

CRAFT SPECIAL

MY MOTHER has a silver thimble with some interesting marks on it. No collector, however, would relish the fact that the surface is covered with indentations made by a child's teeth. I used to enjoy testing the softness of the metal with my young molars when my mother was busy sewing. Not all thimbles have had such rough treatment and most have survived to become classical collectables.

First designed simply to protect the finger from the needle, the thimble has lost little of its charm. The earliest were cast of bronze (a mixture of brass and zinc) and crudely made, but as a wider knowledge of metals and manufacturing techniques was acquired, refinements were made.

There were several ways in which thimbles were constructed. Some were rough cast in a mould and subsequently finished by hand; others were made in two pieces, or pressed from a circle of metal. At first, the indentation was punched on by hand, but by Victorian times the 'knurling', or applied decoration, was all done by machine.

To some extent the thimble can be dated according to the indentations and method of manufacture, but this can only be approximate, as many patterns were re-used during their history and many makers had their own particular styles. Hallmarks are not found on thimbles before about 1890, but most 20th-century thimbles are hallmarked and bear a size number and maker's initials.

Closed top and ring thimbles developed together. The open-topped ring models proved popular with tailors, who used the side of the thimble to press the needle through heavy fabrics.

Silver was practical, as it didn't mark the thread as a base metal could. It was also quite soft for everyday use.

Emma Bromidge hands on some tips for collectors

Thimbles at your fingertips

Other materials included bone, ivory, wood, mother-of-pearl, porcelain and later, enamel on silver.

Among the practical thimbles popular with collectors are the 'Dorcias', 'Dreema' or 'Dura' designs. These had a thin layer of steel sandwiched between two layers of silver to make them more durable.

Charles Horner in Yorkshire patented the design in 1884 and these were at first stamped with the patent number.

Needlework was seen as a refined accomplishment for well born ladies towards the end of the 18th century. Thimbles came in a wide variety, some elaborately decorated with semi-precious stones, intricate patterns and ornate rims, others used for commemorative purposes.

The collector has a plentiful selection to choose from and it is wise to concentrate on a particular period or style and rely on quality rather than quantity.

Children's thimbles are delightful finds for collectors and historically were made for the very young. Some come in sets of three ever-increasing sizes so children could eventually 'grow' into them.

The tiny silver thimble which was traditionally placed in the Christmas pudding was thought to bring luck to the person fortunate enough to find it in their portion.

You may also be able to find glass or metal spirit measures inscribed with the

Early English 19th-century silver thimbles, each holding a tiny scent bottle.



English silver thimbles from the late 19th century and early 20th century.

Photographs: Shire Publications from Thimbles by Eleanor Johnson.

words 'just a thimbleful' to give the impression, it is thought, that only a small quantity of spirit was actually being consumed.

Contemporary collectables include enamelled and porcelain designs which are decorative and often delicately coloured and well finished.

If you want to collect novelty thimbles and keep in touch with current news you might be interested in joining the Thimble Guild, based in the Scottish borders. The club is 10 years old this year. Members are sent a colour magazine each month featuring thimbles to buy. Although there is reputed to be no commitment to buy, members are expected to choose at least four thimbles during their first year of membership.

For further details and to join, send your name and address, on a postcard, to the guild at Thistle Mill, Station Road, Biggar ML12 6LP.

● The John Lewis Partnership has a good selection of thimbles for everyday use. Choose from a tailor's thimble in two sizes at 99p each; a standard design in five sizes at 55p and silver thimbles from about £16, from selected branches nationwide.

● The Thimble Society of London specialises in antique sewing articles and thimbles. The society, set up in 1981 by Betty Huntley-Wright and her daughter, Bridget McConnel, supplies information and advice on collecting thimbles and other sewing artefacts.

The annual subscription fee of £16 entitles the subscriber to a quarterly magazine from which mail order purchases can be made, and which gives useful advice for the collector, such as details on restoring, cataloguing and dating thimbles. Members also have the opportunity to attend a three-day annual conference and their membership card entitles them to free admission to many antique fairs.

Cheques should be made payable to the Thimble Society of London and sent c/o Grays Antique Market, Unit 134, 58 Davies Street, London W1. 