

Dorcas thimble boxes

In 2000 the members of the Needlework Tool Collectors Society of Australia [NTCSA] made their Dorcas thimble boxes available for recording. Lee Bateman and Sue Gowan undertook this to coincide with Lee's presentation on Dorcas thimbles. It is only with a good quantity of items for comparison, that any research becomes possible.

Copies of the photographs were placed in the library of the NTCSA and a second set given to the Dorset Thimble Society. Originally the boxes were photographed against a ruler, but this has not proved satisfactory in showing the actual measurements of the boxes.

It is now time to share these boxes with the wider thimble collecting community in the hope that further examples will turn up and to stimulate further research. More importantly, it is necessary to record this information for future collectors as these boxes are fragile and the information on the bases has been lost or worn to illegibility.

I am often asked whether one should keep the boxes in which thimbles are supplied. Without the boxes produced with the Dorcas thimbles, our knowledge would be poorer. Similarly, if no "Nifty" thimble boxes remained, there would be no link to Australia's "Nifty" sterling silver thimbles, as it is only on their boxes that the word 'Australia' appears. In modern collections, where space is of a premium, it is more difficult to retain modern thimble boxes, but if those needlewomen hadn't passed down their Dorcas thimbles in their original boxes...

Charles Horner, of Halifax England, patented his steel-cored sterling silver Dorcas thimbles in March 1885 and they were made from then until 1947. They have the beauty and comfort of silver with the core of steel, which gave it strength.

This was a major change in the way thimbles were made and Horner took advantage of this with clever marketing. He soon offered an unconditional guarantee of exchange on these new thimbles. It was the first time that thimbles had been sold with an unconditional guarantee.

This guarantee was placed on the underside of the cardboard thimble boxes that Dorcas thimbles were sold in.

For those who own a Dorcas thimble in its original cardboard box, you are indeed fortunate. Because they are not common, you may not be aware how wide the diversity of boxes is and how the exchange guarantee changed over the years.

We do not know which thimbles were supplied with which boxes. There were several different patterns on Dorcas thimbles, but again no specific box matched a specific design.

To date we know of 20 different types of Dorcas boxes with four composite Dorcas boxes. Sometimes, it is just a different colour for the guarantee, sometimes a different coloured inner velvet lining, on the bottom half only. Most of the boxes have a white trim around the edges of the lid.

The interest then lies in the lettering on the front of the boxes and in the different labels on the base of these boxes.

There are two forms of guarantee and together with the first label which has no guarantee of exchange, they would roughly correspond to three phases of Dorcas thimbles production. Guarantee 2 always names the size as '10', no matter what size thimble the box contained.

The 9-carat gold Dorcas thimble boxes differed from those for the silver ones, in that the gold thimble boxes are hinged. There is no exchange guarantee on those boxes. So if your box is hinged, it would originally have contained a gold Dorcas thimble.

Horner did not use the name Dorcas on his newly patented thimbles. Initially they were only marked with the word PAT. (for Patent) plus a number (the size). The early Dorcas thimbles produced had no guarantee of exchange.

The boxes with label 1 would be on the earliest boxes and they do have the name Dorcas on them. Once he gauged the popularity of his thimbles, the guarantee was added.

What seems unclear from the current thimble literature is when Horner began to use the name Dorcas, but it was during the 1890s. When he did, the thimbles were marked DORCAS, with C.H. and the size.

The boxes with Guarantee 1 would be used on the next era of boxes.

After approximately 1898 the British thimble trade began to use 'British Made'.

Up until 1905 the Dorcas thimble apices were domed, which would have necessitated having a bigger thimble box and may correspond to the box sizing.

Horner introduced the Improved Dorcas in 1905: it was a completely new process. It was after this that the thimble apex was flat. The fit is very snug for these later thimbles in the smaller boxes produced after 1905. The words "Improved Dorcas" appear on these exchange guarantees:
see Guarantee 2

Horner also produced The Little Dorcas with its own box and label - there were no guarantees of exchange on the bottom of these boxes, which were housed in these little cardboard thimble boxes. The rarest Dorcas box that has recently come to my attention is for The London Dorcas.

It is difficult enough to find the London Dorcas thimble, never mind finding the matching thimble box!

Since being sent photos of the Dorcas composite boxes, this section is now growing with an undreamt of selection when I began this topic. These would have been used by haberdashers, jewellers or salesmen to display the range of sizes or patterns of Dorcas thimbles.

So popular were the Dorcas thimbles that Horner's competitors started producing their own steel-cored silver thimbles after Horner's patents expired - in the 1920s - Dreema by Henry Griffith and Son, Dura by Walker & Hall and Doris by Charles Iles and the metal thimble The Dorothy by Charles Iles. I have included the Dura (finally a rare Dura Box has turned up!!), Dreema, The Dorothy and Doris boxes for comparison. None have Horner's unconditional guarantee.

I encourage you to seek out the four references listed at the end of these pages, to find out more about Dorcas thimbles and the related steel-cored sterling silver thimbles.

As I don't own any of these boxes, I need help with the sizing in millimetres, please.

Other Charles Horner thimble topics

Charles Horner Ltd sterling silver thimbles with other sponsor's marks
Charles Horner's early Dorcas "PAT." thimbles
Horner and hearts

Dorcas boxes



Label 1

The "Dorcas" Thimble STERLING SILVER

Made in three parts, the inner and the outer being Silver, and the intermediate Steel, giving a resisting power not obtained in Silver only.



The Dorcas

grey blue box
with white trim
cursive gold writing diagonally
maroon paper label
blue velvet lining



The Dorcas

grey blue box
with white trim
cursive gold lettering diagonally
blue paper label
blue velvet lining



The Dorcas

grey blue box
with white trim
cursive green lettering diagonally
maroon paper label
blue velvet lining



The Dorcas

lilac box
with white trim
cursive gold lettering diagonally
blue paper label
blue velvet lining



The Dorcas

lilac box
with white trim
cursive gold lettering diagonally
green paper label
dark blue velvet lining

GUARANTEE 1



Guarantee 1

GUARANTEE

**Exchanged free if rendered useless from any cause whatsoever.
Made of Sterling Silver with interlining of hardened steel.
None genuine without the name 'DORCAS' C.H.
BRITISH MADE**



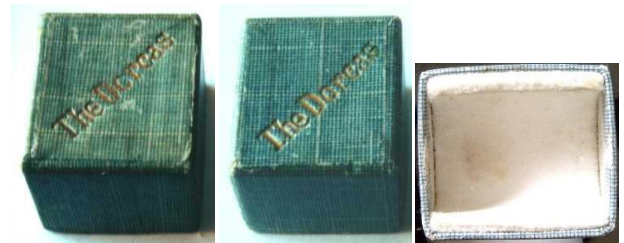
THE DORCAS

dark blue box
bold gold lettering
green paper guarantee
white velvet lining



The Dorcas

cross-hatched blue box
gold lettering diagonally
green paper guarantee
blue velvet lining
size 27x25mm

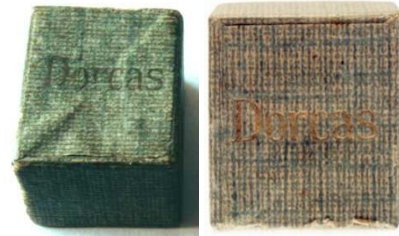


The Dorcas

cross-hatched blue box
gold lettering diagonally
black paper guarantee
white velvet lining
size 27x25mm



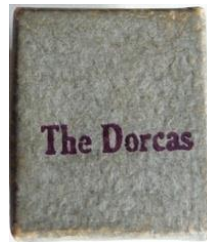
THE DORCAS
cross-hatched blue box
gold lettering
black paper guarantee
blue velvet lining



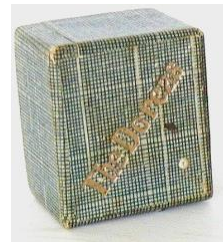
Dorcas
cross-hatched blue-green box
gold lettering
green paper guarantee
creamy-white velvet lining



The Dorcas
bubbly texture, grey box
maroon lettering
white paper guarantee with blue lettering
green velvet lining
size 30x27mm



The Dorcas
bubbly texture, grey box
maroon lettering
green paper guarantee
green velvet lining
size 31x26X20mm



The Dorcas
cross-hatched blue box
raised gold lettering diagonally
green paper guarantee
ivory velvet lining
size 30x27mm

GUARANTEE 2



Guarantee 2

MADE IN ENGLAND
Improved Dorcas Thimble
Sterling Silver - Steel lined
will be exchanged FREE OF
CHARGE if rendered useless
from ANY CAUSE.
None Genuine unless stamped
DORCAS together with
INITIALS C.H.
& SIZE NUMBER CH. 10
on the rim as shown. DORCAS



The Dorcas

dark blue box
with white trim
gold lettering
green paper guarantee with gold lettering
white velvet lining



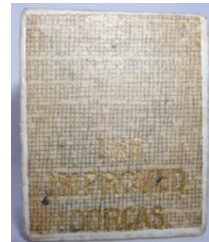
The Dorcas

cracked grey-green box
gold lettering
green paper guarantee
white-pink velvet lining



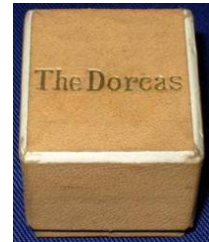
THE IMPROVED DORCAS

cross-hatched blue box
with white trim
gold lettering
maroon paper guarantee
green velvet lining



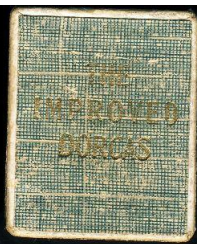
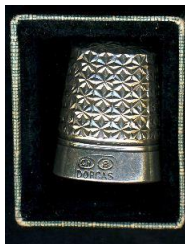
THE IMPROVED DORCAS

cross-hatched grey box
with white trim
gold lettering at lower edge
white velvet lining



The Dorcas

yellow box
with white trim
gold lettering
brown paper guarantee
white velvet lining
size 30x27mm



THE IMPROVED DORCAS

cross-hatched blue box
with white trim
gold lettering
maroon paper guarantee
green velvet lining
33x27x29mm



THE IMPROVED DORCAS

mottled yellow-green
gold lettering

NOTE the **anomaly** in the wording!
There is no mention of steel-lined that is on other Dorcas boxes
(Sterling Silver) only

GOLD DORCAS



9-carat gold steel-lined Dorcas box

The Dorcas

pinkish-grey box

with white trim

gold lettering

green velvet lining

the box is hinged and has no guarantee label

9ct GOLD is lettered on inside lid

size 32x26.5mm

THE LITTLE DORCAS



The Little Dorcas label

MADE IN ENGLAND
"The Little Dorcas"
 Sterling Silver - steel lined.
 None genuine unless stamped
LITTLE DORCAS



THE LITTLE DORCAS

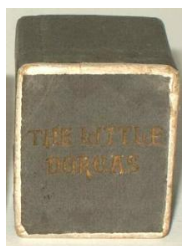
grey blue box

with white trim

gold lettering

maroon paper label

pale blue velvet lining



THE LITTLE DORCAS

grey box

with white trim

gold lettering

maroon paper

description

with Guarantee 2 for

standard Dorcas

thimbles

grey velvet lining



THE LITTLE DORCAS

purplish-grey box

with white trim

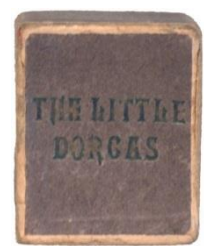
gold lettering

maroon paper

description with Little

Dorcas label

grey velvet lining



THE LITTLE DORCAS

purplish-grey box

with white trim

shows as green lettering

as gold has worn off

maroon paper label

grey velvet lining

size 30x25x24mm

THE LONDON DORCAS



The London Dorcas

olive drab green box
with white edging
deep grey lettering slightly diagonally
dark blue velvet lining
there is additional lettering that looks like
S F & Co
size 34x26x25mm
there is no exchange guarantee label



the very rare thimble for these boxes

COMPOSITE DORCAS BOXES



glass-topped Dorcas display box "DORCAS" THIMBLE STERLING SILVER HORNER'S. PATENT

with RD No.116254 on the box under Horner name



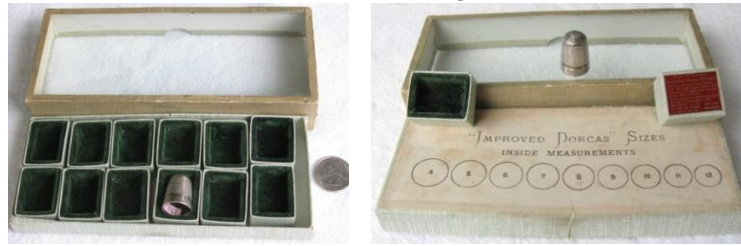
glass-topped Dorcas display box "IMPROVED DORCAS" HORNER'S. PATENT STERLING SILVER

with RD No.116254 on the box's front edge

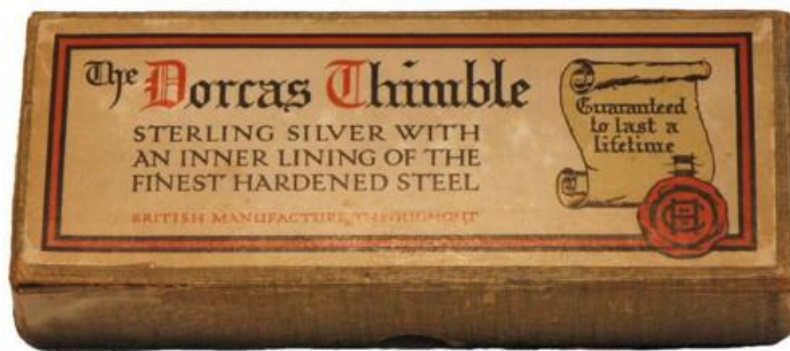


black Bakelite Dorcas display stand

Odeonesque shape
with sized spaces for 12 thimbles
115mm in height



glass-topped cardboard Dorcas display box
for "Improved Dorcas" displays
on the base are sizes with inside measurements
12 smaller boxes with no covers - all have the red Guarantee 2 label
with green velvet lining
size 3x7 inches



cardboard **The Dorcas Thimble box**
size 165X65x25mm
also shows Charles Horner's trademark on the bottom R-H corner



Counter display case with Dorcas thimbles
DORCAS
GUARANTEED TO LAST A LIFETIME



- 1: framed holder is free-standing with a glass cover showing twelve Dorcas thimbles
- 2: the same holder with the guarantee label and price displayed
- 3: the glass slide open
- 4: the inner box of Dorcas thimbles, which is lined with royal blue plush



L: these are the mint thimbles removed from the display case – note that the price of **2/6** for each thimble is displayed on the guarantee label

C: the thimbles have been rendered useless for sewing by having a hole machine-punched thru the thimbles

R: the Dorcas name has been obliterated

lower: showing the detail of the Dorcas name and size obliteration

Pelham Burn - on page 14 - features four examples of these hole punched Dorcas thimbles but could not offer an explanation – seeing the whole display holder now makes sense of the holes!

This interesting set was offered for sale on ebay in 2021
(with the explanation for the punched holes being "professionally drilled for a chatelaine")



DORCAS BOXES WITH ANOMALIES



has this box been doctored?
probably not, having heard from the ebay seller
the Guarantee 1 label used on the base of Dorcas boxes
has been applied to the inner lid of a thimble box
with no signs of glue, discoloration etc
the colour of the inner box is the type used for other Dorcas thimbles
and it would appear that the mint Dorcas thimble fits very well
the Jeweller's details are lettered on the outside of the box
it is likely that the boxes were originally produced in this manner
jeweller: Smith Brothers 2 Market Street Rotherham

COMMEMORATIVE DORCAS BOXES

It's taken until 2025 for this very special Dorcas box to be listed for sale. It was issued to commemorate the Empire Exhibition of 1925. The lion symbol indicates the occasion being commemorated. The seller does not show the base of the thimble box.



The Dorcas 1925

HORNER'S BOXES FOR HIS STERLING SILVER THIMBLES



Hall Marked Silver

note the similar-coloured boxes
to his Dorcas boxes



**Hall Marked Silver
Made in England**



**Hall Marked Silver
Made in England**



**Charles Horner,
Jeweller,
23, Northgate.
Halifax.**

note: the thimble at L was not made by Horner



Mappin & Webb London
Retailer with two Louise thimbles

Other boxes

THE DORIS



**The
"Doris" Thimble
STERLING SILVER
With intermediate steel
Lining, very strong, and
well finished.
MADE IN ENGLAND**



The Doris
grey blue box
with white trim
cursive gold lettering diagonally
maroon paper label
green velvet lining



The Doris
grey blue box
with white trim
cursive black lettering diagonally
cream paper label
green velvet lining



The Doris
green box
with white trim
cursive gold lettering diagonally
cream paper label
green velvet lining

THE DOROTHY



The Dorothy thimble box

cream or grey boxes with no guarantee of exchange

THE DOROTHY THIMBLE

HEAVILY SILVER CASED

HAND CHASED

No. 240/8

MADE IN ENGLAND.

DREEMA



The Dreema label

The 'Dreema Thimble.'

STERLING SILVER

**This thimble has a
steel lining between
two layers of solid
sterling silver.
The beauty of silver
with strength of steel.**



**DREEMA
THIMBLES**

cross-hatched grey
box
with two gold stars
gold lettering
grey paper with
green lettering
blue velvet lining



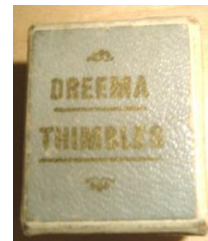
**DREEMA
THIMBLES**

grey-green box
with two gold stars
gold lettering
grey paper with
green lettering
red velvet lining



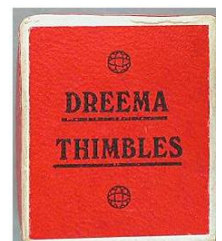
**DREEMA
THIMBLES**

grey mottled box
with white trim
with four blue
diamond shapes
blue lettering
grey paper with
blue lettering



**DREEMA
THIMBLES**

grey dimpled box
with white trim
with two gold
curlicues
gold lettering
grey paper with



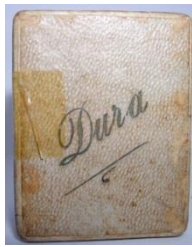
**DREEMA
THIMBLES**

orange-red box
with white trim
with two gold stars
black lettering
white velvet lining

red or blue velvet
lining

green lettering
blue velvet lining

DURA



DURA

finely dotted grey box
with white edging
cursive deep grey lettering diagonally
no guarantee
black velvet lining
size 32.5x25mm



DURA

finely dotted mauve box
with white edging
cursive gold lettering diagonally
no guarantee
white velvet lining

James Walker Ltd



grey box
guarantee



grey box
guarantee

**This Thimble is Real
Silver throughout, specially
strengthened in
process of Manufacture,
and should last a life-
time. Same will be ex-
changed Free of Charge
an any time if damaged.**



green & white box
no guarantee

THIS BOX HOUSES AN ORIGINAL STEEL-CLAD THIMBLE

References

Edwin Holmes *History of thimbles*. 1985
Tom Lawson *Charles Horner of Halifax*. 2002
Diane Pelham Burn *Identifying steel-cored thimbles*. 1993
Estelle Zalkin *Zalkin's handbook of thimbles & sewing implements*. 1988

Contributors

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This listing of Dorcas thimble boxes 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 TO SHARE YOUR KNOWLEDGE.

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