

White Heron

bone china thimbles from New Zealand
which includes Hereford Fine China

When I was researching Australian thimbles for publication in *Thimbles of Australia* back in 1997, I was intrigued to find thimbles with an Australian theme, produced by White Heron of New Zealand. I could find nothing more than one example of handpainted thimbles that may have been part of a larger set. This was one of the floral state emblems, being the kangaroo paw for Western Australia - thimbles that began a long search for further examples and more details of the maker. The design is plain and uncluttered, with a single spray of the Western Australian native flower with "WA" lettered quite palely, under the flower. The thimble backstamp has *Bone China* WHITE HERON *New Zealand* lettered inside, with two facing White herons.









White Heron thimble backstamp



Thimble at R has a larger backstamp

More Australian floral symbols have been discovered since publication in 1998, making a set of six state native flower thimbles: all made in New Zealand! All the states' thimbles have the shortened form of the name as part of the flower design in upper case pale lettering. There is a small sprig of the flower handpainted on the verso of the thimbles. The name of the flower is not lettered anywhere. According to Jean Shoup who marketed White Heron thimbles in the USA, these thimbles were "outline" decals ie it is easier to paint this way and the designs are then more uniform, than if they were painted freehand. This is a technique also employed by Royal Worcester towards the end of their thimble production.

White Heron Australian flowers

 NSW [waratah] this is the only design missing the gold trims sold in the Hereford box	 QLD [Cooktown orchid]	 SA [Sturt's desert pea]
 TAS [Tasmanian blue gum] sold in the Hereford box	 VIC [pink heath]	 WA [kangaroo paw]

Erin Titmus in New Zealand contacted me about the White Heron thimbles and thus began a sharing photos and information over many years.

It was only then that I first knew of the New Zealand set of floral emblems – there are four identified New Zealand flowers and again each has a sprig of the flower painted on the verso. The flowers are named under each, unlike the Australian set. The backstamps are identical in both sets.

White Heron New Zealand flowers

 N.Z. Clematis	  N.Z. Kowhai
 N.Z. Kaka Beak	 N.Z. Pohutukawa R: from Rick Lewis's archive (no gold rims)

Gradually other designs emerged – garden flowers – and a commemorative for 1983. From descriptions I have read of these thimbles for sale on ebay over the intervening years, there may be more of the roses – as they were variously named pink, red and orange. I know there are other thimble designs and I am just waiting for you to share the photos and any other relevant details please. From observation these thimbles may not all be handpainted, but decals applied?

I have also only encountered one signed example on White Heron thimbles – FH. It would be amazing to find who this was and the names of any other of their thimble painters.

A second simplified White Heron backstamp has emerged. Was this the first or the second backstamp in use? Maybe they match the era of the White Heron thimble boxes?



simplified White Heron backstamps

other White Heron thimble designs

** these thimble photos are from Rick Lewis's archives 2015



red and yellow orchid
flower not named
signed FH



pink rose
flower not named
sold in the Hereford box



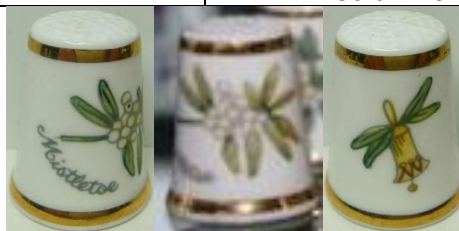
pale green orchid
handpainted
these thimbles have the simplified backstamp



yellow rose
flower not named
yellow rosebud on verso
thimble purchased in 1981
sold in the white White Heron box



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mistletoe



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flower not named



White Heron thimbles were handpainted (in part – see above) in the 1980s. More specifically, I found the New Zealand flower set for sale by *Thimbles Only* of California. Jean Shoup sought out thimbles from all over the globe for her clients and these New Zealand thimbles were offered for sale in her **winter 1983** catalogue – with three NZ flowers on offer – and those are US\$ prices!

Being a New Zealand product I am sure the New Zealand set of flowers would have been produced first but until we can find who was behind the White Heron production, everything is pure surmise! *Thimbles Only* never offered the Australian flower set for sale.



NEW ZEALAND
Handpainted bone china originals depicting the native flowers. White Heron trademark. Hereford International, Ltd. \$26.00 each
N.Z. Clematis — "pink" 88
N.Z. Kaka Beak — "red" 89
N.Z. Kowkai — "yellow" 90

Thimbles Only winter 1983 catalogue page

Even back in 1983, as mentioned in the advert above, the name Hereford International, Ltd., is alongside the name White Heron. And this is where the fun of a thimble 'researcher' begins!

When White Heron thimbles were offered for sale, they were presented in different thimble boxes! The majority were brown (very occasionally grey) velour thimble cases, lettered on the inner lid with 'Hereford New Zealand' and only the thimbles contained therein were backstamped White Heron. Originally, I felt the thimble could have been incorrectly boxed, but there are too many. The other type of box is a lightweight white square cardboard thimble box, marked for White Heron!

If the Hereford thimbles boxes had not been used for White Heron thimbles, it would not have been as easy to find the connection, which lead us to Hereford Fine China.



L to R: White Heron – Hereford boxes – Hereford box with NZ flower thimble and Hereford boxes with Australian flowers.
The head of a bull forms part of this mark and lettered "Hereford".

Erin knew of identical floral thimbles but this time they bore the backstamp of *Hereford* FINE CHINA N.Z. without the "bull" trademark.



Hereford thimble backstamp

Surprise! The handpainted Hereford thimbles are identical to the White Heron thimbles designs! Just allow for slight variations in the painters' hand. One of the only differences that I can observe is that the Hereford thimbles have a self-patterned snowflake on the apex – the White Heron thimbles have a plain indented apex. At this stage, Hereford thimbles appear to only have the New Zealand flower designs.



Hereford snowflake apex

Hereford thimbles



So where is all this leading? In 1983 there seem to be one manufacturer with two names creating similar/identical thimbles? One with a very British sounding name and one with a New Zealand bird name. Which would be more appealing to local thimble collectors?

A recent Google search led me to Hereford Fine China. Quoting from <http://ricklewis.ie> "Hereford Fine China International Ltd established a far-reaching reputation as the producer of some of the finest handcrafted figurines in the world. Founded in England by **Richard C Lewis**, Hereford Fine China then relocated to **Hamilton New Zealand**, where the emphasis was on themes reflecting Australasia and Pacific Basin regions. The Company's stature was reinforced in 1981 when a handcrafted Tui resting on a Kowhai branch was selected as the State presentation to Queen Elizabeth on the occasion of her visit to New Zealand".



Rick Lewis was born in County Down in Ireland and in 1961 he joined Royal Worcester, where over a four year period he was the protégé of Royal Worcester's Harry Davis. Lewis was the only artist with whom Davis was prepared to share his talent and secrets, as he recognised Rick's talents as a porcelain artist.

Lewis left Royal Worcester in 1964 to set up his Hereford Fine China in Ledbury England. Once he moved to NZ in 1981, "his most notable work for the people of New Zealand is his Kiwi which resides in the Beehive, in Wellington". Lewis's Kiwi sculpture was replicated on a one ounce gold coin.

He was later presented with the M.B.E and A.R.A for his contribution to fine art and design in New Zealand. Rick Lewis returned to his native Ireland in 1991.



Rick Lewis

The 1980s were the zenith of thimble manufacture for collectors worldwide and it would have been a short step for Hereford Fine China to join this burgeoning market?

Having had several of the Hereford and White Heron thimbles pass thru my hands over twenty years, I noted at the time, that the thimbles were identical to the blanks of Royal Worcester thimbles. Isn't it a coincidence that I noted this, long before I knew of the connection of Rick Lewis, RW and Hereford?

This in my catalogue entry in 2011. The mention of the purchase date of 1981 is from a reputable seller and means that White Heron were producing thimbles in New Zealand as early as 1981, shortly after Lewis moved to New Zealand. Maybe both Hereford and White Heron only produced thimbles in New Zealand between the dates of 1981 and 1983?

I believe that none of the thimble blanks were made in New Zealand. They were imported from England, or elsewhere, for decoration by White Heron and Hereford, where bone china as a resource, abounds.

10/84 New Zealand. Bone china. White Heron. Yellow rose with yellow rosebud on verso [looking at the shape, was White Heron using Royal Worcester blanks?] Boxed [purchased 1981] \$18

An Australian thimble collector of White Heron thimbles contacted Rick Lewis in January 2015. Quoting from this email exchange "The White Heron backstamp was used for product not designed by myself from 1977-1981. They were not limited editions; I can only estimate hundreds of each."

From further research by Erin in NZ, we now all have the two trade mark registration dates. Both sets of dates are outside the thimble production era, but that is how the trade mark system works.

Hereford #132555
13 May 1980 – 12 December 1985

White Heron #126023
28 November 1978 – 20 July 1988

We know from Lewis's website that he created Hereford China figurines/sculptures etc but I don't know if White Heron made anything except thimbles? Yes, they did – examples of a 1979 handpainted Christmas plate and handpainted white flowers on a log – seen on NZ's Trade Me in 2016.



R: White Heron's Christmas 1979 plate has a handpainted pohutukawa (Christmas) tree

If you are familiar with the handpainted range of thimbles from Royal Worcester, I understand that from the 1970s the foreman of the painting division, Edward Townsend, came up with a cheaper solution to meet the demand for handpainted thimbles, which had necessitated three firings. He created a number of outline prints with several specified designs, which were placed on blank thimbles and the painters then completed the design. It speeded up the process.

After studying some of the White Heron floral designs, this practice may have also been in practise in Hamilton? What do you think? Using a magnifier on the White Heron thimbles, they are definitely handpainted but ... something seems different from truly freehand painting on these thimbles? Nor are they decals – except for the Salvation Army commemorative thimble.

So a few unanswered questions remain. Was Rick Lewis the only owner of White Heron business? If not, who else was associated with the group before 1981 or the painting of these thimbles in New Zealand? Why was there a simpler backstamp – and when?

If you have any ideas or knowledge or further information (or photos) please share.

Contributors

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This listing of White Heron 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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