

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 made 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 head 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.

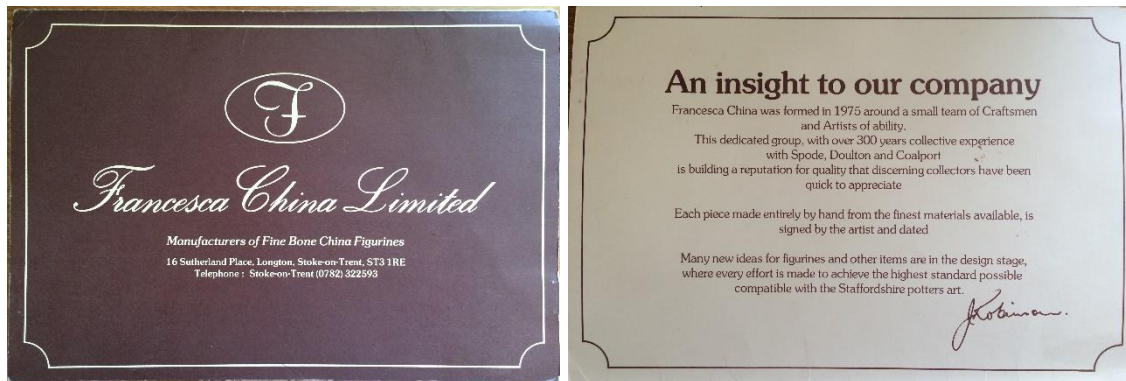


Francesca candle snuffers – Lancelot and Merlin with their Francesca backstamps



Francesca bell – Pope John Paul II

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 year – R: Francesca *F* maker's mark and name of character head

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 year, all lettered on the inside, as well as the name of the character.

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

The years lettered 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 year 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 this delightful handpainted range of thimbles? Another 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 year alongside fourteen of these Francesca painters' names are the ones found lettered inside the thimble. 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

[For other handpainted thimble topics see](#)

- Australian handpainted thimbles and sewing tools 1973-2014
- Cornish Enamels thimbles 1995-1997
- Gerald Delaney handpainted thimbles
- Graham Payne handpainted thimbles 1981-1996
- Hazrah handpainted bronze thimbles from Mauritius 2006-2009
- Iles' handpainted and decalated plastic thimbles
- Jacqui and David Parker of Olivia (Birmingham) thimbles 1983-1996
- Jasper's of Yorkshire handpainted thimbles
- Merryfield Pottery (Devon) thimbles
- Modern British hand-decorated wooden thimbles
- Modern British handpainted thimbles
- Roger Gibbons pewter thimbles 1984-1990
- Roger Harrison of Kelso thimbles 1983-1988
- Royal Worcester thimble painters
- Scottish wooden thimbles

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 --)



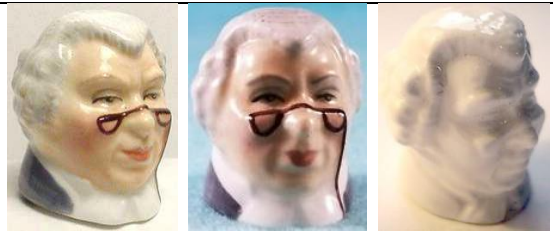
Pip
(-- Great Expectations --)



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 character 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

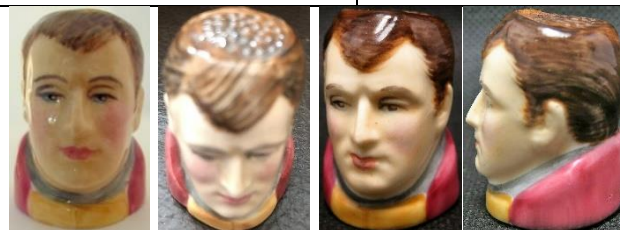
without a hat



Napoleon

with a hat

hat version is featured in the original brochure



Napoleon

without a hat

R: PA82



Raleigh

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

MY88



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



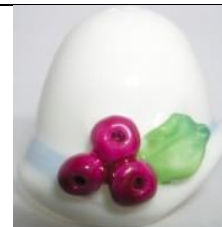
Cornflower
aka June
JL89



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 characters 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)
4th: PA83



Sherlock Holmes



Tam O'Shanter

R: KT84



William Shakespeare (608)

2nd L: 83-year 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

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



Bowler

MY90



Cap

R: MY89 MY90



Hat

L: MY90



Top hat

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.

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