

# Francesca character head thimbles

There has been an increase in interest in collecting thimbles where the shape is predominant. None of these thimbles are being produced now. In 2009 it became apparent that there is a growing manufacture of head thimbles of pewter. This is now a separate topic

For completeness sake, I have included examples of all the head-shape thimbles known to me and these do not cover all figurals. These have come from various thimble catalogues of the time, which is always a good source, or from items that I have had for sale over the years. I presume Francesca pioneered this trend in thimbles? This study does not cover dolls or toys as thimbles

Francesca thimble character heads are the most prolific. According to Thimble Collectors' Guild in September 1985, Francesca were a small family firm in the heart of the Staffordshire potteries and known as Francesca Art China.

The company is no longer in existence. I believe that Francesca were taken over by Sutherland China, who used some of the Francesca moulds and destroyed the rest. Compare the Francesca head thimbles with the Sutherland China heads and you will notice the similarity in the shapes

Francesca began their range with handpainted figurines, the earliest I know of being August 1976, with the Francesca F + "Francesca Art China" which were signed and dated. The studio was based at 16 Sutherland Place in Longton, Stoke-on-Trent, England



backstamps for Francesca figurines

L: Sarah handpainted by John Price 1977 and the Sarah figurine – C: bell in shape of a lady backstamp by P Ansell 1987

R: S Jones 1980 and Francesca advertising plaque for their thimbles – and unknown figurine

As well as figurines, Francesca also produced signed handpainted bells and candle snuffers in the shape of figures.

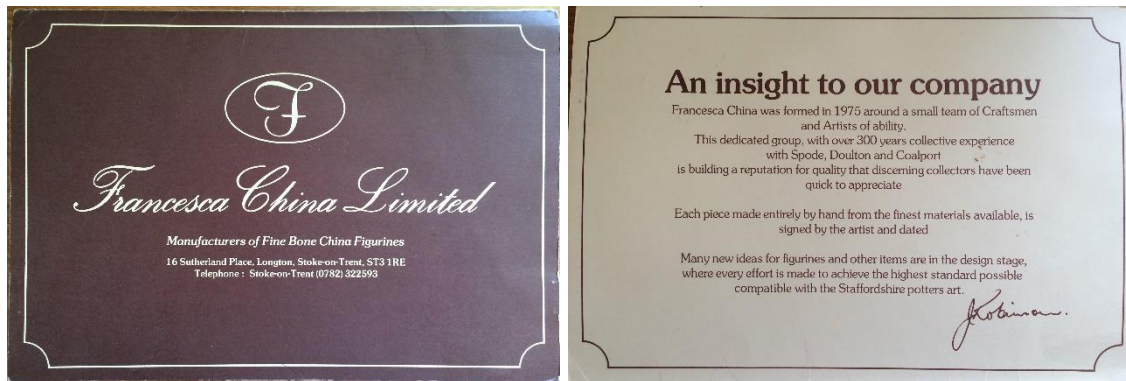


Francesca candle snuffers – Lancelot and Merlin with their Francesca backstamps



Francesca bell – Pope John Paul

Contact with one of the Francesca painters' sons in May 2014, Paul Shufflebotham, gives the founder of Francesca as **John Robinson**, who had had some sort of managerial role at Royal Doulton and surrounded himself with a small team of craftsmen and "Artists of Ability", from several of the potteries (Spode, Coalport as well as Royal Doulton). The first of these was Ray Shuff from Royal Doulton, who became a Francesca figurine painter until the liquidation of the figurines section in March 1981



front and back of introductory Francesca brochures with John Robinson's signature

Thimbles only made their appearance from 1982, after the initial liquidation. It is still to be established who took over Francesca from John Robinson for the period when Francesca produced handpainted thimbles



backstamps found on Francesca thimbles

L: painter's initial and date – R: Francesca F maker's mark and name of character head – thimble boxes

The thimbles have the Francesca backstamp (a cursive F in a circle) with 'Staffordshire England' and usually the painter's initials, with a two-digit date, all lettered on the inside as well as the name of the character

At least count, there are **116** different characters

The dates on their thimbles range from 1982 to 1990. From observation there seem to be some Francesca thimbles that are unsigned, or have the Francesca backstamp missing, or have no markings at all. They are obviously Francesca thimbles: could these be from the later end of the production, as some have an 89 date but no F maker's mark? They could be early "experiments"?

Each character has the indentations on the crown of the head, like traditional thimbles, but these are not always apparent as they are painted over. All the thimbles are handpainted and the finish is glossy, not matt. Being handpainted by a range of artists has led to colour variations and even variety in expressions. If you are a collector of Royal Doulton figurines, you will know the effect of a fine hand painter, as against an average one

You will also notice that there is an increasing appearance of unpainted, tho glazed, character heads - are these seconds or just unpainted stock - surely defeating the purpose of collecting these delightful handpainted range of thimbles? The other thought tho, is that seeing the plain white blank, makes us appreciate the fine handpainting of each character? Many do carry the Francesca backstamp

The following 31 painters' initials have been found in Francesca items, but only the painters in the later stages of the company painted thimbles (ie after 1982)

The dates alongside fourteen of these Francesca painters' names are the dates found lettered inside the thimbles. or dates Do your thimbles show any other initials? Most Francesca artists never painted thimbles

**AD**=Anthea Derry | **AE**=Alice Eckenstein | **AG** | **BB**=B Bream | **DB**=D Broom [83-84-87-88-89-91]  
**DS**=Dan Smith? [84] | **GC**=G Czapski [85-89] | **GE** [unverified] | **IE** [unverified]  
**IS**=Ivan Sutton [82-83-84-85-86] | **JK**=J Kelsall [or Kelshaw] [82-84-86] | **JL** [84-85-87-88-90]  
**JP**=John Price | **JS**=Joan Sutton [82] | **KH**=Keith Harrison | **KS**=K Sylvester  
**KT**=K Taylor [83-84-85-86-87-88-89-90] | **KY** [unverified] | **MB**=M Banks [90] | **MM**=Michael J Middling  
**MW**=Minnie Webb | **MY**=M Young [88-89-90] | **NE**=N Evans [82] | **PA**=Pat Ansell [81-82-83-84-85-86]  
**PN** | **RB**=Robert Band | **RH**=Ron Hearson  
**RS**=Ray Shufflebotham [signs R Shuff] he was apprenticed to Spode in 1950 and was one of the first figurine painters to join Francesca after he left Royal Doulton; also painted candle snuffers | **SF**  
**SJ** =Stan Jones [82-83-84] | **TK**=T Kelshaw [82-83-86]



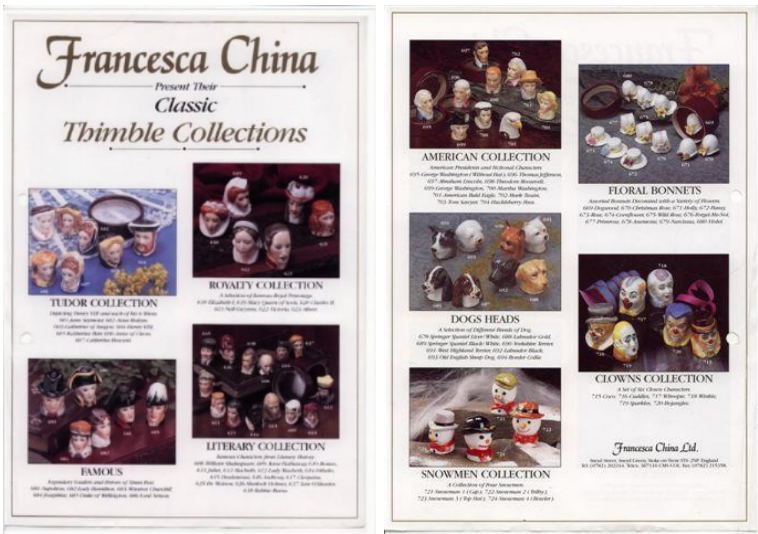
Francesca artists at work



Francesca backstamped, tiny character jugs, candle snuffers and busts were also produced. these are included for completeness to show these non-thimble shapes - they are the Francesca tiny - not mini - character jugs



I am happy to have been sent digital copies of the original pamphlet advertising Francesca thimbles. Although the pamphlets appear to be undated, it is interesting to note the 'subject' groupings used by Francesca, which I have tried to follow, including the group names. I have added the brochures below - the lettering is almost impossible to read but the groupings can be clearly seen



I have divided the Francesca thimbles by the various character groups (as named in the original Francesca brochure) and then alphabetised them. Where possible I have included the name of the Dickensian story that they relate to

# American Collection

there are ten characters in this set



US Presidents



Abraham Lincoln  
+ part-painted version



American Bald Eagle  
R: KT88



**George Washington**  
without a hat  
formed part of original set



**George Washington**  
with a hat + gold-painted crown of hat formed part of original set  
2nd: KT84



**Huckleberry Finn**



**Liberty**  
did not form part of original brochure's set of 10  
with brass headdress



**Mark Twain**  
C: GC89



**Martha Washington**



**Theodore Roosevelt**  
C: KT84



**Thomas Jefferson**  
C: KT – R: MY90  
hand-lettered character's name





**Tom Sawyer**  
with a hat



**Tom Sawyer**  
without a hat

## Clowns Collection

set of six

the clowns are only named on the boxes and not in the thimbles – tho some are!!  
an identical example of the clown "Cuddles" has been found - painted in 1986 - that is named "Beppo"  
within the thimble

the numbering alongside the names refers to the Francesca catalogue numbers

a very observant Francesca collector has noticed that the clown shapes correspond to the Dickensian character shapes. What do you think? I think it shows how artistic and inventive the Francesca painters were!!

look at "Cuddles" and "Artful Dodger" - "Whoopie" and "Mr Dick" - "Winkie" and "Tommy Traddles" -  
"Coco" and "Bill Sykes" - "Bojangles" and "Uriah Heep"  
"Sparkles" and "Mr Micawber"



**Bojangles** (720)

C: KT89

hand-lettered character's name



**Coco** (715)

L: KT89



**Cuddles** (716)

+ KT89 + MB90

hand-lettered character's name



**Sparkles** (719)

R: MY89



**Whoopie** (717)

R: KT89



**Winkie (718)**  
C: KT88 - R: MY89

## Composers



**Bach**



**Beethoven**



**Mozart**  
IS85



**Schubert**  
R: varieties in gloss & matt

## Dickens Collection

originally, I thought this was a set of 29  
on closer inspection of the Francesca brochure  
Charles Dickens is not part of the Literary Collection  
he must then complete this set of 30?



**Charles Dickens**



**Artful Dodger**  
[-- Oliver Twist --]



**Bill Sykes**  
[-- Oliver Twist --]





**Bullseye**

[-- Oliver Twist --]  
hand-lettered character's name



**David Copperfield**

[-- David Copperfield --]



**Estella**

[-- Great Expectations --]



**Fagin**

[-- Great Expectations --]



**Little Dorrit**

[-- Little Dorrit --]



**Little Emily**

[-- David Copperfield --]



**Little Nell**

[-- The Old Curiosity Shop --]

R: MY88



**Magwitch**

[-- Great Expectations --]



**Miss Haversham**

[-- Great Expectations --]





**Mr Bumble**

[-- Great Expectations --]



**Mr Dick**

[-- David Copperfield --]



**Mr Micawber**

[-- David Copperfield --]



**Mr Pickwick**

[-- The Pickwick Papers --]



**Mrs Squeers**

[-- Nicholas Nickleby --]



**Nancy**

[-- Oliver Twist --]

C: PA83



**Nicholas Nickleby**

[-- Nicholas Nickleby --]



**Oliver Twist**

[-- Oliver Twist --]



**Pecksniff**

[-- Martin Chuzzlewick --]



**Pip**

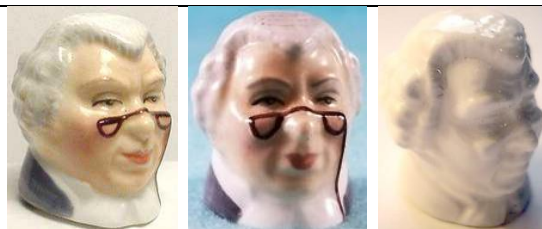
[-- Great Expectations --]



**Sairey Gamp**  
[-- Martin Chuzzlewick --]  
R: PA83



**Scrooge**  
[-- A Christmas Carol --]



**Sergeant Bux Fux**  
[-- The Pickwick Papers --]



**Smike**  
[-- Nicholas Nickleby --]

lower: a very crude amateurish modern attempt (2019) – never painted by original Francesca painters



**Tiny Tim**  
[-- A Christmas Carol --]



**Tommy Traddles**  
[-- David Copperfield --]



**Uriah Heep**  
[-- David Copperfield --]



**Wackford Squeers**  
[-- Nicholas Nickleby --]



## Dogs Heads

there are eight dogs in this set  
 some were offered for sale by The Thimble Guild in Scotland  
 the dogs' eyes are so realistic – for matt-finish dogs – see Victoria China



**Border Collie**



**Labrador – black**  
 hand-lettered character's name



**Labrador - golden**



**Old English Sheep Dog**



**Springer Spaniel - black**



**Springer Spaniel - liver**



**West Highland Terrier**  
hand-lettered character's name



**Yorkshire Terrier**

## Famous

according to the original Francesca brochure  
this was originally a set of six leaders and heroes



**Drake**  
MY88

this thimble did not form part of the original brochure's set of 6 thimbles



**Duke of Wellington**





**Josephine**



**Lady Hamilton**  
3rd: DB89



**Lord Nelson**  
with a hat

hat version is featured in the original brochure  
R: KT85

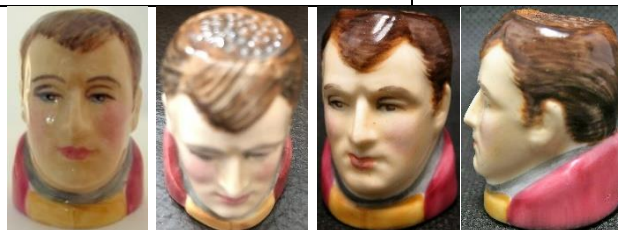


**Lord Nelson**  
without a hat



**Napoleon**  
with a hat

hat version is featured in the original brochure



**Napoleon**  
without a hat  
R: PA82



**Sir Walter Raleigh**

this thimble did not form part of the original  
brochure's set of 6 thimbles



**Winston Churchill**  
without a hat



**Winston Churchill**  
with a hat

hat version is featured in the original brochure

### Floral bonnets

this is a set of twelve thimbles with four differently shaped hats - two types of bonnet, brimmed hat, cloche. Each has a flower attached but the flower is not named inside the thimble  
there are identical thimbles that are also named for the months of the year  
The month is lettered inside the thimble

first offered for sale thru Thimble Collectors' Guild in Scotland, in July 1985



month backstamp



**Anemone**  
aka February  
JL89



**Christmas rose**  
aka November  
+ JL89



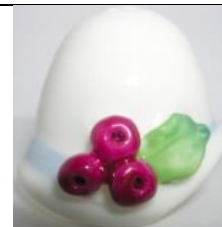
**Cornflower**  
aka June  
JL89



**Dogwood**  
aka October  
+ JL89



**Forget-me-nots**  
aka August  
JL89



**Holly**  
aka December





**Narcissus**  
aka January  
JL89



**Pansy**  
aka May  
+ JL89



**Primrose**  
aka July  
JL89



**Rose**  
aka April



**Violet**  
aka March  
JL89

White – still needs a flower applied



**Wild rose**  
aka September  
+ JL89

## Literary Characters

set of 14

some are authors - some from fiction

many of these thimbles are **pairs** (with consecutive numberings)

the numbering alongside some of the names refers to the Francesca catalogue numbers



**Anne Hathaway (609)**



**Antony (616)**

R: hand-lettered character wrongly name "Anthony"



**Cleopatra (617)**



**Desdemona (615)**



**Dr Watson**



**Juliet (611)**  
C: PA83



**Lady Macbeth (613)**



**Macbeth (612)**



**Othello (614)**



**Robbie Burns**  
R: KT84



**Romeo (610)**  
4<sup>th</sup>: PA83





**Sherlock Holmes**



**Tam O'Shanter**

R: KT84



**William Shakespeare (608)**

2<sup>nd</sup> L: 83-dated thimbles show the indentations starting at the hairline

R: DB91

## Royalty Collection

originally a set of six  
a selection of European royal personages  
the numbering alongside the names refers to the Francesca catalogue numbers



**Albert (623)**



**Charles II (620)**

with a hat

hat version is featured in the original brochure



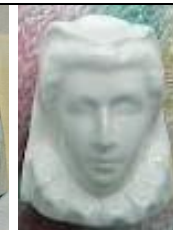
**Charles II**  
without a hat  
R: DB83



**Earl of Essex**  
this thimble did not form part of the original  
brochure's set of 6 thimbles



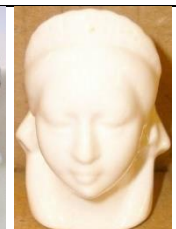
**Elizabeth I (618)**  
C: IS84



**Mary Queen of Scots (619)**  
hand-lettered character's name



**Nell Gwynn (621)**



**Victoria (622)**



## Snowmen

a set of four  
all have a sprig of greenery on the hat



**Bowler**  
C: MY90



**Hat**  
R: MY89



**Top hat**



**Trilby**

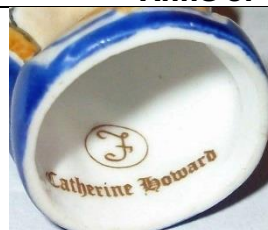
## Tudor Collection



**Anne Boleyn (602)**



**Anne of Cleves (606)**



**Catherine Howard (607)**



**Catherine of Aragon (603)**



**Jane Seymour (601)**



**Katherine Parr (605)**

### Others



**Baby Bunting - blue**



**Baby Bunting - pink**



**Baby Bunting - blue  
in crib  
crib forms a pin-tray**



**Baby Bunting - pink  
in crib  
crib forms a pin-tray**





**Good King Wenceslas**

Bottom L: DB87



**John Paul II**

L: IS86 – R: IS82

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This listing of Francesca character head thimbles does not purport to be complete or accurate in all aspects.  
 Rather it invites comment and contribution to add to our knowledge. My thanks to the contributors.

EMAIL [thimbleselect@bigpond.com](mailto:thimbleselect@bigpond.com) TO SHARE YOUR KNOWLEDGE.

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