

Birchcroft Fine Bone China from the United Kingdom

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Birchcroft Fine Bone China is best known for the manufacture of collectible thimbles. Founded by Tony Forbes over 25 years ago, the company is still very much a family-run business. The factory is located in Longton, Stoke-on-Trent, in the United Kingdom.

As the firm became more involved in the worldwide Web, they realized that button collectors were just as big if not bigger than thimble collectors, although not as strong in the UK. This led them to promote their collectible buttons more via the Internet, and in many ways these are new to this marketplace. The buttons are reasonably priced, and affordable for all collectors.

In response to requests from the large button market, they developed the 1 1/4 inch button. This has brought Birchcroft to the attention of serious button collectors. Originally, the smaller 1 inch button used the same size decoration that fit on their thimbles.



Blue Willow Design



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The familiar backmark on Birchcroft buttons and the one-way self shank.

The firm uses several freelance artists to produce new designs, printing is done in-house and all the production stages for an original set of buttons can be handled from start to finish under one roof. They are continuously developing new designs for their buttons and currently have over 250 with more on the way. Every design is unique and only available through Birchcroft. There are limited quantities on many of the buttons and they only produce one print run of each design.

The factory has the distinction of having two of Britain's listed bottle ovens on site. Few of these ovens remain, but of the six towns comprising Stoke-on-Trent, Longton has the largest number and the finest. Thousands of Pounds (GBP £ *Pounds Sterling*) have been spent on renovation and visitors can now step inside the cavernous relics, many of which have been adapted as museums and showrooms.

The days of using ovens in production are long gone. Birchcroft has



replaced them with much smaller and more economical quick-fire kilns that use off-peak power and very precise automated systems. However, the actual process of making the company's fine bone china items differs little from when the great Josiah Spode introduced porcelain at the beginning of the 19th century.



"Although some mechanization has been forthcoming, the pottery industry as a whole seems not to have noticeably changed," says Keith Forbes who manages the production side of the family-run business.

Clay arrives at the factory in slab form, known as cake clay. It is then made into liquid clay or *slip* by way of a blunger - a large mixer where the clay is broken down - and with the addition of water and silica, made up into specific recipes. This is an important stage in the production process, as the attained density or pint weight is very much a matter of individual mixing.

At the casting benches, the slip is poured into moulds made from plaster of Paris that form the basic button shape. Being absorbent, the plaster soaks up the liquid clay which the caster leaves in the mould until dry.

When the buttons have been removed from the moulds, they are in what is known as a "green" state. Although a recognizable shape, they are fragile and larger than the finished product will be. Spongers, as the name suggests, wipe them smooth for their first firing. Any rejects at this stage can be reconstituted into slip and reused for casting.

Fired at temperatures in excess of 1200°C for about eight hours, the *bisque* is strong, white and translucent, but still rough to the touch. It has to be dipped in glaze, have any surplus solution removed from its shank to prevent it from sticking in the kiln, and then be placed in a *glost kiln* for a second firing. The button is then a white glazed blank that can be gilded and transfer-printed, with the final product having been placed in the kiln and fired on four separate occasions in order to produce this tiny artifact.

Compact and flexible, the company has a reputation for being able to manufacture buttons bearing any transfer-printed design quickly and in relatively small runs.



Tony does remember producing the Blue Spruce buttons for the Colorado State Button Society. These buttons are now unique because Birchcroft has removed all origination and they cannot be repeated.

You can view and purchase Birchcroft China buttons on-line at:
<http://www.thimble.net>
eBay Store: Birchcroft China at <http://stores.ebay.com/Birchcroft-China>

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