

ILES - A FAMILY OF THIMBLE MAKERS

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(For a full account of Iles see '*Iles a family of thimble makers*', a booklet by Norma Spicer. It should be noted that in addition to thimble making the Iles Company were prolific thimble holder and box makers but these items will not be discussed at length in this paper.)

The Iles family

Charles Iles was born in 1812, his father Isaac was a carpenter, but Charles did not follow in his footsteps. He moved to Birmingham and early documents describe him as an engineer, so presumably his apprenticeship was in engineering, possibly with Richard Peyton whom he later joined as a partner in the firm Peyton and Iles.

In 1841, at the age of twenty-nine. Charles married Elizabeth Joiner, a widow some six years older than him. In 1843, Jane was born and in 1844 twins, a girl and a boy followed but sadly Elizabeth died the following day and twelve days later his first son died too so that Charles was left with two baby daughters to look after.

In 1846 Charles married again. His new wife was Mary Linnett and at seventeen, she was just half of his age. Another daughter, Margaret, arrived in 1850, and two years after this, their first son was born. He was called Charles Edward and another son Frederick followed him, in 1854.

In 1870 Charles senior died at the age of fifty-one. The cause of death is given as Apoplexy (stroke) after eight months exhaustion - he was a 'workaholic'. He did not leave a Will, nor could the Probate Registry find any grant of Probate. This would suggest that the business was at the time of his death in the name of some of the other members of the family. His son, Charles Edward was only eighteen at that time, so it is possible that the business was run in the name of Mary, until Charles Edward reached his majority. Both Charles Edward and his brother Frederick are described as thimble makers in the 1881 census.

Charles Edward Iles married Emily Anne Pritchett in 1881 and by 1895 he had built his own house 'Membland' in Moseley. The house reflected the financial success of the owner of the Iles Company, having many rooms, hot water in the bathroom, servant's quarters and a coach house. Charles Edward lived there for the rest of his life. In the garden were built five greenhouses for his hobby of gardening. Alongside the garden was the paddock for his pony, which drew the trap in which he went to business. Fields surrounded the house. He also helped fund the building of the local church, but fell out with the Vicar and never entered its doors. His wife Emily Anne was a devout churchgoer though and worshipped regularly. Charles Edward was a keen fisherman, especially of trout, both in Wales and nearer home. Charles Edward loved Wales and visited many times. In about 1900 he bought a cottage called Plas Tanat, near the river Tanat. The cottage was extended to provide accommodation for guests. A garden of shrubs and roses was laid out alongside the riverbank. House parties were held at Plas Tanat during the summer and the number of guests was often between twenty and thirty. These fishing parties would venture out early to a suitable lake and often bring back a large basket of trout before breakfast. In 1904, he caught two record pike, which were stuffed, mounted and hung in the hall of 'Membland'.

Charles Edward and Emily Anne had two children, Dorothy Emily was born in 1882 and Charles Edward was born in 1884. Charles Edward studied medicine at Birmingham University gaining a degree in 1905. After qualifying he was appointed to the staff of Birmingham General Hospital in the posts of House Physician and House Surgeon. He later became a doctor on P&O steamships en route to the Far East. He never married and continued to live at 'Membland' until his death in 1976. He left 'Membland' to his loyal housekeeper of many years, who nursed him in his final illness.

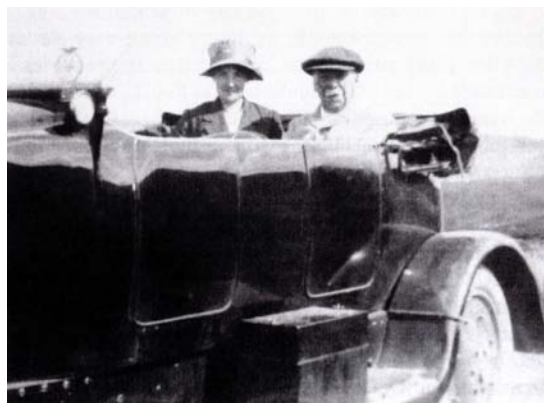


Fig 1 Dorothy and her father

Dorothy (Fig 1), whom the 'Dorothy' thimble was named after married Alfred Cox in 1911. He was born into a farming family and was not an engineer. He had previously worked for a firm of Birmingham brass founders however and soon came to work at the Iles Factory after his marriage to Dorothy in 1911.

Charles Edward senior died in 1925 aged seventy-three. He wrote a Will in 1919, with Codicils added in 1920 and 1922. It shows him to be a man of property. As well as owning the successful business, he also owned 'Membrand' in Moseley, the 'Croft' in Kings Heath and 'Plas Tanat' in Montgomeryshire. He left an Annuity of fifty pounds a year to his daughter Dorothy. He left property and financial provision for his wife Emily Anne, amounting to one third of his estate the other two thirds was left to his son Charles Edward. Assay Office registers show that Emily Anne and her son Charles Edward were still running the business as executors, two years later in 1927. Although being a successful Physician and Surgeon precluded Charles Edward from being involved in the daily running of the business, he did not relinquish his interests in it. From 1930, Alfred Cox, the son-in-law of Charles Edward ran the business until his death in 1955. Dorothy Cox died in 1966. Emily Anne (wife of Charles Edward senior lived on to be ninety-four. Dorothy and Alfred Cox had seven children, four sons followed by three daughters. One son, Denzil died in childhood, the other three Cedric (killed in action in WWII) Basil and Edward all worked, at some time in their lives, in the Iles factory.

The Iles Business

Charles Iles first business seems to be that of Peyton and Iles, manufacturers of hooks and eyes. The firm also made metallic bedsteads and Charles Iles actually took out a patent for bedsteads. It is therefore probable that when Charles Iles came to Birmingham, he was apprenticed to Richard Peyton, continued working for the company, was recognised as having qualities necessary for the success of the firm and was made a partner around 1849. This partnership lasted about eleven years, during which time Charles Iles patented his ideas for bedsteads, hat pegs, door bolts, wardrobe and dress hooks as well as improvements in machinery for cutting cylindrical surfaces and pointing hair pins. During this time (1857) he also took out a patent for 'the improvement in the making of thimbles' (2111). This indicates that the company included thimbles in their growing list of items now manufactured.

In 1851, in the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace, the company of Peyton and Iles exhibited a steam-powered machine for sticking pins in circular tablets. The use of the machine enabled patent ornamental circular embossed tablets or pin-holders (pinwheels) to be filled with pins. The tablets were made of various materials, but generally cardboard. Although the company was awarded a bronze medal at the exhibition (1), it seems that this medal was not for the manufacture of thimbles. A souvenir pinwheel (Fig 2) from the exhibition was produced (2).



Fig 2 '1851 Exhibition pins for all Nations' 'pinwheel'

It seems that Peyton and Iles ceased to trade around 1860 and in 1861 the company of Charles Iles is listed for the first time. Charles Iles having bought the thimble making machinery and equipment continued on his own, producing a variety of items, still describing himself as a manufacturer of hooks and eyes in the 1861 census, but concentrating more on the manufacture of thimbles. He patented a method for fastening envelopes in 1861 and one for umbrella ferrules in 1863, as well as a further patent for thimbles (1564). In 1862 Charles Iles exhibited at an International Exhibition held in London, where he showed specimens of hooks and eyes, and enamel-lined thimbles (Fig 3). Also listed as exhibits are solid headed pins, hairpins and fancy boxes and other articles for containing and connected with these items. His last patent was taken out in 1868, about eighteen months before his death.



Fig 3 Steel thimble with brass rim

His first premises were in Balsall Heath but just before he died in 1870, he moved to premises in Highgate Street in the city of Birmingham. To begin with this was just a dwelling house, with offices, with a covered gateway leading to a yard and workshops behind the house (Fig 4). A three-storey mill was built behind the offices and a steam engine and other machinery added later. The address remained, as 138 Highgate Street even though other properties in the street were acquired. It was known as 'The Unity Works'. Employees lived in 'back to back' houses also in Highgate Street. Several generations of these families worked at the Iles factories.

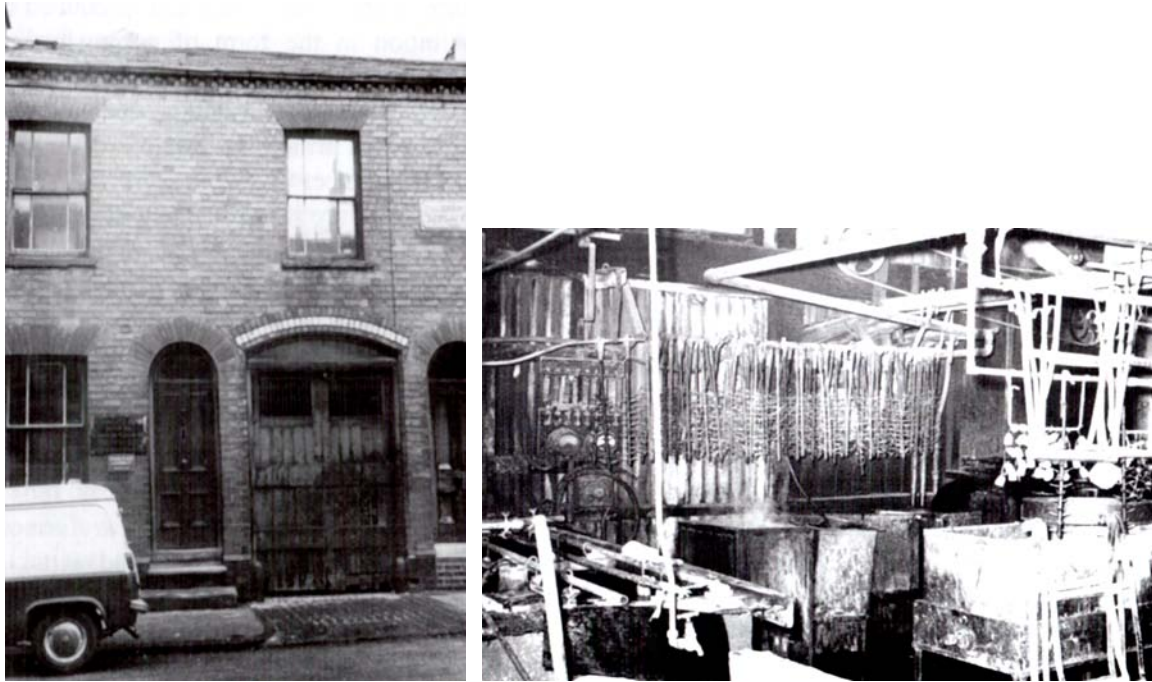


Fig 4

It is interesting to note here that Charles Edwards's only brother Frederick, who was described as a thimble maker in the street was also described as a Patentee and manufacturer of fancy gold plated hair pins, cap ornaments and Iles patent spiral grip letter rack and toilet pins - for home and abroad. Whether there was any link between the two businesses is not known.

After his father's death in 1870, Charles Edward Iles, only eighteen at the time, continued to run the business very successfully. The original steam engine no longer had sufficient power to run all the machines. Around 1900 an electric power station was set up in Birmingham to run the new tramway and the Iles factory was able to install electric motors to drive the machinery for making thimbles. As new inventions in machinery came on stream, the Iles company took advantage of them to improve its methods of manufacture, which included 'bright dipping' silver plating and other processes. An indication of the quality of machines and tools is shown by the fact that some of these items made in the latter part of the nineteenth century were still being used in 1945.

The Iles Company thimbles were sold worldwide and were taken to North America by the Hudson Bay Company where the thimbles were sold by Sears Roebuck from Chicago to the Far West by mail order. BY the end of the 19th century the Iles Company was producing between three and four million thimbles each year.



Fig 5 Three layers of early Dorcas thimble

Charles Iles was one of the main suppliers of the 'steel core' (Fig 5, middle) for the early Dorcas thimble. After 1905, when the Dorcas was made of three compressed layers instead of separate shells, this was no longer necessary. However Iles could not make a steel-cored thimble for himself at that time, as Horner held the Patent for it.

The lifestyle of the Iles family, with their several properties, large cars, fishing parties and other social activities testify to the success of the Iles Company from the 1890s to WWI. What the Iles Company did during WWI is not known, but it is likely, as with other similar companies that machinery was converted from the making of thimbles to the production of small equipment for the war effort.

After the end of WWI, when Alfred Edward Cox, husband of Charles Edward Iles daughter Dorothy, came out of the army, he was made works manager. He tried to run the business along army lines, but this was not popular, especially when he started to call his female employees by their surnames - this did not go down at all well, and the practice was soon stopped. The Iles employees knew him as 'young Mr Alfred'.

Mrs Lily Wallin, worked for Iles from 1915 to her marriage in 1922, and tells of Charles Edward Iles as being a pleasant, though not handsome man, having a pink and white complexion - he took a cold bath every day. He was always immaculately dressed in a grey suit and wore a bowler hat, which he never removed at work, so that his workers didn't know if he had hair or was bald - he was known to them as 'Daddy Iles'. He was a kindly man, as long as one did the work properly, but breaking any of his rules was a sackable offence. If he saw reject thimbles thrown aside he would always say 'there goes my daily bread'

During the early 1920s times began to get more difficult and several small thimble companies went out of business. Iles kept going, even though Charles Edward paid his workers their wages on a Saturday and then borrowed half of the money back to buy materials for the following week's production. Charles Edward died in 1925; he had no heir to work in the business, as his only son had gone into Medicine. The business however belonged, two-thirds to this son, Dr Charles Edward Iles and one-third to his wife and they ran it as 'executors of his estate'.

Around this time the Iles (mother and son) bought up the firm of Gomms, which was experiencing financial problems. Gomms was a small firm specialising in electro plated items and souvenirs. A group of Assay Office entries for Gomms beginning in 1927, has instead of Directors, Charles E. and Emily Iles as 'executors', but in 1930 it is noted that Alfred Edward Cox (son-in-law, who had worked in the company from 1911) became managing director of the company. Gomms had a hallmark (Fig 6) which suggests that items of silver were being made, but no thimbles have been found with the Gomms' mark, from this time. A Gomms silver thimble from 1930 has however been seen (Fig 7).



Fig 6



Fig 7

The early 1930s brought the Depression and its attendant problems, Iles had great financial difficulties and it was only an injection of cash from Charles Edward Iles, now a very successful Physician that saved the company. Later in the thirties the sale of thimbles took a leap forward with the manufacture of electro-plated thimbles for sale as souvenirs at holiday resorts. Also at this time millions of Aluminium glass topped thimbles were made (Fig 8) - the borders were in various colours and advertised a diversity of products, from foods, equipment, newspapers, clothes and shoes, cleaners and many, many others. Lyons Tea Cakes, CWS Tea and News of the World sold over a million each. EPNS (electro plated nickel silver) thimbles in presentation boxes were also sold at this time.



Fig 8

The Iles Company also made all of the thimbles marked and sold by Abel Morrall of Redditch, Worcester (Fig 9).



Fig 9

Then came WWII. Iles, jointly with Thomas Johnson were given the contract (50% each) to supply the Ministry of Supply with open-ended tailors thimbles. Made at first in brass, then in steel and finally in a bright alloy based on aluminium. Presses and other machines were tooled up to produce millions of detonator tubes and also ballistic caps for other small arms.

After the war, production geared up again and as well as orders from home, many orders came from all over the world, including Europe, North America and British Africa. At first just nickel plated brass thimbles were made, then the injection moulded plastic thimbles, increasing to a full range of open and closed topped thimbles, some lined, some unlined, with either brass or white metal. Patterned nickel silver thimbles were made and production soon increased to over 100,000

thimbles manufactured per week. To keep up with the demand, the old machinery had to be replaced with up to date ones and modern methods used to bring the company up-to-date. In 1947 the name of the company was changed to Iles and Gomms.

In 1955 Alfred Cox died and his two sons took over the business (still owned by Dr Charles Edward Iles) Alfred Basil Cox took over as Managing director and Edward Brandon Cox as Works Director. The company diversified into the manufacture of other items and only a third of their production was in thimbles. Many of these thimbles were anodised and coloured light alloy metals, all steel thimbles were now nickel-plated and chromium-plated thimbles were also produced. Packaging included carded thimbles, first twelve to a card and then singly. The Iles Company supplied thimbles for school needlework lessons, in various metals.

Another entry for a hall mark for Iles and Gomms is shown in the Assay Office register for 1957, signed by Dorothy Cox (nee Iles) Dr Charles Edward Iles and the two sons of Dorothy and Alfred Cox, Basil and Edward — what it was used for is not known (3), as it appears that silver thimbles, to be put in Iles boxes and to be sold by them, were in fact, made by James Swann and Son — this continued until the business ended, with a 1994 assay entry authorising James Swann to do work for CI&G and use the sponsors mark. The connection between Charles Iles and James Swann and Son (JS&S), is known to go back, at least to the end of WWII and possibly further. JS&S chased the patterns on to the nickel thimbles of Iles in the 1960s.

In the early 1960s Birmingham City Council compulsorily acquired the factory in Highgate Street for re-development and in 1962 the company was moved to a new home on the Tyseley Industrial estate (Fig 10), the old works were then demolished.



Fig 10

In the 1960s problems were caused by a shortage of steel, which often had to be ordered six months ahead, when it was not possible to know accurately just how much would be needed at that time. By the late 1960s Iles were again in financial difficulties and the business was sold to Richard and Joan Mealings. The Iles family did not lose touch completely as Basil Cox did some part time consultancy work with the new owners, and Edward Cox continued with them as works supervisor. Two long time employees of Iles, Gerald Benton and Bernard Goodman, continued working with the Mealings for several years longer.



Fig 11



Fig 12



Fig 13 Brass thimble from 'last batch' and accompanying certificate

The Mealings kept the thimble making side of Iles going, but by the late 1980s, it was no longer viable. Around this same time the Company made a brass thimble for the 'Ohio Thimble Seekers' and the box insert stated that 'This brass thimble is from the last order of thimbles manufactured by Charles Iles & Gomms Ltd. Birmingham, England 1840-1990' (Fig 11). Later thimbles were less well made (Fig 12). The last batch of thimbles (Fig 13) actually made by the company of Iles was made in March 1990 and were sold in a presentation box.

The company was taken over by their long time competitors Thomas Johnson, who continued making some thimbles in the time honoured way, using machinery and tools that had once belonged to Iles. Johnsons went out of business in the mid 1990s and their assets were sold off. Some of their machinery and tools were bought by a small company called Entaco — part of Needle Industries (now Coates). Entaco are making a small range of thimbles, for commercial and home sewing and so the machinery and tools of Iles go on, still making thimbles, even if the name no longer exists, some one hundred and forty years after Charles Iles started up on his own.

Trade mark and Registered Designs (R^d.)

Trade Mark

Many of Iles thimbles are recognisable as his because of the very distinct trademark. This shows three thimbles touching at their bases forming a central triangle (Fig 14) and was registered in 1876 by Charles Edward Iles for the manufacture of sewing thimbles made in Iron, Steel, Brass and other common metal or alloy, also plated and made of German Silver, Silver and other Precious Metals.



Fig 14 Iles box and thimble marks

The date of the trademark registration means that earlier Iles thimbles would have had no mark on them and thus they cannot be positively identified.

Registered Designs

Charles Edward Iles was a great believer in protecting his thimbles and in addition to patenting them and having a trade mark, he registered many designs as further protection. Of these only five were for thimbles, one for a spirit measure and the rest were for boxes, counter cases and individual fancy containers for thimbles.

His earliest Rd is No 108544 dated September 1888 (Fig 15). The drawing in the public Record Office register shows a panelled thimble with the three thimble mark - because the drawing has no explanatory note with it, it is not possible to know if the registration is for the three thimble mark (which was already a trade mark) or for the different design thimble.



Fig 15

The Iles Company realised the importance of attractive presentation of their products quite early. They went on from putting their thimbles on cards to putting them in attractive single boxes (Fig 16), several in a box (Fig 17), or in a box or container, that in some cases was more attractive than the thimble it contained.



Fig 16



Fig 17



Fig 18

They also produced some very attractive Counter Cases (Fig 18) to be displayed at point of sale. The company registered many of these designs to prevent their competitors from copying their ideas while the design was under protection.

For more details relating to specific Iles Registered designs and Patents, and Iles' thimble boxes the reader is referred to *Iles a family of thimble makers* by Norma Spicer.

Iles Thimbles

When it comes to variety of materials, innovation, creativeness and style for thimbles, the long established Iles Company is top of the list of British makers of base metal and thimbles of plastic type material.

Dating Iles Thimbles

It is almost impossible to date many Iles thimbles accurately, because unlike precious metals; there is no standard date mark. If a thimble has been patented, then, at least, the earliest possible date that it could have been made is known, and this also applies to registered designs. Company records no longer exist and although the Iles three thimble mark will show that a thimble was made by Iles, it appears that it was not put on every thimble, neither in the early or later days of the company, so, it too, is really only an identification help.

The Thimbles of Charles Iles

The founder of the company filed two patents. These were in 1857 ((2111) and 1868 (1564). The first shows that he was making, iron and steel thimbles, and the patent describes non-metallic linings for the protection of the finger from these metals. His 1868 patent is more helpful and shows that he made thimbles of cast iron, tin coated lead, possibly thimbles of porcelain and other vitreous materials and ductile metals.

The Thimbles of Charles Edward Iles

Again some thimbles made in the era of Charles Edward Iles (1870-1925) can be dated through their patents and registered designs. The 1895 patent (22397) is not helpful in that it describes in detail how to ornament a thimble with 'jewels' (Fig 19), but not what metal the thimble itself was made of. From a known example it appears to be a white metal, possibly nickel or cupro nickel.



Fig 19 Brass thimble with zinc lining and 'jewelled' top

The 1898 (4246) patent is very interesting with regard to materials - new materials were being considered, such as celluloid, xylonite and other non-metallic substances such as bone, and compressed paper, but having a cap of hard metal (Fig 20). The 1899 (818) patent is also similar, relating to non-metal thimble bodies being protected by a metallic cap. The 1908 (1149) patent is similar, while yet another 1908 (10821) patent deals with linings, (see below) while the third 1908 (15826) patent is for the ventilated thimble (Fig 21) (lined cupro-nickel) which is shown in various magazine advertisements to have been well into production by 1910 and was still being made in the early 1920s. His final patent in 1924 (227313), which he shares with three others was a thimble with a needle threading device (Fig 22), examples show that the thimble is a white metal, probably of nickel or cupro nickel.



Fig 20



Fig 21



Fig 22

Lining materials used for thimbles

Various patents list and describe the type of linings that can be used in metal thimbles to protect the wearer's fingers. These include vitreous, (enamel) semi-vitreous materials, Keene's cement, Gutta Percha, celluloid and other non-metallic materials.

Other materials

Many thimbles were made of materials not mentioned in patents include Iron, Steel, Nickel, Nickel Steel, Solid Rustless Nickel, Brass, Plated Brass, Electro Silver, Silver and Gold Cased, Ivory, Celluloid, Ebony, Bone, Argent Alba (white silver) Sterling Silver (used on inner and outer layers of the 'Doris') Silver Plated and Silver Finished, Aluminium, Aleuride, Aerlyte, Plastic (many kinds) Anodised Aluminium (late 20th c.). This list may be far from complete. Some of these materials became the Trade name of the particular thimble. e.g. 'Aerlyte' - a hard non-flammable plastic.



Fig 23

Nickel is the pure element, but is not often used on its own. Nickel silver and cupro nickel have copper added, so that they are basically the same, although the composition may vary slightly. Iles may possibly have used the term 'nickel' to cover all three (Fig 23)?

The 'Dorothy' thimble (Figs 29, 30) is described as 'silver cased' and is silver coloured (silver-plated) however most of Iles thimbles with 'silver-cased' on them (Fig 24) are now brass coloured and have little indication that they have ever been near silver of any sort. It may be that these latter thimbles were poorly plated and that all the plating has worn away.



Fig 24 (note remains of silver in some of the dimples)



Fig 25

A 'gold cased' thimble was also made and this seems to be a rare thimble (Fig 25).

Named thimbles

Iles was a manufacturer who gave names to, and put these names on his thimbles; whereas other makers generally did not, exceptions being the other maker's steel-cored, place name and advertising thimbles. These thimbles were late Victorian or early twentieth century. Fenton's and Swann's 'non-slip' thimbles had a given name in their advertisements - 'The Gripper' and 'Diamond Gripper' but these names were not put onto the thimble itself. It is also possible that thimbles were known by names given at a later date (not necessarily by the maker) Fenton's 'Scottish Pebble' is an example of this, but again this name was not put on the thimble itself.



Fig 26

There were three Iles Victorian thimbles, which relate to the Queen herself (Fig 26). The 'Queens Record Thimble' which has the Iles mark on it and was a souvenir for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. The 'Her Majesty Thimble', long thought to have been made by Iles, although it doesn't have an Iles mark on it. And a souvenir thimble with the words 'Victoria' and 'Jubilee' separated by a crown, which could be either for the golden or diamond jubilee, as it has the Iles mark, which had been registered before the earlier jubilee.

Another Iles commemorative thimble celebrates the Silver Jubilee of King George V and Queen Mary in 1935 (Fig 27).



Fig 27



Fig 28

Early Iles thimbles were made of steel and these were lined with white metal or brass, these usually have the word 'Iles' on them, but no mark (Fig 28). Some do not have 'Iles' on them, but are identical in appearance - one of these has the words 'The Hercules' on it - the type of name that Iles might use - maybe this is one of his.



Fig 29

SHEET 3

Real Silver Cased Thimbles.

THE CELEBRATED DOROTHY THIMBLES
IN GLASS TOP CASES OF ONE DOZEN

No. A2 2/- Per Doz.
Ben Plan.

No. 1931 2/- Per Doz.
Chased Border

No. 1940 2/- Per Doz.
All Chased

Hand Chased on Silver Shield
No. 942 1/- Per Doz.

Glass Top Case used for
Nos. A2, 1931, 1940.

The Celebrated Dorothy Thimbles
No. 945 4/- Per Doz.

THE DOROTHY THIMBLE
3 Dozen All Chased in Glass Top Cabinet
No. 945 17/6 Each

Fig 30



One of the best known named thimbles is the 'Dorothy'. There seem to have been two 'Dorothy' thimbles. One was a plain nickel silver thimble with the words 'The Dorothy' stamped on the rim (Fig 29) and the other, a silver cased nickel steel thimble, with a chased pattern, 'guaranteed to be executed by hand', the rim is plain (Fig 30). The Iles catalogue shows that these latter thimbles were made in about six different designs and sold in 'Dorothy' boxes (Fig 30). Both of these thimbles were named for Dorothy, the only daughter of Charles Edward Iles. They were made early in the twentieth century and could quite possibly have been to commemorate Dorothy's twenty-first birthday in 1903.



Fig 31

Another well-known thimble is the 'Doris' (Fig 31). This is a steel-cored thimble thought to have been made by Iles for Abel Morrall (maybe Doris was the name of one of his female relatives.) It could not have been made before 1918, as the 'Dorcas' patent did not run out until then. It is slightly shorter than the 'Dorcas' thimble and the quality is not quite as good. As there are so few about compared with the large numbers of 'Dorcas' to be found, it is not thought that a large number were made, which makes it a rare thimble today.

There are three twentieth century thimbles of similar type (Fig 32), with the names written in a flowing script, these are 'The Boudoir', 'The Treasure' and 'The Studio'. They are polished nickel silver. Also of similar type, but with the words in capital letters is 'The Iles Comfort Thimble,' the inside is smooth, but nothing really to suggest it is any more comfortable than other similar Iles thimbles (Fig 32, right).



Fig 32

Iles 'Little Darling' thimbles were displayed in a box containing twelve thimbles, each in their own individual box - blue for boys and pink for girls, they were in three small sizes (2,3, & 4) and were obviously meant for children's fingers. These thimbles are rare (Fig 33).



Fig 33 Boy's Little Darling thimble and box



Fig 34

Some thimbles made of different metals, brass, brass plated and nickel silver, have the words 'Iles Patent' on them (Fig 34). They were made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These thimbles generally have a plain dimpled top, but the borders vary in width and can be plain or patterned, the rim is sometimes turned over and sometimes that too is decorated.

An Iles thimble that is very well known is his 'Ventilated' thimble patented in 1908. This was not the first ventilated thimble to be invented or patented, but by this date the earlier patents had lapsed. It was described in an advertisement as being silver cased nickel steel, lined with pure Ivorine (Fig 21). The top had a hole in it, protected by steel gauze, a metal defence and then silver gauze. Around the rim were more holes in the metal outer, allowing air to pass through and not let perspiration be absorbed by the skin. These ventilated thimbles retailed from 6d each. The advertisement claimed that the thimble was 'Delightfully Cool, Smooth and Comfortable' and that it 'Entirely Prevents Sore Fingers or other Injurious Effects'. It was 'The best of all thimbles to work with' and Charles Edward Iles was obviously pleased with his new invention. It continued to be made for a number of years, later being marketed as 'The Hygienic Thimble'. There were variations on the position and number of holes in the ventilated thimble and some thimbles thus labelled appear not to have any means of ventilation at all.

Two other names are found on the insides of display boxes, 'The Floral Thimble' 'which 'makes sewing a pleasure' and 'The Daisy Thimble' but neither thimble is known.



Fig 35

Another well known named thimble is 'The Cupid Thimble' (Fig 35) which is an Ivorine thimble with a colourful border of cupids holding garlands. The thimble has the word 'England' above the garland held by the cupids but there are some with 'USA' in the same place and these would have been made for the American market.



Fig 36

A different kind of named thimble was the Aluminium advertising thimble made in the 1920s and 30s (Fig 36). These were given by shops and salesmen to promote all kinds of goods, including foods, textiles, cleaning materials, newspapers, journals, manufacturers and many other items. They were made in their millions and three in particular - CWS Tea, Lyons Cakes and The News of the World had over a million of each made. The thimbles were aluminium with a coloured border on which the name of the product was written and had a coloured plastic top.



Fig 37

There were also Iles thimbles with the name of the material they were made from written on the thimble, such as Ivorine, Nickel Steel, Pure Aluminium and Solid Aluminium (Fig 37).



Fig 38

There are brass thimbles with names of products on them e.g. Hudsons Soap (Fig 38) and CWS Tea, these were probably made between the wars, but whether by Iles or not, is not definitely known.

Patterned Thimbles

Iles, from the beginning of the 20th century onwards, produced a whole range of patterned thimbles (Fig 39). These were made of polished nickel silver, the patterns, with few exceptions were the same as those produced by contemporary silversmiths, having plain tops with decorative borders, plain borders with decorated sides and top and a few with decorated rims using geometrical patterns, daisies, feathery leaves, the Greek key pattern. There was also a panelled thimble with free flowing patterns on each panel. Some were however, cruder in execution. A close look at the common daisy patterned ones revealed that some have a dot in the centre, some a cluster of dots, some with a perfect round depressed centre, some with diamond shaped centre and some with a clear wheel-like centre of six spokes. The majority have the Iles three thimble mark on them, so are easy to identify. They would have been cheaper than the same pattern in silver and appealed to the lower end of the market. They were harder wearing than silver ones and made attractive gifts when put in one of the many interesting boxes that Iles made.





Fig 39

Some more original and more ornate patterned thimbles may occasionally be found (Fig 40), and some Iles thimbles may have applied brass decorations (Fig 41).



Fig 40 'Indian patterns' possibly for the Far Eastern market



Fig 41

The Iles Company made a few nickel thimbles with stone tops (Fig 42), some with applied decorative rims (Fig 43) and some with plain rims, and some had magnetic tops (Fig 44).



Fig 42



Fig 43



Fig 44

Plastic thimbles were made over a long period, using the different kinds of plastic material as they came on to the market. Some were attractively patterned (the 'Cupid') and others were plain for ordinary everyday sewing.

As well as making thimbles for sale to the public in shops, Iles, in the latter years of the Company made thimbles for clubs and companies worldwide. These would have the company name on them and be given to customers, sometimes to commemorate an anniversary of that company. Woolworths bought all their plastic thimbles from Iles, who also sold brass, nickel, steel and some plastic thimbles to local education authorities for use in school needlework lessons.



Fig 45 Plain 'Just a Thimble Full' and decorated 'The play ground of New Zealand - The Chateau Tongariro'

One of their 'best sellers' must have been the thimble shaped spirit measure, with the words 'Just a Thimble Full' on it (Fig 45). The design was registered in 1924 (707065) and they were made from cupro nickel, which was sometimes brass plated, later ones were made of chromium and did not always have the Rd number on them. There were souvenirs having crests from towns, countries and tourist attractions all over the world, they would also commemorate special occasions such as exhibitions. Some noted are Fort William, Inverness, John o' Groats, Tregaron (Wales) Isle of Man, London, Brighton, Windsor, Llangollen, Jersey, Antigua, Canada. The 1924 Wembley Empire Exhibition, The North - East coast Exhibition May-Oct 1929, Table Mountain Cableway S.A. and many, many more. They were made from 1924 to 1970 and must have been a very successful idea.

Sizes on Iles Thimbles

Not a lot can be said about Iles sizing system, as the majority of his thimbles do not have a size number on them. A fairly full range of thimbles was produced, especially average and larger sizes but only three child's size thimbles have been identified.

Advertising

In his very early days, Charles Iles would have been little known outside the Birmingham area but his name would have come to public notice at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851, where Peyton and Iles exhibited a variety of their goods. He probably had an agent, who was responsible for bringing the company and their goods to the attention of London wholesalers and foreign buyers.

It is likely that Charles Edward Iles advertised in early Trade Journals. It is known that later, in the early part of the twentieth century the Iles Company advertised in Ladies Magazines - particularly his ventilated thimble in 1910.

Abel Morrall whose company originally made thimbles was also a wholesaler and produced catalogues of items sold by companies including those of Fenton, Horner and Iles. It is thought that these catalogues cover the end of the 19th century and the first part of the twentieth century.

It is known that Iles sold to America, Canada, South Africa, to Chain Stores similar to Woolworths in Australasia, to Cyprus, The Seychelles and the Caribbean. In later years, after WW II marketing of Iles thimbles was worldwide. Iles and Gomms advertised in trade journals in later years, as did Thomas Johnson after they took over the firm.

Iles or not?

Charles Iles, both father and son, must have made many thousands of thimbles before their three - thimble Iles trademark was registered. These thimbles were probably not named ones either, so that with no marks at all it is almost impossible to say whether many thimbles are Iles or not. The only way to see if they could possibly be Iles is to look at the materials they are made from, the shape and style and draw a possible conclusion (as an example - Iles gave names to many of their thimbles and there is a 19th century brass lined steel thimble named 'The Hercules'. The thimble is identical to many of Iles thimbles which have the word 'Iles' on them. The name even sounds like an Iles 'type' name - possibly Iles made it).

The three - thimble mark was put on most of the Iles Company thimbles in the middle period of their business, but in the later years this was not done on a regular basis, although it was possible to ask to have the mark put on thimbles being bought (mainly by wholesalers such as Morrall). The millions of aluminium advertising thimble that were made by Iles bear no mark, but it is known that he made these. Later plastic thimbles had neither mark nor name on the thimble, unless they were carded, when the name was on the card.



Fig 46

There are some pretty nickel silver thimbles with a vine and grape pattern round the border (Fig 46) and one with ivy leaves, these have no marks but are thought to be Iles manufacture.

Iles made a brass 'Just a Thimble Full' for the 1924 Empire Exhibition - there is also a brass thimble for the 1924 British Empire Exhibition - it is thought to have been made by Iles, but has no marks on it (Fig 47).



Fig 47

The question must be asked 'if not Iles then who?' There were many small makers of base metal thimbles in the mid to late 19th century in Birmingham, but they gradually disappeared as the 20th century dawned, leaving the only large competitor, the old rival, Thomas Johnson, who mainly made thimbles for commercial use and did not appear to have made the variety that Iles made. Possibly some unnamed thimbles could have been made by Thomas Johnson in the earlier days, but there is no evidence of this. Many thimbles are shaped and constructed in the same way as Iles Company thimbles so probably they were made by Iles but it is impossible to be certain now (Fig 48).



Fig 48 (middle thimble possibly made by Entaco)



Fig 49

The 'Coroza' thimble may also have been made by the Iles company although it does not bear an Iles mark (Fig 49).

The Dutch Thimble club, 'Der Vingerhoed', issued a boxed set of Iles and Gomm thimbles shortly before the firm closed and none of these thimbles seems to have the Iles mark so that without the box these thimbles too, would be impossible to positively identify (Fig 50).



Fig 50

Clearly during the years that the Iles Company was in existence a very large number and variety of inexpensive thimbles were made using many materials. The Company was probably the most prolific thimble making company to ever produce thimbles but because their thimbles were not very often made from expensive materials their work seems to have been undervalued by thimble collectors. It is hoped that this paper will enable readers to understand why the name Iles was, and still is, a very important name in the history of thimble making.

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1. According to *The Illustrated Exhibitor*, a book about the 1851 exhibition that listed the prizewinners, neither 'Iles' nor 'Peyton and Iles' seemed to have won a prize. 'Peyton and Harlow' did however receive a prize medal (Category XXII) for Metallic Japanned bedsteads. Mealings and von Hoelle, however, state that 'Charles Iles displayed his thimbles made from sheet metal and was awarded the Prize Medal, engraved with his name as manufacturer. He was awarded a second medal in 1862 at the International Exhibition in London. These medals are on display at the works.'

2. Addendum

Pinwheels

Christina Bertrand

Pinwheels are probably the cheapest and smallest pincushions ever to have been made. In addition to the 1851 Exhibition pinwheel mentioned above (Figs 2 and 51), Charles Iles subsequently made two more pinwheels. Although they have the word 'patent' on them, there is no record of the patent ever having been filed. One of these wheels shows two little royal princesses (Fig 52) and the other commemorates the marriage of the Princess Royal in 1858. The Iles pinwheels were made of paper and pressed card. The back was a separate glued on piece of paper (Fig 52, right) and the colours of the wheels varied, as did the sizes. The wording on the wheels varied too, some said 'PEYTON & ILES' (Fig 2, 51, top right), while others simply said 'CH. ILES'. Some said 'Warranted' (Fig 52), and others 'Iles Patent' (Fig 51, top right). Some were made for the continental market ('France' and 'Belgique') and state 'BREVETE S G DU.....' (Brevite sans Garantie du gouvernement) (Fig 51, bottom).

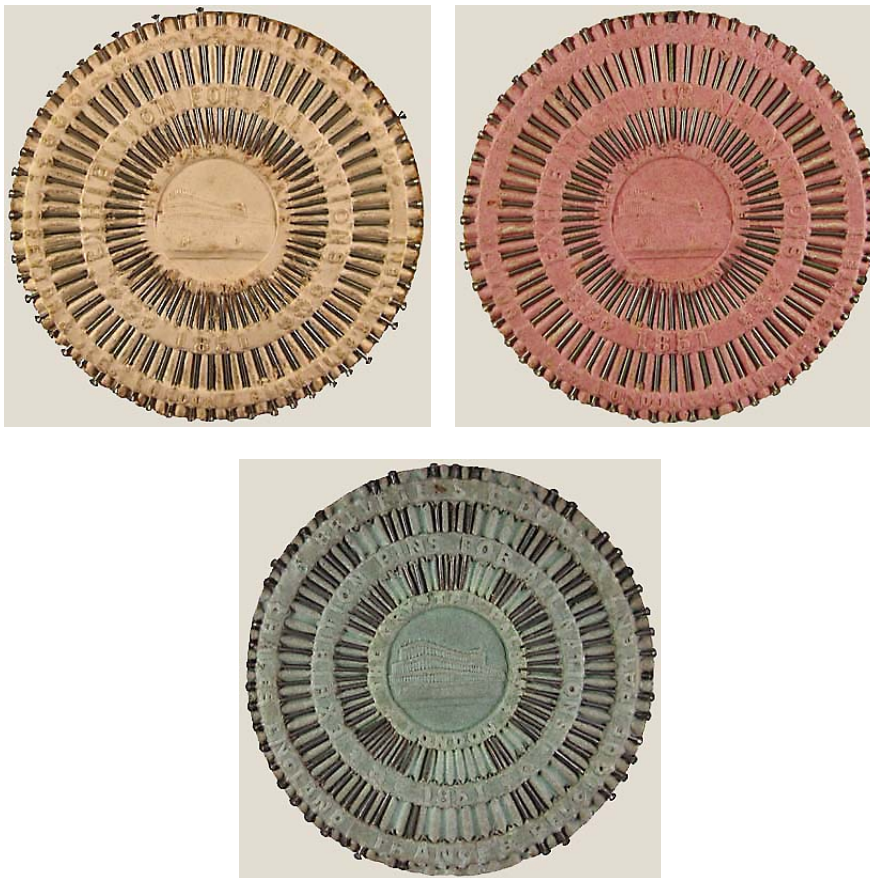


Fig 51



Fig 52 Royal princesses pinwheel, front and back.

3. 1957 C Iles and Gomms' hallmark

A silver thimble bearing the 'C Iles and Gomms' mark' was recently been discovered by Ray Nimmo and is reproduced with his permission. The thimble was assayed in 1995, long after Iles and Gomms had made their last thimble. It is possible that Thomas Johnson used the mark for this thimble.



Fig 53 'C Iles and Gomms' hallmarked silver thimble and 'CI&G' mark

4. The 'The' thimbles

In addition to 'The Boudoir', 'The Treasure' and 'The Studio', there appear to have been several other 'The' thimbles attributed to Iles.

Examples may be seen at: <http://thimbleselect.bizland.com/catalogue.htm>