

Metal Sewing-Thimbles Found in Britain

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Frontispiece: Der Fingerhüter (Christoph Weigel 1698). A Nuremberg thimble-maker's workshop

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For Val, for her support and encouragement

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Notes on Illustrations

The principal illustrator *et al* skilfully produced accurate representations of actual thimbles catalogued herein though some were drawn from photographs that frequently failed to show all perspectives or detail, particularly plan views. Catalogue drawings are approximately actual size with the exception of detail, which is enlarged. Maximum metric dimensions for all objects are noted within the text: dimensions for squashed items may be slightly larger than when intact. Copyright acknowledgements and Treasure, PAS, UKDFD and museum accession numbers are also included in the text. Thimbles and other objects shown in Figs are not to scale and except for Fig. 3, come from British depositions, primarily detectorists' finds and some archaeological.

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Abbreviations

B – base	ill. – illustration number
D – diameter	Fig. / Figs – Figure / Figures
H – height	PAS – Portable Antiquities Scheme
L – length	MoL – Museum of London
T – thickness	SM – Salisbury Museum
W – width	UKDFD – United Kingdom Detecting Finds’ Database
No. Nos – number / numbers	V&A – Victoria & Albert Museum
acc. – accession number	WHM – Wiltshire Heritage Museum
cat. – catalogue number	MDC – Metal-Detecting Club

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Brian Read, Huish Episcopi, Somerset, 2017.

Foreword

Brian Read has been at the forefront of the publication of accessible books for metal detectorists and finds researchers since his first book *History Beneath Our Feet* was published in 1988. This new volume follows on the success of his 2005 *Metal Buttons* and *Hooked Clasps and Eyes*, published in 2009, in which he researched and catalogued specific categories of finds. The late great Geoff Egan wrote the foreword for both books so I am honoured to have been asked to contribute to Brian's new book, *Metal Sewing-Thimbles Found In Britain*. Thimbles are a relatively common find on urban sites, as any of Geoff's published works on London finds show us, and as stray finds in rural locations, though they can often be dismissed beyond simple form and metal by those immune to the charms of these intimate, widely varied objects.

This important book celebrates the humble sewing-thimble, and looks at the varied forms and types of hand protection used when pushing needles through textile and leather from the 13th century up to the early 20th century. He uses data from the Portable Antiquities Scheme and UK Detector Finds Database, as well as those found during controlled archaeological excavation and mudlarking. It is richly enhanced with photographs and drawings, emphasising that no two of these objects are the same, and providing an invaluable resource for detectorists, archaeologists, finds specialists, dress historians, curators and collectors to identify and date types found in Britain. Indeed, this book is likely to reach further, providing comparanda for finds from important sites such as Jamestown, a place that was close to Geoff Egan's heart.

This book cannot be definitive, as new and different thimbles are regularly appearing. This only goes to emphasise the importance of recording each thimble found, however it may be recovered. As ever, close cooperation between archaeology and detecting remains essential in furthering our knowledge of small metal material culture. *Metal Sewing-Thimbles Found In Britain* adds to and builds on the corpus of collected works such as Bridget McConnel's *The Letts Guide to Collecting Thimbles* 1990, the late Edwin Holmes' *A History of Thimbles* 1985, and Magdalena and William Isbister's *More About* volumes as well as the catalogues of stratigraphically recovered finds by Geoff Egan.

The wide variety of thimbles found reflects the equally wide variety of people who would have used them. A thimble can provide us with a wealth of information about its creation, use and ultimate loss. And who can resist putting this most personal of finds onto a little finger, sparing a thought for the maker and the owner as it bears witness to the past?

Nicola Powell (Buckinghamshire, 2017)

Metal Sewing-Thimbles

Introduction

The name *sewing-thimble/s* differentiates these tools from metal thimbles used in specialist occupations, e.g. thatching, threshing, surgery, firearms, ropework or rigging *et al*; and it describes those without a crown or having a closed or partially open crown, but all for propelling needles through textile or leather. Out of their normal working environment, certain specialist metal-thimbles may be mistaken for sewing-thimbles, therefore some catalogued here as the latter are perhaps the former. In this study, for textual brevity, the common description *thimble/s* is used.

The present writer emphasises this work is not definitive, and opinions are based solely on his own physical examination of numerous metal thimbles found in Britain, combined with researching the available archive of primary and secondary publications. Some of the latter, it is fair to say, are frustratingly ambiguous and inconsistent and virtually verbatim of someone else's work, therefore when studying these, circumspection is wise. However, the primary sources are mostly reliable but since their respective publication fresh evidence has inevitably projected new light on the subject.

For dating typical late medieval and early post-medieval metal thimbles of the kinds regularly excavated in Britain, much of the more trustworthy evidence is found in the following literature: On Early Thimbles: A Seventh-Century-AD Example from Punta Secca, Sicily in Context by R J A Wilson *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* Vol. 35, Issue 4. 2016; *Vingeeerhoeden en naairingen uit de Amsterdamse bodem: Productietechnieken vanaf de Late Middeleeuwen* 1999 by Catherine A Langedijk and Herman F Boon; *The Medieval Household Daily Living c.1150-c.1450* 1998 and *Material Culture in London in an Age of Transition Tudor and Stuart Period Finds c.1450-c.1700 from Excavations at Riverside Sites in Southwark* 2005 each by Dr Geoff Egan; *The Venetian Shipwreck at Gnalčić* 2004 edited by Zrinka Mileusnic; *De Vingerhoed in Het Kunstambacht* 1992 by Adrienne De Smet; *Nuremberg Thimble-makers* 1986 by Helmut Greif; *Nürnberg Fingerhüte* 2014 by Michaela Eigmüller and Inge Lauterbach. Wider information about thimbles made of any material and from any period is found in two invaluable reference books – the late Edwin Holmes *A History of Thimbles* 1985, and Bridget McConnel's *The Letts Guide to Collecting Thimbles* 1991. Unquestionably, Holmes' research forms the benchmark in knowledge about the subject. Magdalena and William Isbister are the current vanguard into research concerning thimbles generally, especially those of metal, and their books and papers listed in the bibliography are essential reading. Des Pawson MBE discusses sailmakers' palm-irons in his commendable Monograph 8 *Sailmakers' Palms* 2010 and *Sailmakers' Palms expanded edition* 2018. The present writer has drawn heavily on the aforesaid works. Also considered are the bibliographical publications listed herein, and *Treasure Hunting* and *The Searcher* magazines. Invaluable information concerning metal thimbles primarily found by detectorists is available on the respective databases of the PAS and UKDFD.

Herein, only metal thimbles (including finger-guards and palm-irons), i.e. copper-alloy, iron/steel, pewter, gold or silver, found in Britain are studied, many of which belong to ubiquitous types while others are unusual or perhaps even rare (notwithstanding, comment is made about certain lead or stone implements of unclear function). Holmes 1985 indicates that pewter was not generally used for making practical thimbles, and mentions several recovered from a 1700-50 context (whether archaeologically or River Thames foreshore reliable, he does not say), and their small size suggests they were children's tokens for games. This present study revealed only a trio of pewter domed thimbles: a crushed example from the River Thames foreshore, London, one so tiny it is perhaps a child's toy, and another large enough to be functional. Apart from one here, thimbles earlier than the 19th century and made of gold

do not seem to feature in the known record as detecting or archaeological finds. Emphasis is given to the constructional processes of metal thimbles, of the types covered, and how these methods often created features that may aid reasonably accurate dating. For an accepted understanding of how and when certain late medieval and post-medieval copper-alloy thimbles were made, one cannot do better than to study the aforesaid work by Langedijk and Boon 1999.

Detectorists, including members of the Society of Thames Mudlarks, are responsible for finding in Britain most of the metal thimbles, finger-guards and palm-irons in this present assemblage, and the former span from possibly the 12th century through to the early 19th while the latter two are seemingly post-medieval. Notable absentees are 18th-century silver filigree domed thimbles, with not one example in the known detecting record. The 19th and 20th centuries saw an explosion in the types and styles of metal domed thimbles and, all being easily recognisable, are largely omitted from this present study. Findspots are denoted in italics: to protect the confidentiality of landowners and sites, the omission of precise provenance details is deliberate.

Essentially, four forms of stone, organic or metal tool to propel a needle through textile or leather are recognised:

- ring-type thimble – aka tailor’s thimble, sewing-ring, thimble-ring
- domed thimble
- open-top thimble
- palm-iron – aka pusher, palm-guard pusher

An understanding of the evolution of the English word ‘thimble’ is best explained by Holmes 1985, who quotes a verse from a 12th-century Arabic poem entitled ‘The Thimble’ composed by Al-Liss, a Moor from Seville:

‘Tis like a helmet, nicked
Where thrusting lances pricked;
Some sword has dispossessed
The helmet of its crest’.

The poem, which is the earliest written reference concerning thimbles, accurately describes the early medieval inordinately large, distinctive cast copper-alloy domed thimbles made in Cordoba, Spain (see below) seemingly modelled on the Moorish military helmet. Holmes continues, Al-Liss used the arabicized Persian word *kustubān* meaning thumb guard; which in true Persian is *angushtvān* meaning finger protector, a word found in archery publications. In India the word is *angushtāneh*, Bengali *angushtāna* and Hindi *anghootyūm*. The English word thimble evolved from the Old English (Old Saxon) *thūma*, meaning ‘thumb’, which provides the derivation ‘thymel’. Sometime during the 15th century the letter b was added giving us ‘thimble’, from the Middle English word ‘tho(u)mbe’. This does not imply thimbles were necessarily worn on the thumb. Even earlier, the German words for thimble and ring-type thimble are *fingerhūt* and *nähring* respectively, and in Dutch, *vingerhoed* and *naairing*.

Thimbles of any type and material are unknown from ancient Egypt or Greece respectively, and the first trustworthy tangible evidence for metal thimbles comes from China during the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) (Wilson 2016 *et al*). Written mentions of Roman thimbles are: H S Cuming 1879 ‘... ring-type thimbles were discovered in Herculaneum’; Sylvia Groves 1966 ‘... bronze thimbles had been found at Pompeii and Herculaneum’, and Helmut Greif 1984 ‘Pompeii and Herculaneum ... buried by Vesuvias ... metal thimbles must have been in use about 2000 years ago’ (Greif also describes Roman thimbles). Notwithstanding, Holmes 1985 indicates there is not any archaeological stratified evidence

for thimbles of any material or type from any Roman site, including Pompeii or Herculaneum. Holmes' research is generally accepted as reliable, however, so-called Roman copper-alloy thimbles persist within the museum, archaeological and metal-detecting fraternities. Interestingly, in 1988 a (?) cast copper-alloy ring-type thimble came from a c.AD 100-125 archaeological stratified context in Ephesus, Turkey (Wilson 2016). Despite this thimble being the earliest recorded from a Roman stratified context anywhere in the Roman Empire, it's speculative whether it is truly Roman: Wilson 2016 indicates it is a possible Far Eastern import, perhaps accompanying silk yarn and fine steel needles arriving from China. Whether or not the great Roman civilisation did use metal thimbles is a debate that will rumble on until an example is recovered from an archaeological stratified Roman context in Britain or elsewhere.

Said to be the earliest evidence for copper-alloy ring-type thimbles, about 100, in Europe is from archaeologically stratified 9th- – 12th-century deposits in Byzantine Corinth, Greece (Davidson G. R. 1952), though Wilson 2016 challenges this statement, saying their contexts were unstratified. However, nine ring-types have been found at various Eastern Mediterranean locations, all archaeologically secure 7th- century contexts: the earliest from a c.AD 600-625 stratified context in Punta Secca, Sicily (Wilson 2016). The Punta Secca discovery nullifies the Corinth ring-types.

Copper-alloy ring-type thimbles were seemingly current in 12th-century Germany (Holmes 1985) and an early 13th-century archaeologically stratified context in Amsterdam revealed a fragmented example (Langedijk and Boon 1999, ill. 34, cat. 292). Where these early ring-type thimbles originated is unclear, but they were perhaps cast, a technique that continued for both ring-types and domed until the advent of hammering which Langedijk and Boon 1999 say started in the mid-15th century. Archaeological evidence from London refutes this date – hammered domed thimbles were produced from at least the 14th century (see below). Interestingly, the Punta Secca ring-type thimble, the incomplete one from Amsterdam, the Eastern Mediterranean examples including those found in Corinth are all remarkably similar to late medieval ring-types recovered from British soil. This begs the question – do some British-found examples warrant a much earlier attribution? Isbister 2001, when describing children's thimbles, wrote, 'the earliest [a ring-type] ... found near Salisbury ... probably dates to the 12th or 13th century'. Regrettably, supporting evidence for this statement is not provided, however, the present writer believes it may be correct.

From at least 1350, and throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, Nuremberg was Europe's primary producer of copper-alloy thimbles, and their manufacture there, albeit decreasingly, continued until the end of the 18th century. The Netherlands eventually overtook Nuremberg and predominated until the end of the 17th century. Thimble manufactories were also operating in France at least by the 13th century, and at similar times in different areas of Germany, Wallonia in Belgium and other European centres but in Britain large-scale commercial copper-alloy thimble production did not start until the late 17th century (see John Lofting, below), albeit artisan thimble-makers worked here from at least c.1650. Britain's needs were supplied from mainland Europe, e.g. between 29 December 1682 and 1 February 1683 19,500 thimbles were imported into London, and 304,000 between March and June 1692 (Houghton 1727/28), without doubt these came from the Netherlands. Determining the age of some metal thimbles found in unstratified contexts, or where they were made, is problematic, therefore it is wise to be circumspect – for many described in this present study, dating and/or provenance is tentative.

Medieval and post-medieval thimbles primarily were made from copper or an alloy of: scientific analysis is the only way to determine a precise composition therefore it is sensible to describe this metal as copper alloy, albeit thimble-collectors usually say 'brass'. Iron, silver or gold thimbles were no doubt current in Britain during the later Middle Ages too, though sumptuary law would have restricted those made of precious metal to royalty and the nobility. No medieval silver thimbles of any type were noted during this study. In the early 16th century silver became more plentiful and thimbles (and other

trinkets, too) were made from this metal, however, until it was repealed in 1604, again sumptuary law ensured that only people above a certain rank were allowed to own them. Apart from four early post-medieval silver domed-thimbles here, this perhaps explains the apparent absence of silver thimbles in archaeological contexts and as detecting or Thames Mudlarks' discoveries. Paradoxically, Holmes 1985 indicates their widespread use, however, the lack of conclusive evidence from the soil suggests otherwise.

Ring-type thimbles are simply virtual tubes, or barrel-shaped or truncated cones of metal, open at both ends – one end of which or the widest end fits over the finger – and these may be cast, hammered sheet, sheet with longitudinal soldered seams or sheet with longitudinal unsoldered seams. Soldered and unsoldered seams may be butted, scarfed or both lapped and scarfed.

Thimbles with closed rounded, flat or pointed crowns are best described as domed, the basic construction of which, depending on period, is either cast one-piece, hammered sheet one-piece, or composite two, three- or six-piece sheet with longitudinal (sides) and horizontal (crowns to sides) soldered seams. Dated at c.12th – c.15th century, a Hispano-Moresque large cast copper-alloy domed thimble here is possibly the known record's earliest domed thimble from a British deposition. Composite two-piece domed thimbles with both longitudinal and horizontal soldered seams may have been first made about the mid-15th century, but complete confirmed examples of this date were not noted during this present study, however, evidence for one possibility is discussed below. Longitudinal seams are usually butted and soldered, and horizontal seams either butted or scarfed soldered. As with some ring-types, however, longitudinal soldered seams may be both lapped and scarfed, as noted on several examples in this present assemblage. Sometime during the late 18th century mass composite construction of domed thimbles gave way to the mechanical deep-drawing method (see below); notwithstanding, at this time artisan composite production continued, two practices often responsible for assigning an incorrect age to a thimble. For example, herein, a domed silver composite three-piece thimble could easily be ascribed as 16th or 17th century; however, it is stamped with the international fineness mark 925 thereby confirming it as 19th – 20th century. It was around the late 18th century that steel caps began to be soldered on crowns of some silver or copper-alloy domed thimbles.

A cross between the ring-type and domed thimble has a much larger circular hole in the apex of the crown (see below). These thimbles are seemingly uncommon in Britain and in this present work are classified as 'open-top', of which two styles are noted – both cast copper-alloy – one quite tall and the other somewhat stubbier.

Differentiating cast or hammered thimbles of any type from those having soldered seams is invariably relatively easy. Examination of both the outside and inside, using magnification if necessary, may reveal the telltale lines of solder shown in a different colour. Nonetheless, a skilful artisan would attempt to disguise seams (especially with gold or silver thimbles) by incorporating them into any decoration.

Crowns of certain late medieval one-piece domed thimbles exhibit a small circular hole, though unproven, possibly formed by a pin securing a casting mould core: confusingly, some hammered domed thimbles also feature similar holes. Domed thimbles in this current study revealed that it appears only those with a tonsure (see below) have such a piercing. Also noted on crowns of many cast or composite sheet domed thimbles is a tiny centring pit, and internal turning striations, two or more basal peripheral equidistant notches, and/or a basal wedge inside with oblique grooves outside, all of which suggest being held in a lathe chuck for finishing or knurling (see below).

Both silver and copper-alloy domed and ring-type thimbles were made by hammering, i.e. using different-size punches to force a flan of sheet metal alternately into a series of decreasing-size circular

holes in an iron swaging-block. This process is often called ‘deep-drawing’, a term which really ought to be reserved for mechanical deep drawing. Such thimbles may exhibit creased or split sides caused by insufficient annealing. Domed thimbles lacking any of the aforesaid characteristics can make it difficult to differentiate cast and hammered forms. Size and mass are unreliable guides though cast examples may have thicker sides. Langedijk and Boon 1999 offer an alternative method of hammering, i.e. ‘Round metal plates were gradually raised by hammering them on an edge until the shape of a thimble was reached’. This statement is questionable; while raising is a manufacturing technique suitable for larger metalwork, for small items such as thimbles it’s impractical (pers. comm. a master goldsmith).

Pits – aka indentations, dimples, holes, blind-holes – were either drilled or punched, and applied in columns (often oblique), concentric circles, left- or right-hand spirals, random or a combination of configurations. Possibly the earliest configuration is columns or concentric circles, as testified by the aforesaid examples from China, Punta Secca and the Eastern Mediterranean. Pits may completely cover the thimble while Holmes 1985 indicates up to c.1650 (a contentious date, see below) many were left with a tonsure-like patch on the crown, the size and shape of which varies, some with and some without a crown hole. Sides of both ring-type and domed thimbles frequently feature circumferential upper and/or basal plain bands that vary in width. Drilled pits are obviously circular while those punched may be circular, oval, D-shaped, reversed D-shaped, square, rectangular, elongated ovoid, triangular, crosses or a variety of star shapes. Many thimbles with triangular pits are said to be French (Isbister 2002/2011); however, Nuremberg thimble-makers also applied this shape, as perhaps did English producers. A mixture of pit shapes on the same thimble is not unusual. The size of pits is an unreliable guide to a thimble’s age; it probably only indicates suitability for use with a particular gauge of needle.

Circumferential basal single or double engraved grooves or bands of punched dots are apparent on many medieval domed and ring-type thimbles. Use of such grooves continued into the 17th century. The known record seemingly has only five medieval thimbles – two domed and three open-top – with one or more circumferential engraved grooves separating the pits from the tonsured crown or upper hole. Other decoration on medieval thimbles is uncommon though engraving, die punching, drilling and openwork are known. Pits were occasionally arranged to leave patterns of geometric strapwork or organic motifs, usually but not always outlined with linear engraving, or pits themselves formed geometric or curlicue shapes. White-metal coating, probably tin; gilding or a black coating, perhaps linseed oil (Holmes 1985) (black coating is common on other early and late post-medieval small metalwork), also appeared during the 16th century, while niello is apparently known on thimbles from the mid-15th century to the 18th though other than one mid-17th-century English silver domed thimble, none were noted during this current study. Gilding is occasionally evident on thimbles from the early post-medieval period through to the 19th century.

Excavated medieval and post-medieval domed thimbles with surviving leather, paper, twine, textile or metal internal sleeves are recorded. Presumably such inserts provided comfort and/or a better fit or strength, and evidence is provided that metal sleeves acted as repairs to damaged crowns (see below). A not uncommon discovery, which is easily mistaken for a metal internal sleeve, is a domed thimble with another inserted inside; this possibly represents a convenient method of storing. With regard to excavated domed thimbles retaining organic sleeves, Susan North, dress historian at the V&A Museum, London, provided an opinion based on photos, that inserts on one (see below) are ‘... coarse, plain-weave fabric ... possibly linen’.

Metal domed thimbles occasionally show obvious evidence of major repair or alteration and these are termed ‘hybrid’ thimbles (Isbister 2011). One definite hybrid and one possible are included here (see below).

The palm-iron – aka pusher, palm guard – is probably the earliest form of tool to push needles, initially perhaps being a rudimentary piece of stone or organic material cupped in the palm, or held by the fingers. Stone pushers ascribed as c.10,000 BC are recorded, and copper-alloy pushers, called *acutrudia*, dating from the 11th to the 15th centuries are known from the Middle East and Turkey (McConnel 1991). Some form of palm-iron is possibly what the Romans used, but paradoxically such tools are absent from the Roman period archaeological record.

In Britain, entirely due to detectorists and Thames Mudlarks, substantial cast metal tools now recognised as seemingly post-medieval palm-irons are becoming more apparent in the known record (see below). Other cast leaden objects invariably described as palm-guards/pushers are frequently found by detectorists though this function is unproven (see below).



Figure 1. Composite three-piece sheet silver domed thimble c.19th – c.20th century. Note longitudinal soldered butt seam and 925 fineness stamp. Private collection.



Figure 2. Hybrid sheet silver domed thimble with a probable replacement flat crown c.19th – c.20th century. Dorset.