

Belleek thimbles

Ireland

Anyone who has handled Belleek Pottery in any shape or form, will be intrigued by its translucency and its distinctive cream colour, with the coloured decoration in relief. This translucent china is known as Parian ware, which is a fine white porcelain. I was familiar with Belleek from Ireland as Mum always had a few lovely pieces displayed on her "what-not".

So it was a short step for me when I visited Ireland in 1986, to search out thimbles made by Ireland's Belleek. I knew they existed thru seeing early thimble advertisements - and their bluebells design was my first Belleek thimble: the only Belleek one I found for sale in Eire!!

According to Jean Shoup, in her early 1980s mail order catalogue *Thimbles Only* "Belleek was the dream of three men: John Caldwell Bloomfield, the owner of the Castle Caldwell Estate on Lough Erne; Robert William Armstrong, a London architect and David McBirney, a Dublin merchant. Bloomfield's estate included the village of Belleek, and in his repair of the estate he noticed the plight of his tenants. Being interested in minerals and his tenants' welfare, he decided to take advantage of the feldspar and kaolin present in the area and open a site for making pottery.

Armstrong was an avid fancier of pottery. McBirney was approached to provide the financing. They began to manufacture Belleek in 1857. The original building is still in use today. They experimented with porcelain formulas and in 1863 produced parian ..." The clay of the area was to produce a porcelain of exceptional translucency, with a soft 'mother-of-pearl' glow.



Belleek painters

Most thimbles made of porcelain are difficult to date but I am confident the start of the manufacture of Belleek thimbles would date to the early 1980s and would not have been made after that decade.

Belleek thimbles were not featured in the 1980 Franklin Mint 'Thimbles of the Worlds' Porcelain Houses' set of 25.

Tho I have never seen one, I understand there is a Belleek thimble that forms part of the 'The Hallmarked Thimbles of the World's Great Porcelain Houses' set of 50 produced by the Thimble Collectors Club in 1985 - it only appeared in the USA-issued set.

In late 1984 Thimble Collectors Club (TCC) issued the Shamrocks thimble and it was the only Belleek thimble featured by the TCC for their members.

The Belleek mark is made up of a tower, an Irish wolfhound and a harp, making easily identifiable, with the words Belleek and Ireland lettered under the three Irish symbols.

I am currently aware of only thirteen thimble designs produced by Belleek - amongst which is their range of flowers with the flowers depicted in pale colours - which are handpainted.

The flowers set have the later brown-gold backstamp.

A completely new shape of Belleek thimbles have recently been brought to my attention - those with fluted sides - in muted shades. They all bear the earlier green Belleek backstamp.

Donegal Parian ware is not Belleek ware (even tho the word Belleek is used in the name).



green Belleek maker's mark – 1965-1980



brown-gold Belleek maker's mark 1980-1992



an in-between colour?



Belleek thimble box



Belleek thimble box Inspired by Nature

Flowers



set of six flower thimbles



wild Irish blue rose



harebells



pink lily-of-the-valley
or pink harebells



wild Irish pink rose



shamrock

Thimble Collectors Club (TCC)



wild Irish yellow rose

Others

fluted abstract patterning on mottled ground
all have green maker's mark



Contributors

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This listing of Belleek 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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