

The History of the Dorset Button

The Dorset Button began in Shaftesbury, Dorset, probably between the years 1680 to 1700. The first buttons were known as "High Tops" and were made from a disc of horn from the Dorset Horn Sheep. It was covered by a small piece of material and worked with a needle and thread to make a conical shaped button. These buttons were much used for ladies' dresses.

Other types of buttons were then developed using wire twisted on a spindle with the ends cut and dipped in solder. Children of both sexes were employed as "Winders and Dippers" - others threaded the rings and they were called "Stringers". Whole families were employed in the button trade in East Dorset at this time and the wire buttons ousted the "High Tops" completely. Dorset buttons were much sought after, not only in Europe but also in the New World. Nearly 1000 people were employed in this industry.

Abraham Case opened the first depot for receiving buttons and by 1720 there were depots in Bere Regis, Milborne St. Andrew, Sherborne, Poole, Langton Matravers and Tarrant Keynston. At the Milborne Stileham Agency, set up by Peter Case junior in 1803, buttons were accepted every Friday and the place was like a fair ground as the crowds were so great. If you were to ask a native of East Dorset what his work was the answer would most probably been "I do Buttony".

Another Peter Case (Abraham's grandson) was sent to Liverpool where he started a clearing house for the export side. Peter is remembered in Liverpool as the founder of Case Street and Clayton, both probably built from the money made by "Buttony". He invented an alloy for the rings and old buttons made on these rings show no sign of rust. In its heyday the trade bought in some £12000 yearly (a great deal of money in those days).

The best buttons were mounted on pink paper - these were for export. Seconds were mounted on navy blue paper and the third class button on yellow paper. These last two qualities were for sale in England. Expert button makers could make a gross a day for which they were paid 3s. 6d. or seventeen and a half pence.

In 1850 a button making machine shown at the Great Exhibition in London bought a tragic end to the industry - almost overnight the industry was ruined for no hand-made button could compete. Acute distress and even starvation came to the Dorset button makers; from the Shaftesbury district alone 350 families were shipped to the colonies at Government expense.

Many of the depots remained in the hands of the Case family for well over a hundred years, the last surviving descendant of old Abraham died in 1908 at the village post office in Milborne St. Andrews. The Dowager Lady Lees bought the whole of the stock of old buttons of William Case on his death and tried to revive the industry at Lychett Minster. She succeeded in building a small business but the 1914-18 war killed it.

