

History at your Fingertip

Jeremy Miles explores the fascinating world of thimbles with the President of the Dorset Thimble Society and discovers a wealth of miniature collectables

A collection of medieval thimbles



Dorset Thimble Society. As you might expect she's showing me thimbles galore from her remarkable collection. Some date back centuries. There are working thimbles, commemorative thimbles and even one inscribed with a love message.



Russian thimble made of enamel on silver.

"Here's one that would have been used by a 14th-century sail-maker," says Elaine pointing to one in her impressive collection. "It's Turkish and would have been worn on the thumb." Other thimbles in the collection come from Morocco, Spain, the Netherlands and even Scandinavia. There are medieval ones, relatively modern ones, but nothing from the Roman era. Elaine shakes her head: "It's very strange but, contrary to what you might read, no one has ever found a Roman thimble. We have no idea why. It seems they simply didn't make them."

The study of thimbles is clearly a fascinating and absorbing subject and draws interest from all over world. With three meetings in Bournemouth each year and a popular biennial conference, The

Dorset Thimble Society regularly attracts collectors from overseas.

Elaine, who lives near Wimborne with her husband Philip, originally founded the society back in 1985. At the time she was a relative novice. Today she is an acknowledged expert and author of *Miller's Sewing Accessories: A Collector's Guide*.

She first became interested in serious collecting after health problems cut-short her career in nursing. With time on her hands and with Philip's

To paraphrase John Cleese in *The Life of Brian*: "So, apart from roads, medicine, education, public health and better sanitation what exactly did the Romans do for us?"

Well, they didn't leave us any thimbles. Now that might not sound like a particularly big deal, but it's a curious fact that has puzzled thimble collectors across the world for a very long time indeed.

The first English thimbles didn't appear until the early 18th century when they were brought to this country from Holland.

How could a mighty empire that managed to invent everything from sophisticated armour to ankle-socks

have failed to come up with something as simple and protective as the finger-thimble?

I am sitting having tea and a lesson in the surprisingly complex world of sewing tools with Elaine Gausson, President of the

Silver thimble with a wooden Mauchlinware box with a transfer of the Bournemouth Gardens from the late 1800s.



Norwegian thimble from 1900 -1910 with symbols for snowflakes and icicles.



Enamel on silver thimbles from 1900 to 1930.

encouragement she started looking for antique thimbles. It was a subject that quickly had her hooked.

“I started writing to collectors but it got to the stage where I couldn’t keep up with all the correspondence so we started a newsletter. Then people began contacting me asking if they could join and I thought ‘join what?’ We got about half a dozen local people together into a group and went to the press, radio and

TV.” Elaine was surprised at how quickly the Dorset Thimble Society took off.

“Originally we met at my house but now we have something like 150 members. There’s a core of around 50 members who actually live in Dorset, but we get people coming from all over the world - Australia, Holland, the USA and



Norwegian silhouette enamel thimble.



Elaine Gaussen with a collection of gold thimbles.

The history of thimbles is a huge subject; their origins and changing designs providing a wealth of interest.

Canada, all over the place, particularly for the big conferences.”

Both the conferences and meetings, the next one is at the Wessex Hotel in Bournemouth on March 18, provide the perfect platform for discussing the rich history of this tiny object of desire and sharing the latest research available about antique thimbles. “We want to know who made them, why they were made, what they were used for and how long ago,”



Reproduction needle pushes used in pre-medieval times. These were a precursor to thimbles.



Collection of enameled thimbles from 1910 to 1975.

says Elaine. “We get expert speakers on all kinds of subjects related to different thimbles and sewing tools, their makers, conservation and so on.”

The history of thimbles is a huge subject; their origins and changing designs providing a wealth of interest. For instance you probably don’t know that the first English thimbles didn’t appear until the early



Ivory thimble from Africa circa 1880.

and Bridport. There is also a collection of tiny Dorset buttons. The county had a thriving cottage button-making industry until mass production in the late 19th century swept it into the dustbin of history.

Looking through her comprehensive collection, Elaine points out her personal favourites in Norwegian silhouette enamel. She shows me a couple

not come cheap. Depending on quality and rarity they can cost between about £375 and £1,000 each. But that’s nothing. The record price paid for a thimble was at Christies in New York some 30 years ago when a collector paid £18,000 for a stunning example in yellow enamel silver gilt.

However budding collectors can pick up interesting antique thimbles for a lot less. “A fancy thimble in mint condition will be worth £40 or £50 but the average silver thimble, if it’s plain, should cost no more than £12.” says Elaine, adding, “It really isn’t a hugely expensive hobby, it doesn’t take up a lot of space and it’s absolutely fascinating.” □

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Channel Tunnel commemorative silver thimble from 1994.

18th century when they were brought to this country from Holland. There’s a lot for people with a specific interest in Dorset history too. Elaine’s own collection contains thimbles, needle-cases and boxes from Bournemouth, Wimborne, Swanage

beautifully crafted examples in colours representing snow and the midnight sun. “It’s the work that has gone into making them that interests me,” she says. Not surprisingly such intricately worked thimbles do



Silver thimble made by James Walker in the 1930s.

THE DORSET THIMBLE SOCIETY

For more details on the Dorset Thimble Society and its meetings contact their Membership Secretary, Jenny Bundock on 01202 735251 or email jenny@jgthreads.com. If you wish to go to the meeting on 18 March at the Wessex Hotel in Bournemouth you must book in advance with the Society.



Gold thimbles from the 1900s.

PHOTOS: HATTIE MILES