

TRUE TREASURE BOOKS

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PRESENTS

TAILORS, GLOVERS AND MEN OF KENT

Peter D Spencer wrote in *The Searcher*, November 2002, of a dispute between himself and his detecting partner as to whether buttons, probably the most common metal detecting find, are largely casual losses or the result of the former agricultural use of shredded old clothing, called shoddy. The crux of the argument was that shredding machinery either removed or damaged the buttons leaving very few in amongst the shoddy and so the vast majority of button finds would have been casual losses.

Personally I am convinced that the shredding machinery was pretty ineffective at removing the smaller buttons, particularly as farmers, who used shoddy as mulch laid around plants to protect roots, discourage weeds, retain moisture and perhaps fertilise, tell me that it was actually full of buttons and pins. If we look more closely at some of these buttons that many in the hobby scorn, there is further support for the shoddy lobby in the great distances many buttons have travelled.

It was only recently that my detecting friend, Brian, held out a fly button and asked if I had seen one like it before. "Thousands!" was my immediate answer.

"But you haven't seen one like this, it's got writing on" Brian insisted.

"NE PLUS ULTRA, EXCELSIOR, SUSPENDER, BEST RING EDGE, THE CLIMAX - I reckon I've seen all the button maker's trade names." I protested.

"It's nothing like that." Brian added: "Take a closer look." Almost reluctantly I took the button and read OLIVER GOULD CHILHAM embossed on the front. Knowing Chilham to be a small Kent village not likely to support button making, I was puzzled even more so when Brian produced a similar button inscribed GOULD & SON CHILHAM.

Another hobby of mine is family history research and I went off to look Oliver up on the 1881 census, one of the key documents used for tracing people of the Victorian era. It turns out he was the village tailor and must have had his name stamped on the buttons he used as a form of advertising. Oliver was 65 years old in 1881 and didn't seem to have any male offspring living locally so the second button was probably used by Oliver's father, the son referred to being Oliver himself. Brian and I went through our Kent-found buttons and noted that around 10% carried tailors' inscriptions, some local, some from London and some from places as far away as Bradford and Dublin. Our little survey showed that more fly buttons originated outside of the county than within and while some London buttons may have been deposited by visiting hop-pickers, the buttons from further afield were surely imported with shoddy.



GLOVE BUTTON WITH LION MOTIF



GLOVE BUTTON WITH FLEECE MOTIF



TAILOR'S BUTTONS (TOP LEFT TO BOTTOM RIGHT): GOULD & SON CHELHAM, A
POULSON DORSET, WILLIAMS WALTHAM, J C BRIGGS NEWPORT IW.



TAILOR'S BUTTONS (TOP LEFT TO BOTTOM RIGHT): BELLINGHAM CANTERBURY,
WOODMAN LONDON WALL, JESPER & CO. BRADFORD, R BAKER & CO.
DUBLIN.

I have a theory that while many small clothing buttons escaped the shredding machinery, the larger buttons, we find less of, didn't and are mainly local casual losses. Staying with Chilham, a particular design of livery button seems to turn up in nearly every field and I wouldn't be surprised if quite a number had been found on the large metal detecting rally that was held there a few years ago. The crest is of an armoured arm holding a dragon's head, which I have not been able to track down precisely. The nearest crest I can find in the very comprehensive book: James Fairburn, *Fairburn's Crests of the Families, of Great Britain and Ireland*, (London, 1986), is that of HARDYMAN: an arm, in armour, embowed (bent), in hand a boar's head, erased (torn off) at neck. The back mark, or maker's name, on one of the buttons: C & J Weldon, 130 Cheapside, London, dates the button from 1851 to the early 1900s which ties in well with the fact that a Charles Hardy was the wealthy owner of Chilham Castle Estate from 1861 to 1919.



Adding the similarities between the names Hardy and Hardyman and the fact that slight modifications were often made to crests to distinguish them from those of other lines of the same family, I am sure that Charles Hardy commissioned the Chilham livery buttons, for adorning his servants.

Charles Hardy bought the estate from Sir James Beckford Wildman, Baronet, who had inherited it in 1816. I have found one example of a livery, button, which shows the arms of WILDMAN: out of a mural coronet, a demi-lion supporting a battle-axe dropping blood. The back mark: T Nortzell, 21 Bouverie St London, dates the button to between 1825 and 1838, which ties in with Sir James and my local loss theory.

The other thing that struck me about these personalised buttons is that there are now hordes of family historians seeking evidence of their ancestors such as could be provided by these buttons, many of which most of us throw away. I haven't discovered any tailors, button makers or British aristocrats in my own ancestry but I do have a link to Dents the glove manufacturers, who also used metal buttons, for, in 1837, my great-great grand aunt Sarah Davis Bennett (nee Northwood) married Jeremiah Macklin Allcroft, one of the firm's partners.

Bachelor brothers, John and William Dent, founded the firm known then as J & W Dent & Co in Worcester in 1777, soon gaining additional premises in London. In 1801 Jeremiah Macklin Allcroft was apprenticed to John Dent and by 1822 had become a partner in the firm which became known as Dent, Allcroft & Co in 1855. By this time Jeremiah and the Dent brothers had retired and John Derby Allcroft, Jeremiah's son by his first wife, was running the show. Under John Derby's management, annual production quadrupled to over 12 million pairs in 1884 and Dents became the premier glove producer in the world. Over a hundred years later Dents are still very much in business based in Warminster, Wiltshire; the London and Worcester factories having closed.

The buttons I have seen, which were used for fastening leather gloves at the wrist, all have a recessed centre portion somewhat like an eye on the front and a substantial fixing at the back. On page 38 of Alan and Gillian Meredith, Michael J Cuddeford, *Identifying Buttons*,

(Mount Publications, 1997), there are two glove buttons illustrated, both early 20th century from Dents' factories - one is embossed with the words 'Dent's Make', the other shows the '97 Wood Street', London address. I have only found two glove buttons personally, (one in the ground and the other at a boot fair.) both have the 'sunken eye' design containing a pictorial motif and are inscribed 'English Make'. Dents couldn't say whether these were their own buttons or not but did tell me that they would have used a few hundred different designs of metal button until they quite recently went out of use - today press-studs are almost exclusively used by Dent's for glove fastenings.

Now, I feel a project coming on, I am quite keen to put together a collection of Dents' buttons but at my current finds rate of one every 15 years, I am not going to get very far on my own. Would anyone like to help me out? I would preferably like the actual buttons, but if you don't want to part with them, a description, sketch or photo would be useful - I will gladly refund postage.

One final thought - if you would like to try your hand at family history research, for your finds or whatever, my wife and I have written a basic guide, originally for our friends and relatives who wanted to get started on their family ancestry. You can download a free from my website.

