

# Bog oak sewing tools

I was very much a thimble beginner when we visited Ireland in 1986. In my naivety I thought I'd be able to pop into an antique store and buy a bog oak thimble. To this day I don't own a 19<sup>th</sup> century bog oak thimble. I have to be content with a modern bog oak thimble bought thru a mail-order catalogue in Melbourne in 1986.

Bog oak, which covers other types of trees not only oaks, is a semi-petrified wood. Trees, which fell into the peat bogs, were buried in the acidic water associated with the bogs. It took hundreds or even thousands of years being buried in mud with an absence of oxygen to achieve this fossilised state. It is a very hard material. Divers are required to bring these rare finds to the surface.

I have always known this material as bog oak – current searches also name it bog wood.



expensive slabs of bog oak

Bog oak a very smooth black material and items produced for the jewellery trade or as souvenirs were made between 1840s thru to 1930.

The hand carving on bog oak features the shamrock and often the Irish harp as well. Bog oak requires special tools to carve it – whether it be the shape or the intricate Celtic patterns. You will notice that there is additional stippled patterning to complete the carved tool.

Bog oak thimbles are rare: even other sewing tools like pincushions and thimble holders are seldom seen. This is because of the high price of the original material.

I have only been able to locate one or two photos of the rarer sewing tools.

See the Guinness souvenir pincushion, which was never advertised as bog oak. Fakes of bog oak are known.



three groups of bog oak sewing items

L: pincushion and three thimble holders in the shape of owls from Killarney

C: four pincushions

R: group of four sewing tools including two needleholders

Geoffrey Manley of Lyme Regis was a carver of exotic materials in the 1980s – these included bog oak, ivory and mammoth teeth. Another maker is from Shropshire. One of the antique makers is known.

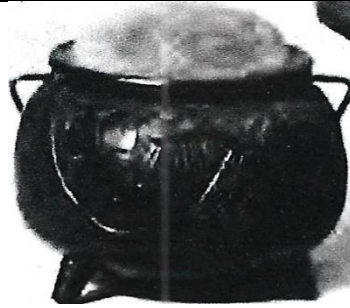
I have included a date, where supplied by the seller or author.

## Pincushions

The principal shape of bog oak pincushions is a pot – whether it is a saucepan or cauldron. In the latter case there may be metal handles. Some have feet or three legs. Owls are another shape.



cauldron  
bun feet  
red cushion is a replacement  
1880s from Killarney  
shamrocks Irish harp  
83x60mm



cauldron  
three legs with tiny handles  
KILLARNEY impressed on base  
b&w photo



cauldron  
three legs with tiny handles  
shamrocks Irish harp  
45mm



cauldron  
three legs  
metal handle  
b&w photo



owl  
with glass eyes



owl  
with glass eyes



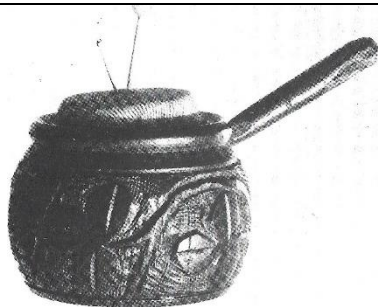
owl  
with glass eyes  
1900s



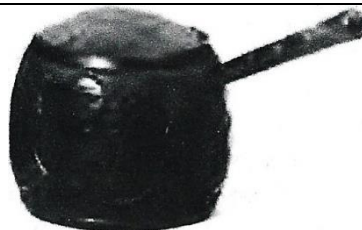
pot  
shamrocks Irish harp  
CORK lettered on base  
1890s



saucepan  
there in no pattern round the pan



saucepan  
shamrocks  
b&w photo



saucepan  
shamrocks and harp  
CORK impressed on base  
b&w photo



saucepan  
shamrocks



pincushion  
**stained wood** beer barrel  
 advertising Guinness Ireland

### Thimble holders

Thimble holders in various shapes are the most prolific bog oak sewing tool. Sometimes the holder may contain a brass thimble and the fit suggests it is original. The piece de resistance is to find a bog oak thimble inside.

A few are lidded; many with similar themes as bog oak pincushions.



acorn  
 screw-on lid  
 no carving



pot  
 shamrocks Irish harp  
 this could contain a bog oak  
 thimble



barrel  
 Irish harp shamrocks



Blarney Castle  
 lidded  
 1840s



bucket  
 child's size brass thimble  
 geometric pattern  
 metal handles  
 1890s  
 22mm



cat  
 child's size brass thimble  
 glass eyes



cat  
 glass eyes



cauldron  
 metal handles  
 three legs  
 shamrocks  
 1900s



cauldron  
 lidded with metal handle  
 three legs



cauldron  
lidded with knob in shape of a **pig**  
three legs



cauldron  
small handles  
three legs  
bog oak thimble



pot  
geometric pattern



owl  
glass eyes  
removable head  
bog oak thimble



owl  
with hinged lid  
**Cornelius Goggin**  
large glass eyes  
1860s



owl  
ffinely feathered  
glass eyes



owl  
glass eyes  
removable head



owls  
glass eyes



owl  
blue glass eyes



owl  
brass-lined container for thimble

**Brown**  75 mark  
b&w photo



owl on plinth  
removable head

**Brown**  75 mark  
glass eyes  
brass=covered beak and claws  
4.5 ins  
b&w photo



owl  
removable head  
yellow glass eyes  
b&w photo



owl on plinth  
glass eyes



saucepan  
lidded  
there in no pattern round the pan



saucepan  
shamrocks



top hat  
shamrocks continue on brim  
lidded



top hat  
shamrocks continue on brim



tubular  
abstract pattern  
shamrock carved in relief on lid

## Thimbles

Antique bog oak thimbles are rare. Modern thimbles of 1980s and 2010s are the antiques of the future.



abstract pattern  
1930s



band of shamrocks  
with ERIN carved upside down  
diamond pattern above  
1800s



KILLARNEY carved on band  
abstract vertical lines above  
1800s



**Geoffrey Manley**  
Lyme Regis 1980s  
plainly turned



band of shamrocks  
abstract vertical lines above



absract pattern on band  
abstract vertical lines above



**Gordon E ...**  
Shropshire  
2010s



band of shamrocks  
with BLARNEY carved upside down  
diamond pattern above  
1800s



band of shamrocks  
with CORK carved upside down

## Other sewing tools

These bog oak tools are the rarest of all.

It is recorded in Cummins and Taunton's book on chatelaines that a bog oak chatelaine exists. The attachments listed are scissors in a scabbard – a horn-shaped container with harp on the lid – a bucket thimble holder – a needlecase in the shape of a tower – barrel for tape measure.



crochet hook  
1890s  
cow bone finial  
shamrocks



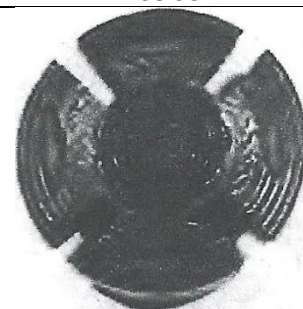
needlecase  
shamrocks  
1890s



needlecase - narrow  
shamrocks  
BRAY lettered on lower part  
1890s



tape measure  
bone finial  
silk measure  
abstract pattern



pinwheel  
carved on both sides  
rosette in centre

## References

- Elaine Gausson *Sewing accessories: a collector's guide*. 2001  
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Eleanor Johnson *Thimbles and thimble cases*. 2004  
Gay Ann Rogers *An illustrated history of needlework tools*. 1983  
Jenny Scharff *Irish bog oak thimbles & other sewing tools*. TCI Bulletin, fall 2000

## Contributors

Micky Garvey | Nicola Kissane | Caroline Meacham-Elegant Arts | Irene Schwall

This listing of Bog oak sewing tools 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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