

Innes Mitchell pyrographed wooden thimbles (Scotland)

1984-1988

Looking back over the plus thirty years since I began collecting thimbles, I realised what a major part The Thimble Collectors Guild/Scotland Direct/The Thimble Guild played in bringing their local thimble makers to the awareness of the collectables thimbles market worldwide - especially in the early to mid-1980s. The Guild was founded in January 1983 by Arthur Bell in Lanark, and then moved to Biggar also in Scotland. The Guild exposed us to thimble makers that we would not have encountered. Through their monthly mail order catalogues, individual thimble Scottish craftsmen were promoted thru their sales.

We have seen thru the Guild the finest thimbles that Scotland has to offer
local silversmiths like Philip Campbell of Mull in the Hebrides
Carol Edwards of Lewis in the outer Hebrides' thimbles' Coll Pottery
Christine Philp of Skye in the Hebrides' wooden thimbles
Highland China
Heather McLean of Balandra Crafts' wooden thimbles
Lesley Lamb of Ross-shire's handpainted sycamore thimbles
John and Meg Urwin's thimbles
Norley Swanson's wooden painted thimbles
etc.

I know you will have your own favourite.

I am intrigued to know whether in the early 1980s the Guild went around Scotland searching for thimble makers, to commission them or did the thimble makers come to the Guild with their creations? Sadly, that era of thimble makers has long gone and in Britain the great majority of thimbles in 2018 are decal china thimbles. The Guild ceased their paper catalogues in August 2018.

I was introduced to pyrography on wooden thimbles by the Guild – those of Innes Mitchell. I must laugh at myself tho. Until I started to look back thru my Mitchell collection of thimbles and back issues, looking at their maker's story – I had always presumed that Innes was a woman. My apologies Innes! My attention to detail is appalling!

There are several features of Innes's thimbles that make them special, even unique, in my eyes.

Firstly, the timber used: he used the natural timber of iconic **British trees**.

Secondly, once turned into a thimble, the wood was polished to reveal the true beauty of the grain and thus the patina – look at the buttery colour of the Box Wood thimble.

Finally, the fineness of Mitchell's drawing of the outline of the actual tree with its name underneath using a hot poker, the skill known as pyrography.

Adding a fine trim of matt gold to the rim of the apex and near the base, completes the treasure.

From a true craftsman these little miniature wonders were 'born'.

I notice that in later editions the gold lines were omitted – you may be able to tell whether yours was one of the original sets made.

Being handturned, the thimble shapes differed over the years and there will always be slight variations in the timber when different trees of the same species were sourced. I have shown all examples as the pyrography is always different too.

Sadly, Innes Mitchell never added his signature to his thimbles, so another unmarked thimble creator. They are unique so I hope this latest topic will keep his name associated with these beautifully crafted wooden thimbles from the Scottish Highlands, for many years to come.

The trees set is the most widely collected and there are twenty-two in the series (this includes fruit trees). Being Scottish, Mitchell has added the Scottish or **Gaelic** name of the tree to a few thimbles in this series. The tree is only drawn on one side when the Gaelic lettering is used, then the English name is included on the verso, which is of plain wood. I have found five examples of thimbles with Gaelic tree names so far.

I have shown the back of some of the tree series thimbles to show the plain timber. What a variety of colours – the pinkness of the pear – the pale silver birch – the deep chocolate of the walnut wood.

I have noticed that with my Mitchell thimbles – now over thirty years old – the wood is darkening in colour.



Irish yew – 1985 - 2025

I don't know if these thimbles were available to purchase as a set. I have never been interested in collecting sets of thimbles, but I was surprised to find how many of these little tree thimbles live in my treasured Highlands of Scotland collection.

Due to the popularity of the trees series, the Guild encouraged Innes to pyrograph local flowers onto his thimbles.

He mainly used holly timber for these creations and then handpainted the flowers' colours over the pyrographed flower shape.

Until I began researching this topic on Innes Mitchell, I hadn't been unaware of his tourism-themed thimbles.

The final theme is a commemorative thimble, and it has bilingual lettering.

I can only find Innes Mitchell wooden thimbles for sale by The Thimble Guild for a short period 1984-1988.



English Elm

The hedgerows and parks of England were once lined with these majestic trees, but now the leafy elm is becoming a nostalgic sight. Innes Mitchell, craftsman in wood, has preserved a little piece of elm for you and turned it into a captivating thimble. After polishing it to a superb finish to bring out the warm golden-brown sheen of the natural grain, he employs the technique of pyrography to "draw" an elm tree with delicate artistry. Enhanced by two gold bands, it is a tribute to the natural beauty of wood. £8.45 or £6.95 if ordered by 8th March.



Limited edition or availability

FIELD MAPLE

Antonio Stradivarius was one of the first to use maple in violin making, recognising as many have done since its quality for use in instrument making when correctly seasoned and varnished. Innes Mitchell has used this attractive wood with its distinctive figured pattern to make a thimble for you. He has then intricately pyrographed it with a tiny maple tree. £8.95 or £7.50 if ordered by 10th March. TB745

L: one of the first Mitchell thimbles offered for sale by The Guild February 1985 – the ad features how the thimbles were made

R: this ad of February 1987 features the history of the timber used
in some ads it mentions 'limited to 150' – this is a small run by the Guild's standards

Once I decided to feature the Innes Mitchell thimbles as a new topic, I looked into where the thimbles were actually made. I don't think you can get to such a remote spot that easily.

Mitchell lived and worked in Sutherland near Cape Wrath on the north-west tip of Scotland.



map showing the remoteness in Scotland of where Innes Mitchell produced his thimbles

Other Scottish thimble topics:

Carol Edwards of Coll Pottery and Horizon China thimbles

Highland China thimbles

Scottish wooden thimbles

Trees



limited to **150** sets of 20 thimbles



Alder

March 1986



Apple

seems to be missing the lower gold trim



Ash



Ash

September 1986



Uinnseann





Beech Faidhbhile "Beech"

February 1986



Box Wood

April 1987



Chestnut

March 1988



English Elm

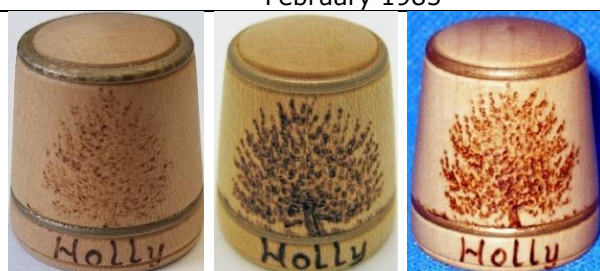
R: no gold trims

February 1985



Field Maple

February 1987



Holly

November 1986



Hornbeam

limited to 350
September 1987



Irish Yew

showing the heartwood on the apex

August 1985



Laurel

November 1984



Lime Teile

L: seems to be missing the lower gold trim



Oak

December 1986



Pear

January 1987



Plum

September 1985



Scottish Laburnum



Silver Birch

June 1986



Sycamore

May 1986



Walnut

April 1986



Weeping Willow

February 1988



Wild Cherry Sirist Fiadhach

2nd L: later version with thicker gold trim

December 1985

Flowers



Foxglove
holly wood
June 1985



Grass of Parnassus
May 1987



Snowdrop
holly wood
handpainted
limited to **150**
January 1988

Tourism



**Balmoral
Larch – Scots Pine**

R: purchased at Balmoral Castle in 1997
pyrographed geometric symbol is from on Balmoral's coat-of-arms



Cape Wrath

showing Durness Lighthouse eleven miles from
where thimbles were made

Sycamore
October 1987



Suilven Elphin Sutherland

bilingual name of the mountain near where Innes
lives
March 1987

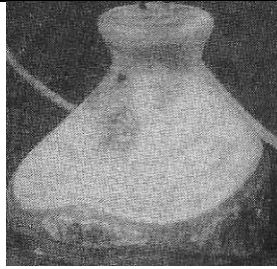
Commemoratives



Merry Christmas Nollaig Chridheil

pyrographed, handpainted holly
bilingual greeting with extra gilding on the apex centre
November 1987

Other items



miniature vase 10mm carved from a twig
January 1986
b&w photo

Contributors

Pawel Brzyski | Andrea Griffiths | Jean Taylor | Krystyna Zagajewska

This listing of Innes Mitchell thimbles does not purport to be complete or accurate in all aspects.
Rather it invites comment and contribution to add to our knowledge.

EMAIL thimbleselect@bigpond.com TO SHARE YOUR KNOWLEDGE

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