

Modern British enamelled thimbles

It's time to return to enamelled thimbles, having covered specific enamelled thimble handpainters in earlier topics. I feel that there has been so many mis-attributed makers of modern British enamelled thimbles in this group. This occurs when these thimbles are sold on the second-hand market. I hope I can untangle this without making things more muddled.

In 18th century England, Bilston in South Staffordshire was the heart of enamelled Objets d'Art. They were crafted between 1750-1840 - and held as desirable by well-healed Georgians.

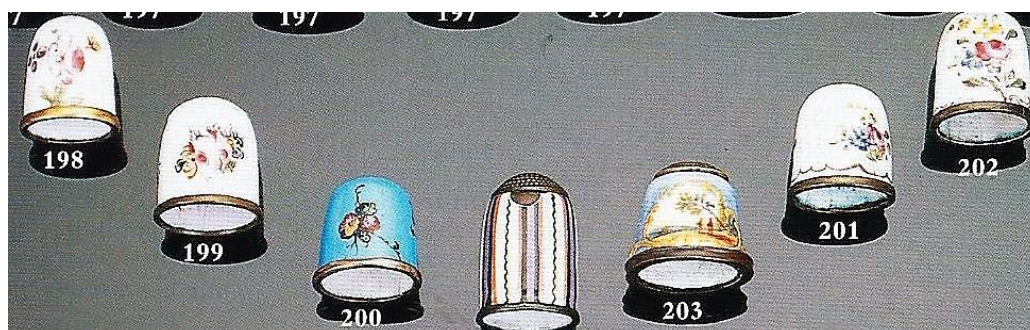
In 1830, as industrialisation sped up, this craft was dying out.

None of the 18th century enamelled thimbles bear any marks.



examples of early Bilston in South Staffordshire handpainted thimbles

The term used for these eighteenth century enamelled thimbles is South Staffordshire: it is now difficult to distinguish their exact provenance.



South Staffordshire enamelled thimbles 1760s

Battersea Enamels were made in Battersea in London for just four years, between 1753-1756.

I plan to concentrate on the modern enamelled thimble that is made over copper and brass, with a smattering of thimble enamellers who have worked over silver. This study excludes silversmiths like James Swann & Son or Whitehill Silver & Plate Co. Both turned out many sterling silver thimbles with enamelling. These designs are too numerous to include in this small study.

Most of the thimble enamellers listed below did not handpaint their thimbles. That had been the norm since enamelled Objets d'Art were first crafted between 1740-1830. Once the British industrial revolution changed lives forever in 1830s, enamelled treasures disappeared as a craft.

From 1970 enamelled thimbles were being made for the collectables market. This was led by Susan Benjamin. Technology had evolved in techniques of enamelling. Instead of earlier handpainted enamelling, the invention of transfer printing, which could then be hand coloured or hand touched with enamel paint, became the norm. This step made production faster than entirely handpainted objects. The enamel had a transfer print applied – and once applied, the thimble could be hand touched and produced in any quantity.

For an example of one of these transfer prints, see Halcyon Days Enamels below.

Thimbles and other collectables were created again in Staffordshire. I visited Bilston in 1995 but found little evidence of the history of enamelling. There seemed to no local Museum either.



map showing Bilston, south-east of Wolverhampton (Google Maps) South Staffordshire

Much confusion has arisen from the use of the 18th century name of Bilston or Battersea (branded as Bilston & Battersea after 1970) which has been used to mark some modern enamelled thimbles. This created name is lettered on some modern thimble boxes. The marketing name forms part of the backstamp of many modern British enamelled thimbles or certificates.

see example on right below: **HALCYON DAYS LTD** is lettered in small letters - and can be easily overlooked. BUYER BEWARE – this is NOT a Bilston & Battersea Enamels thimble.

	
thimble inside this misleadingly-named box is for Halcyon Days	the lettering under the royal cipher reads: 'By Appointment to H.M Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Halcyon Days Ltd, London Suppliers of Objets d'Art'
	
the misleading backstamp: Designed by Halycon Days London, where the lettering for Bilston and Battersea Enamels is the more prominent lettering!	

You will notice rounded tops to some of the enamelled thimbles listed below. They are too similar in construction not to be made by the same thimble maker. Until more useful information comes to light, I can only list them under their nominated backstamps – Border Fine Arts Studio Enamels.

At the end of this topic I have listed enamelled thimbles that fall outside this topic as they were not made in Great Britain. There is a possibility that these thimbles are Chinese-made as there are identically shaped thimbles made for Royal Doulton.

I am more interested here in who the enamellers are when the thimbles are over sterling silver – not the silversmith.

Thimbles over sterling silver are very prone to chipping – they are too fragile to use for sewing. Some enamelling can erode with time (see damage below)



enamelling damage on a sterling silver thimble

for other enamelled thimbles topics see:

Cornish Enamels thimbles
Crummles enamelled thimbles
Graham Payne handpainted thimbles
Peter Swingler handpainted thimbles

Border Fine Arts Studio Enamels

Border Fine Arts was founded in 1974 in Langholm in the Esk Valley on the border between England and Scotland (hence the name chosen). From early on, the time-honoured way of life there inspired their figurines.

Ray Ayres, the master sculptor, when customers demanded greater detail and colours, moved to a resin cold cast process and used enamel paints.

The well-known snowman transfer figure seems to be their only thimble design. These were produced by Enesco for Border Fine Arts: the label on the thimble box makes this clear.

Border Arts closed in 2016 after the decline in demand.



snowman
rounded top with no copper apex
over copper
thimble box: 2003 – made by Enesco Inc

Craftmade



hellebore
over copper

Leonore Doskow



Doskow was a Montrose, New York thimble designer. Her named thimbles were made in England by James Swann & Sons
She died in 2008



unknown child
b&w photo

Maureen Edgar

Maureen is a graduate of Royal College of Art and in 1983 a lecturer on enamelling on sterling silver, Edgar (b.1949) opened her studio in 1980 in Eyemouth Berwickshire. She is Scotland's most well-known and finest enameller – co-founder of Society of British Enamellers. small quantities were created, which made them exclusive but expensive



one of her enamelled boxes

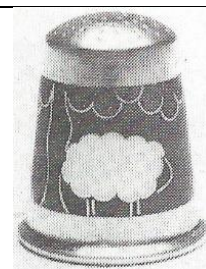


1982



Chrysanthemums in enamel
1983

two different yellows used in the flower petals individually created in silver – on black enamel – inside plated in 22ct gold signed and numbered limited to 25
b&w photo

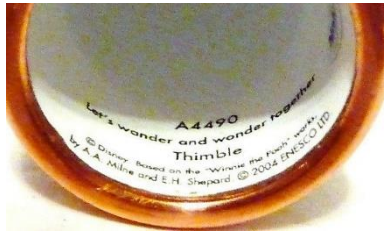


Sheep under Olive Tree
1984

cloisonné enamel limited to 25
b&w photo

Enesco

The enamelled thimbles bearing the Enesco backstamp are a different shape from other modern traditionally enamelled thimbles. There is no brass apex – there is a smooth, rounded top to their transfer applied thimbles.



© Disney based on the 'Winnie the Pooh' works backstamp
© ENESCO 2004 LTD



'Let's wander and wonder together'
over copper

Alicia Gordon

When Diana, the Princess of Wales died in July 1997, the Thimble Society of London commissioned Alicia Gordon to create an enamelled thimble design over sterling silver to commemorate Princess Diana's life.



'Diana 1961-1997'
9ct gold and azure enamel
limited to 450

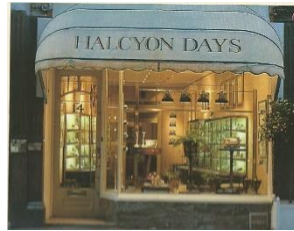


'Diana 1961-1997'
sterling silver and azure blue enamelling
limited to 850

Halcyon Days Enamels

On a visit to London in 1984, I was fortunate to visit Halcyon Days Enamels in Mayfair and purchased a couple of their enamelled thimbles. I had a lovely subsequent visit in 1987.

The store had closed by my next visit to London in 1995.



Halcyon Days flagship store Brook Street Mayfair London (closed)



Susan Benjamin (1921-2010)

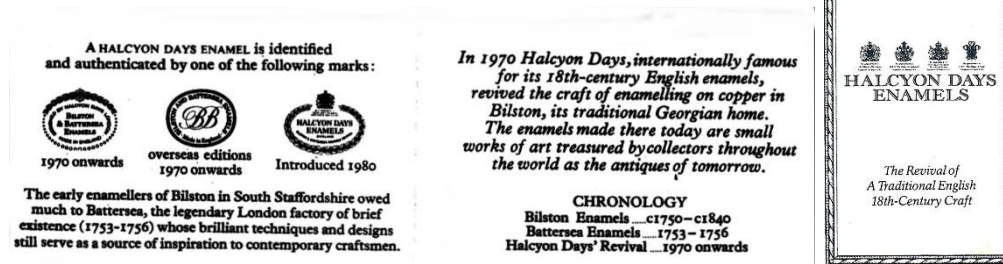
Irene Schwall has written an excellent article on Halcyon Days Enamels. We read about the founder of Halcyon Days Enamels in 1970: Susan Benjamin.

Benjamin wanted to revive the antique art of enamelling. The name of her London store is taken from a Greek myth and opened in 1970. In 1978 the company was granted the royal warrant for Queen Elizabeth II.

Thimbles bearing the Halcyon Days Enamels backstamps were made in the traditional heart of the earlier enamelled thimbles in the West Midlands, specifically in Bilston Staffordshire.

Halcyon Day's enamelled thimbles use ceramic print transfers with the design outlined. Handpainting in enamel can be applied to complete the design.

Halcyon Days Enamels accept commissions of thimbles and there are quite a number of commemorative thimbles listed below.



Halcyon Days Enamels certificates



Halcyon Days Enamels backstamp

Made in Bilston England

R: the misleading backstamp: **Designed** by Halycon Days London, where the lettering for Bilston and Battersea Enamels is the more prominent lettering!

What distinguishing features should we look out for in Halcyon Days thimbles? The brass apex is flatter and has more densely clustered indentations than their competitors. The brass rims are more defined: a striated rim with a narrow plain band above. Of course, it follows that there will always be exceptions.



brass apex for all Halcyon Days Enamels thimbles – and distinctive striated rims

I have noticed that some of their thimbles bear a date moulded into the apex of the thimble: see the months' thimble series. Other when there is a commemorative thimble and for this set, the generic run of their thimbles are not dated.



dated brass apexes found on Months set of 12 (1983-1984)



various Halcyon Days Enamels thimble boxes

In addition to thimbles, Halcyon Days creates other sewing tools – made to match the thimble. These can include needlecases, tape measures and pincushions.

<https://www.halcyondays.co.uk>



'A stitch in time'



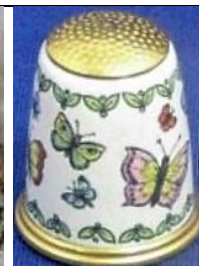
birds - blue



birds - yellow

this design also used by Crummles
has matching needlecase

Roz Belford offered this design to members of The Sewing
Corner from 1976



butterflies



cameo with yellow rose



dogroses



country scene with figures, sheep and church



doves of peace
1978



eagle and heart
has matching needlecase
this design also used by Crummles



flowers
has matching needlecase
Roz Belford offered this design to members of The
Sewing Corner from 1976



'Hotel Ritz Paris'
has matching tape measure



John Wesley rules



'Metropolitan Museum of Art'
has matching needlecase and tape measure



month: January
Sparkling January heralds the fledgling year
Anon
1984



month: February
Well dost thou have, thy solemn feast to hold in vestal February
Coventry Patmore 1823-1896 St Valentine's Day



month: March
In March bright daffodils celebrate Spring's glden days
Anon
1983



month: April
Well appareld April on the heel of limping Winter treads
Shakespeare's 1564-1626 Romeo and Juliet

no photo

month: May



month: June

And what is so rare as a day in June? Then, if ever, come perfect day

J.R. Lowell 1819-1891 The Vision of Sir Launfal

1984

R: no bottom brass rims



Month: July

In July the world is a carpet of flowers, soft and sweetly scented

Anon

1983

month: August

Dry August and warm doth harvest no harm

no harm

Thomas Tusser Good husbandry



month: September

Up from the meadows rich with corn Clear in the the September morn

J.G Whittier 1808-1892 Barbara Fritchie



Month: October

Humbert Wolfe 1885-1940 Autumn



month: November

Now in November hear comes the sun down the abandoned heaven

D.H.Lawrence 1885-1930 November by the sea

'1983' or '1984' lettered on apex



month: December

What freezings I have felt. What dark days seen! What old December's bareness every where!

Shakespeare's Sonnets 1564-1646

'1983' or '1984' lettered on apex



mushrooms/toadstools
has matching thimble case, needlecase and tape measure



'Opera House'
'The Metropolitan Opera'



primroses
has matching thimble, needlecase, pincushion and
tape measure



Queen Elizabeth II
25 years on the throne
thistle daffodils shamrocks rose
has matching needlecase
1977



roses with butterfly
repeated again
has matching tape measure and pincushion
1978



sewing



Three Blind Mice



grey & yellow flowers



V&A (Victoria and Albert Museum)
1970

design based on original drawings held by the V&A Museum

T.C.I. (Thimble Collectors International) holds biennial conventions in various cities in the USA. Between 1994 and 2014 ten commemorative thimbles were commissioned – they had to be pre-ordered by TCI members, as approx.125 were produced for each Convention each Convention committee designed their required thimble details and Halcyon Days produced the drawings for approval



this is the 2008 design by Nina Harby produced by Halcyon Days initially only the state of the Convention was named but the month was included - later the city was named and the month was dropped



T.C.I. Convention
Baltimore August 1994
sailing ship



T.C.I. Convention
Minnesota August 1996
loons



T.C.I. Convention
Texas Baltimore August 1998
bull



T.C.I. Convention
Florida 2000
flamingoes



T.C.I. Convention
Long Beach 2002
fish blowing thimble bubbles



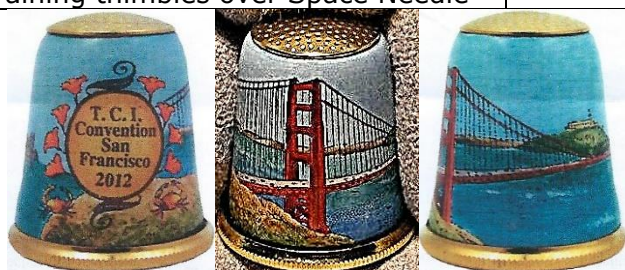
T.C.I. Convention
Boston 2004
Boston Common



T.C.I. Convention
Seattle Washington 2006
raining thimbles over Space Needle



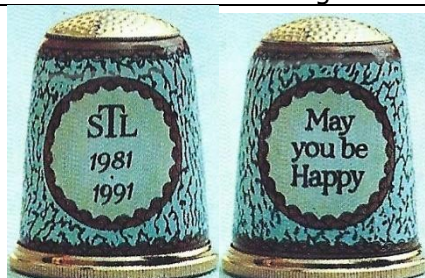
T.C.I. Convention
Philadelphia 2008



T.C.I. Convention
San Francisco 2012
Golden Gate Bridge



T.C.I. Convention
Kansas City 2014
'Steamboat'



'TSL 1981-1991'
'May you be Happy'
commissioned by Thimble Society of London
maroon bands



Victoria 1960-1980
The Embroiderers Guild
commemorating 20 years
Guild logo in green and Victoria's state flower
Pink Heath



W.A.
The Embroiderers Guild (in 1980)
Guild logo in blue and Western Australia's state flower Kangaroo Paw

Chris Harmer

When I was researching handpainted enamelled thimbles of Peter Swingler, there was a batch of sterling silver thimbles which seemed different from his other thimbles. Chris Harmer and Peter Swingler were enamellers at the same time, for James Swann & Son in Birmingham.

It became apparent that these thimbles were not painted by Swingler.

There is a small **CH** signature on all of these thimbles.

One of his *To the Bride* 1977 thimbles has regularly been ascribed to Swingler.

One group of Harmer's signed enamelled thimbles is a set of six – featuring famous buildings in the UK. These are not handpainted enamelled thimbles – rather transfer printed designs which could then be hand coloured.

A distinctive feature is the ornate borders around the name of the building on the verso.

The 1977 Jubilee Queen Elizabeth II thimble design is similarly made.



full Harmer signature: C M Harmer



CH signature is part of the design



Anne Hathaway's Cottage
1983



bird



Buckingham Palace



Edinburgh Castle



Houses of Parliament



fish



'He who goes a Mothering finds violets in the lane'



'EJR
Silver Jubilee
1952-1977'



Shakespeare's Birthplace



'To the Bride'
1977



'Adventures of Tom Sawyer 1876-1976'
full C M Harmer signature below the raft
this was first offered for sale by Collectors Circle of New York in 1970s under the title "The Piate Crew"



Worcester Cathedral



five of the six famous buildings in the United Kingdom set



Shakespeare's Birthplace – Houses of Parliament ... Buckingham Palace – Edinburgh Castle



distinctive versos from Chris Harmer's famous buildings of the UK set

JW or JWM



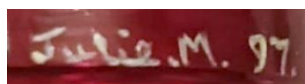
Cardiff Castle
1983
b&w photo



Poppies
1985

Julie Menzies

Menzies was the artist and designer for The Thimble Guild in Scotland from 1993- . These seem to be her only handpainted enamelled thimbles, over sterling silver.



Winston Churchill
limited to 500
James Swann & Son 1995



Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip
golden wedding
signed, dated 97
James Swann & Son 1997

Anthony Nicholls

This Isle of Mull Scottish enameller produced these copper thimbles in 1981-1983. The designs are decals or transfers commonly found on china thimbles. They are then covered with lacquer, giving an enamelled look. The apex is slightly domed and does not extend over the edge

It is not known whether Nicholls crafted the thimbles himself. Never marked

Dates are from The Thimble Guild catalogues

 <p>'A Stitch in Time'</p>	 <p>autumn leaves January 1983</p>	 <p>blue tit</p>
 <p>butterfly - mauve</p>	 <p>butterfly - orange January 1983</p>	 <p>Charles and Diana 1981</p>
 <p>cottage</p>		 <p>fleur de lis spaced around February 1983</p>
 <p>forget-me-nots on two sides</p>	 <p>French woman</p>	 <p>goldfinch</p>
 <p>heather August 1983 b&w photo</p>	 <p>horses October 1983</p>	 <p>Siamese cat with Persian cat on the other side September 1983</p>



windmill
May 1983



Staffordshire Enamels/The Staffordshire Enamels

The development of transfer printing on enamelling by Stephen Theodore Janssen, at York House in Battersea, changed enamelling forever. He became the founder of Staffordshire Enamels in the 1970s. He too wanted to revive enamelling.

Thimbles are no longer produced by Staffordshire Enamels.

All the thimbles listed are transfer printed, which may have added hand enamelling.

What distinguished modern Staffordshire enamelled thimbles from their competitors? Their brass apex. It fits so neatly and is indented with wide-spaced indentations. They have a single brass rim.

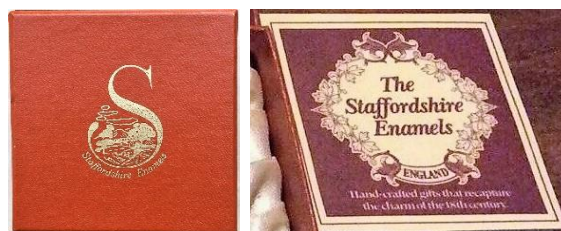
The thimbles are not named - those used here are my descriptive terms.



early handpainted Staffordshire Enamels thimble 1770s



distinctive brass apex with wide-spaced indentations. The rim has a plain brass edging
There are also examples of heavier indentations



L: Staffordshire Enamels thimble box with the distinctively-shaped **S** logo

R: **The** Staffordshire Enamels England certificate

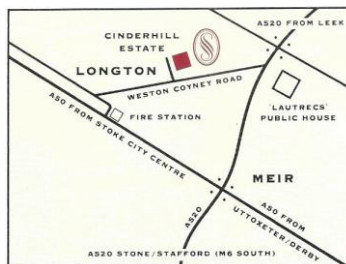


backstamps

L: **S** logo at centre "Made in England in the Old Bilston Battersea tradition Staffordshire Enamels"

R: **S** logo at centre "Staffordshire Enamels Made in England" with two areas of stylised flowers completing the later simplified backstamp.

Some of the Staffordshire Enamels backstamps also include the name Old Hall. Does anyone know what this additional name indicates? It seems to only be used on the mark **The** Staffordshire Enamels.



area in Stoke-on-Trent Staffordshire where Staffordshire Enamels are made

On a visit to their retail store in Staffordshire in 1995, I was informed they no longer made thimbles. There is no evidence that this policy has changed.



blue flowers in cameo



blue
heavier indentations



Charles and Diana 29th July 1981
Prince of Wales feathers
blue enamel
certificate: **The** Staffordshire Enamels



Charles and Diana 29th July 1981
white enamel
CD initials are larger
heavier indentations



feather
part of month set?



fleur de lis



flowers: blue and pink with insect



flowers: blue with red



flowers: dogroses and wildflowers



flowers: ladybird
has matching pincushion



flowers: pink and white



flowers: poppies, passionflower, dogroses, geranium and butterfly







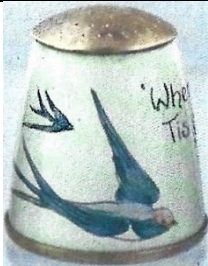


flowers: red with blue small
blue flowers intertwined
repeated again



flowers: stylised
1991



flowers: waterlilies

	
<p>hawthorn has matching needlecase and pincushion R: is this the same thimble just missing its brass cap?</p>	<p>leaves insects including ladybird and butterfly has matching needlecase</p>
 <p>mice sewing has matching needlecase and pincushion 'a Nicola Bayley drawing' 1975</p>	<p>no photo</p> <p>month: January</p>
<p>no photo</p> <p>month: February</p>	 <p>month: March 'The stormy March is home at last'</p>
 <p>month: April</p>	<p>no photo</p> <p>month: May</p>
 <p>month: June 'June damp and warm does the farmer no harm'</p>	<p>no photo</p> <p>month: July</p>
 <p>month: August 'If the 24th of August be fair and clear then hope for a prosperous autumn that year'</p>	



month: September
'Fair on September first, fair for the month'



month: October
'Then came October full of merry glee'
R: heavier indentations



month: November
'November take flail let no ships sail'



month: December
'In December keep yourself warm and sleep'



robin

R: heavier indentations



The Staffordshire Enamels backstamp which includes 'Old Hall'



shells



St Paul's Cathedral



strawberries



strawberries
has matching needlecase



'Merchant Taylors' Company 17th May 1989'
outer lettering on box 'Merchant Taylors' Company' – inner lettering: Staffordshire Enamels
see similar design in Spode thimbles topic



yellow-breasted bird
part of month set?



floral

James Swann & Son

James Swann & Son of Birmingham were thimble silversmiths during the 20th century. They employed enamellers to decorate their thimbles. I understand that the enameller W.W Goodwin created the enamelled designs for JS&S thimbles. As JS&S closed in 2005, it is difficult to gain further information.

None of the JS&S enamelled thimbles are signed by the enameller.

As such, they are outside the scope of this topic.

Exceptions shown here are handpainted thimbles where the enameller is yet to be identified.
see also: Chris Harmer - Julie Menzies



private commission:
"25 Miep en Arie Rotterdam"
sterling silver hallmark date: 1982

Toye, Kenning & Spencer



London store 1949-

The company has been in existence since the 1700s. Guillaume Toye arrived in Britain as a Huguenot in 1685 – he was a silk weaver in Bethnal Green, London. Over the succeeding three centuries TKS have become known for their exquisite embroidery – on banners, regalia and insignia including bespoke Objets d’Art. TKS has always been the home of diverse British creatives and artisans. They are based in Birmingham’s Jewellery quarter and from 1801 created enamelled Objets d’Art.

Including enamelled thimbles to their range is more recent: 1980s-. They design and make their thimbles in Birmingham. TKS use outline transfers and then the thimbles are handpainted with coloured enamels.

BY APPOINTMENT
TO HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN
SUPPLIERS OF GOLD AND SILVER LACES,
INSIGNIA AND EMBROIDERY
TOYE KENNING & SPENCER LTD LONDON
lettering in thimble boxes – with royal cipher

TKS have two other royal warrants – for Prince Charles and Prince Philip
earlier they had been granted the royal warrant by Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother



Toye, Kenning & Spencer thimble boxes
L: "Fine Birmingham Enamels" - R: "Traditional English handcrafted enamels"



certificate lettering includes that the design is exclusively theirs

In 1982 TKS used James Swann & Son sterling thimbles to produce a commemorative for the birth of Prince William – shown here for completeness



fruit – apples

L: prototype 1980s – unsigned and no brass apex

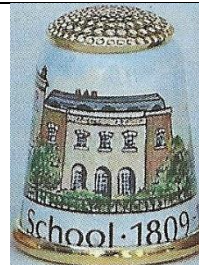


fruit – pears

prototype 1980s – unsigned and no brass apex



merry-go-round scenes



"Royal School for Deaf Children 200 years 1809-1909 Old Kent Road"



swallows



flowers

has matching pincushion and needlecase



"CD 29th July 1981"



In 1982 Toye Kenning & Spencer used James Swann & Son sterling enamelled thimbles to produce a commemorative for the birth of Prince William. It is identifiable as a TKS thimble as the maker's mark used is their TKS silver mark registered with Birmingham assay office

Jo Withers

This is a husband and wife team – John Withers is the silversmith with Moody & Archer of Birmingham, Jo the enameller and miniature painter. They were based in Madeley, Telford in Shropshire.



seagulls and yachts seascape
1985 M&A John Withers
limited edition



duck



Floral
with silver band



kingfisher



yacht



yellow rose

unknown enamellers



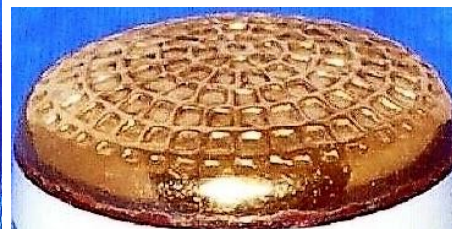
handpainted enamelled 'Warwick' crest
sterling silver CGC 1995



wedding scene
handpainted on brass



mermaid scene
apex has copper squared indentations





hawthorne



Moss & Woodd 'Orion' 1905
over copper
no copper apex



children playing
over brass



hp flowers



roses etc
over copper

non-British made enamelled thimbles



'Playful'
Chinese-made for Royal Doulton 2004



set of colourful Chinese enamelled thimbles over
copper with traditional Chinese scenes
Mr Song Jim-Ming – 1990s



German-made enamelled brass thimbles



German-made 935 silver gilt
Australian indigenous flowers – flannel flowers –
waratah – pea flowers (b&w)

References

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Beryl Frank *Susan Benjamin's romance with enamels*. Thimbletter Jul-Aug 1993
Susan Jean Gowan *Thimbles of Australia*. 1998
Di Pelham Burn *Enamelled brass thimbles*. At Your Fingertips (Dorset Thimble Society). May 1998
Irene Schwall *TCI Halcyon Days thimbles: a 10th thimble anniversary* TCI Bulletin summer 2012
Norma Spicer *James Swann maker of gold and silver thimbles 1887-present*. 1997

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This listing of Modern British enamelled 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.

EMAIL thimbleselect@bigpond.com TO SHARE YOUR KNOWLEDGE

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