

Hunting the thimble is big-money game

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Collecting for investment

Peter Johnson

THEY come from every continent and mirror the decorative arts of many civilisations. They were found in the ruins of Herculaneum, Marco Polo bartered for them in China and the Moors left them in Spain. They shout hurrah for Bonny Prince Charlie, salute the wedding of a later Prince Charles, and promote products from Andrews liver salts to Zebra grate polish. The items in question are thimbles.

"Collecting thimbles appeals to women because it's such a feminine subject. Like dolls and decorative fans it has been very much a woman's domain," says Bridget McConnell, the organiser of the 1,000-strong Thimble Society of London. "But more and more men are taking an interest."

There has been a tendency to dismiss thimbles as frivolous. They don't immediately jump to mind as valuable items, as Fabergé eggs and gemstones do, although there are, incidentally, both Fabergé and gem-studded thimbles.

Attitudes have changed as the full scope of thimble art has been defined and researched. Small is beautiful: like stamps and coins, jewels and portrait miniatures, thimbles enjoy the cachet.

At the lower and middle-price levels, however, a collector does not feel that she or he has to keep the goodies in a bank box. They are easy to display, hardy and conveniently portable.

Although a thimble has changed fingers at £18,000, small-timers need not be frightened off. The star piece was a gold and stone-studded gem that owed its price less to its intrinsic value than to its provenance, having been reputedly owned by Elizabeth I.

You can start hunting the thimble at about £5 for a collectable item. Between that figure and £5,000 there is a



Thumbnail sketch: Bridget McConnell with her large collection of decorated thimbles

layered price structure graduated to suit collector-investors of all purses.

How were they named? They were once worn on the thumb and called "thumbells", goes one explanation. McConnell, a busy actress who has collected, dealt in and written about thimbles since the early 1980s, has a more complex explanation: "The word derives from the medieval English *thymel* or *thuma*, meaning thumb. It is unlikely, though, that the early thimble was worn only on the thumb which, itself, means thick finger. The roots of the word 'thumb' lie close to the Latin *tumere*, to swell. A finger with a thimble on it is thickened and resembles a thumb." Thimbles come in every material from glass and bone to gold and reindeer hide.

"Given the diversity of materials, nationalities, periods

and designs," says McConnell, "both new and more established collectors can have serious problems in building a sensibly organised, and thus more interesting, collection."

"Another pitfall is the use of antique moulds to reproduce old thimbles, complete with the 'original' hallmarks. While these may not have been created to deceive in the first instance, these reproductions may occasionally be presented as genuine antiques.

"Crude workmanship is not necessarily an indication of antiquity. Rough hand-produced thimbles are still being made today, while fine, intricate examples may be several centuries old."

A beginner is advised to specialise, if only in broad types at first. The choice might be the genre of aluminium advertising thimbles, produced around the 1920s — rough and ready tools that were probably given away — each otherwise identical thimble being distinguished by the promoter's identity in a printed band: "Hoover Home Happiness", "Gas for Economy", "Mrs Karls Fine Bread" and so on.

These simple relics have quadrupled in price in a decade, and are worth about £16 apiece.

If you decide to start on commemoratives, particularly relating to well-known personalities, you can put a china Margaret Thatcher (1979-90) on your finger for £12.

A 1981 enamel memento of the Prince and Princess of Wales has become a minor collector's item at about £35. In thimble-land there is an understandable reluctance to predict prices for similar royal souvenirs at the present time, although a silver commemorative one of the Queen's coronation costs £200; a diamond-jubilee relic of Queen Victoria, also in silver, is worth £440.

McConnell, who has a role in the new Dawn French comedy series, *The Vicar of Dibley*, which opened on BBC1 last week, is the author of a hard-back guide to collecting thimbles, now in its second print.

"Throughout the recession, thimbles have done extraordinarily well," she says. "On the whole, values have trebled in the past decade. Many branches of art-and-antiques would love to be able to make the same claim."

● *The Thimble Society of London is at Unit 134, Grays Antique Market, 58 Davies Street, London W1Y 1LB. Telephone: 071-493 0560*

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