ROYAL RUFS

By Harriet B. Martin

In the 16th Century, clothing was dark and often richly encrusted. As a welcome contrast, delicate, frothy ruffs fairly offset the heavy aspect. Such a refreshing touch at the throat added sparkle.

Frilled collars became more and more elaborate and developed into the

Elizabethan ruff. What began as a small, pleated ruffle on the shirt collars of the very early 16th Century, ended as large wheel-like collars, requiring specialized tools to keep them pleated. Only the very rich could afford the expense in linen, lace, materials and upkeep.

The Elizabethan ruff was one of the most recognizable items of Elizabethan Fashion.

Ruffs, or ruffles, started as a high frilled collar. Fashion then changed and dictated a more feminine and seductive image for women, which resulted in opening the ruff in front to expose the neck and the top of the breasts.

The high ruff with an open neck for women was constructed on gauze wings which were raised at the back of the head. Ruffs were pinned into place and often attached to partlets. The pleat or flute of a ruff was called a Purl which were sometimes edged with fine lace. Ruffs were sometimes added to the cuffs of sleeves. Laces or strings, called Band Strings, were attached to the opening of a ruff which were tied together to secure the ruff or band around the neck. (from the Elizabethan Era Organization)
Ruffs framed the face and dictated the hairstyles of the age, which were short for men and swept up for women.

Of course, conforming to the prevalent style was a must for those wishing to socially advance themselves or maintain social status.

Portraits of reigning queens of the era showed ruffs in plenty. Damsels and dames seemed to blossom above their ruffs as both sexes benefited equally.

Achieving this airy elegance was no simple matter. Households of the wealthy required the help of a deft pair of hands behind the scenes, to “gaffer” these collars.

Goffering was the art of shaping the crimps and flutes that made up a ruff. A special goffering tool was used, in the form of a rod or baton, to work the fine cambric or linen into shape.

Elizabeth of England is said to have greatly encouraged lace making in her choice of ever more elaborate neckwear.

After her death, Bishop John King of London made so bold as to proclaim his objection to ruffs in 1611.

Ruffs never looked better, even though they displeased that Bishop. If he was searching out sin, he should have looked elsewhere rather than pointing a finger at a bit of white fluff!

During the Elizabethan era, pamphlets were printed and distributed commenting on life. A writer of one such pamphlet was a well-traveled Londoner called Philip Stubbes. He was well educated and a strict Elizabethan Puritan, holding views on any social practices which, in his view, were unfitting for true Christians. He named his work “The Anatomie of Abuses” in which he strongly criticized many of the fashions and clothing worn during the Elizabethan era. The pamphlet was recorded in the Stationers’ Register on 1 March 1583. From his writing regarding ruffs, we can confirm that:

- Ruffs were made of varying expensive, fine linens (Holland, Lawne, and Camerick);
- Starch was used to maintain the ruffs;
- Supports and under-props kept the ruffs in place;
- Almost everyone had three or four ruffs;
- Ruffs were decorated with lace, gold and silver thread and fine silk;
- Ruffs varied in length & style, and could be pinned up to the ears or laid over the shoulder.
By then King James, having dissolved Parliament that same year, was hardly in the mood to be concerned about the ruff bashing.

Several button portraits illustrated here wear different ruffs in each case. Note the version of a small ruff surrounded by a high flaring style.

Ruffs have continued to appear on clothing throughout history, as fashion predictably rediscovers the encircling appeal of the face framed in the dramatic ruff.

Encircling white ruffs, framing men’s features, were also a style of the times. Antique Spanish playing cards depicting Don Carlos I, King of Spain from 1516 to 1556, show his fashionable attire, included a ruff. Could the Bishop have been in a ruff about that ruff, too?

The King of Cups (Hearts) This is Don Carlos I, King of Spain 1516-1556, and also Emperor of Germany as Charles V from 1519.


Henri IV of France. A stamped brass head applied to a pierced brass background. The engraved rim is separately applied. Late 19th century.

George Vol Cramer AT:680. The inscription does not make sense (possibly copied from a medal used as the design source for the button, or deliberately garbled, as many inscriptions copied from coins for coin-like buttons seem to have been altered). Stamped and tinted brass, steel back and wire shank. (Above)

Henry of Navarre, Henri IV, first Bourbon King of France. The head is of brass stamped in very high relief and applied to a brass rim decorated with faceted steels. (Left)

Deccan Buttons

Indian artisans have known the art of metalworking since 3000 B.C. More metalwork is known to have originated from the Deccan region, than from any other region in India. The making of metal ware is one craft tradition that engages many families in the state.

In India craftsmen use different metals like iron, copper, silver and alloys like bronze, bell metal, white metal, etc. to make buttons. A variety of metalwork can be seen from different parts of the country. Deccan buttons featured here are made of silver, often with enameling.

Increasing demand for traditional products, has had an effect on production. Today, these contemporary buttons are generally made in small-scale and cottage industries. Distinguishing backmarks are found on many, although some have no markings. (See backmarks at the end of this article.)

Deccan buttons on their original card. Collection of Margaret Blain, U.K.

Black buttons from the collection of Margaret Blain, U.K.

These cobalt blue Deccan buttons are found in small & medium sizes. Raised backmark reads, "MADE IN DECCAN TRADEMARK No 230-RD 1926-B" with a crescent moon and star. Collection of Linda Kent