, whose role is described below.

By the late seventeenth century, England had a well-established brass-working industry of its own, and the opportunity this presented was not lost on John Lofting, a Dutch thimble manufacturer. In 1693 he set up a thimble factory at Islington, London, and began production on a larger scale than had hitherto been known in England. He subsequently moved to premises in Great Marlow, Buckinghamshire, where the use of water power, rather than horse power, enabled him to double his output of thimbles. With a capacity of about two million thimbles per year, Lofting clearly had ambitions beyond the home market, and probably exported to the American colonies.

John Lofting died in 1742, but his Great Marlow mill is believed to have continued producing thimbles for several years, possibly until it succumbed to competition from manufacturers in Birmingham.

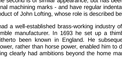

Fig 11: Two sizes of the commonly found 'Lofting' type thimble of the 18th century, with characteristic waffle-shaped crown patterns. The smaller one is a child's thimble. Right-hand thimble: UKDFD 216

Large quantities of thimbles of the type illustrated in Fig 11 are found in both England and the Netherlands, and it is believed that these probably represent the final development of the type introduced by John Lofting. They are cast in one piece, their indentations are knurled, and they have a characteristic waffle-shaped crown pattern. There is little variation in their design, other than size. They are believed to have been produced throughout most of the eighteenth century.

It is not unusual to find very small thimbles of the 'Lofting' type, made specifically for children. These are similar in all respects, except size, to the normal thimbles of the period. The second thimble shown in Fig 11 is a child's thimble, and is shown at the same scale as the first one to highlight the difference in size.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, manufacturers in Birmingham were producing a vast number of small brass articles, and it was not long before some began to copy the Lofting thimble. Although there is no documentary evidence of thimble making in the town before the second half of the century, it is likely that Lofting was feeling the pressure of competition before he died. The Birmingham manufacturers were producing thimbles of similar quality, but with slightly more decorative features, such as concentric rings and stamp marks such as buckles and buttons. Thimble-makers in Birmingham continued to produce these novelties, known as the latter type of thimble, which high quality, specially produced thimbles were a popular sale line. Unlike their working counterparts, however, examples of these thimbles are rarely recovered from the ground, probably because they were highly prized items, which saw little use. The Birmingham Assay Office was opened in Birmingham in 1773 through the efforts of the industrialist, Matthew Boulton, to preclude such silver items having to be sent to London for taxing.

If numbers recovered from the ground are any guide, working thimbles of the Lofting type dominated the early and middle eighteenth century, but during its second half, manufacturing changes, and a preference for taller thimbles, radically altered the situation. In 1769 Richard Ford of Birmingham patented a process known as 'deep drawing', and this was soon taken up by the thimble manufacturers. Instead of casting in a mould, deep drawing forms the thimble shape from a sheet-metal disc.The metal is alternately forced between progressively developed sets of dies and annealed by heating until the desired shape is achieved. Thimbles of brass and silver produced in this way are thinner than their cast counterparts, and early ones often have steel tops to prevent needle penetration.

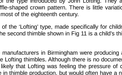

Fig 12: Two steel-topped thimbles of the late 18th to early 19th century produced by the deep drawing process.

Fig 12 shows two thimbles produced by this method, their steel tops having been destroyed by corrosion, as is usual with excavated examples. They date to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. As with the Lofting type, children's thimbles were also produced by this method, and once again they are exact replicas of the adult type.

The mechanical improvements in thimble production brought about by the new processes were complemented, at least in the case of brass, by metallurgical improvements to the metal. Prior to the mid-eighteenth century, brass was produced by adding calamine, an ore of zinc, to molten copper. The nature of the alloying process, however, was not properly understood until 1738, when metallic zinc was first extracted from calamine and recognised as a separate element. Zinc eventually replaced calamine in the melt, but even prior to this, better understanding and control of the process resulted in a more ductile brass, which was better suited to the rolling and forming processes now being employed in thimble manufacture.

Fig 13: A 19th century brass thimble with concentric indentation pattern on the crown and pronounced rim.

Deep drawing became the standard method of thimble production, and improvements early in the nineteenth century eliminated the need for steel-reinforced crowns. The mass-production of thimbles facilitated by this process led to a vast variety of types in brass, silver, and even gold. The quality and uniformity of these products reached hitherto unattainable levels, but the thimble-maker's traditional skills were no longer required. The mass-production methods also dramatically reduced the price of thimbles, and the brass models, at least, were affordable by everyone. Brass working thimbles of the nineteenth century may be characterised by their pronounced rims and concentric rings of indentations on the crown. They are of thinner metal than earlier thimbles, and sometimes carry decorative markings or inscriptions around their bases. The more expensive thimbles, and those of precious metal, were made in such a diverse range of shapes, sizes and designs that any generalisation is impossible. Figs 13 and 14 are examples of 19th century brass and silver thimbles respectively.

Fig 14: A 19th century rimless silver thimble with concentric indentation pattern on the crown.

Some Pointers to Thimble Dating:
(Note that there are many exceptions)

Beehive shape	14th century
Hole in crown	14th century
Tonsured crown	14th to early 16th century
Spiral indentation pattern on body	14th to 16th century
Manually produced indentations	14th to early 18th century
Rimless body	14th to early 19th century
Maker's mark (mainly Nuremberg thimbles)	Early 16th to early 17th century
Waffle-shaped body indentations	17th century
Ring-shaped indentations	17th century
Clock-dial crown	17th century
Strap-work on body	17th century
Slightly rimmed body	Mid 17th to late 18th century
Waffle-shaped crown indentation pattern	Mid 17th to late 18th century
Mechanically produced indentations	Mid 17th century onwards
Steel-topped body	Late 18th early 19th century
Fully rimmed body	19th century onwards

Refs:

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Edwin F Holmes, A History of Thimbles
Bridget McConnell, The Collector's Guide to Thimbles
Nigel Mills, Medieval Artefacts

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