

FROM THE EDUCATION CHAIR

The Pearly Kings and Queens of London: A Grand Tradition Continues

By Gloria B. Skovronsky



Imagine yourself walking the streets of Cockney London, in Victorian times. The early morning thoroughfares are choked with tradesmen and servants: making appointments, shopping for daily produce to take back to the cook, choosing bouquets for the banquet table. The Covent Garden Market (established in 1671 by Charles II) is a bustle of activity with vendors' donkey carts jostling for position and bringing merchandise to the many stalls that are a shopper's delight. The Costermongers are the most easily recognized. As tough market traders, they congregate closely, and spend their day haggling for the best prices for their fruit and vegetables. They are flamboyantly dressed, with the seams of their trousers, waistcoats and caps covered with pearl buttons to show their status in the market. As a young boy you watch them, hoping you have the courage to fit into this close-knit community somewhere. And if your name is Henry Kroft, you reach down to the gutter and pick up your very first pearl button.



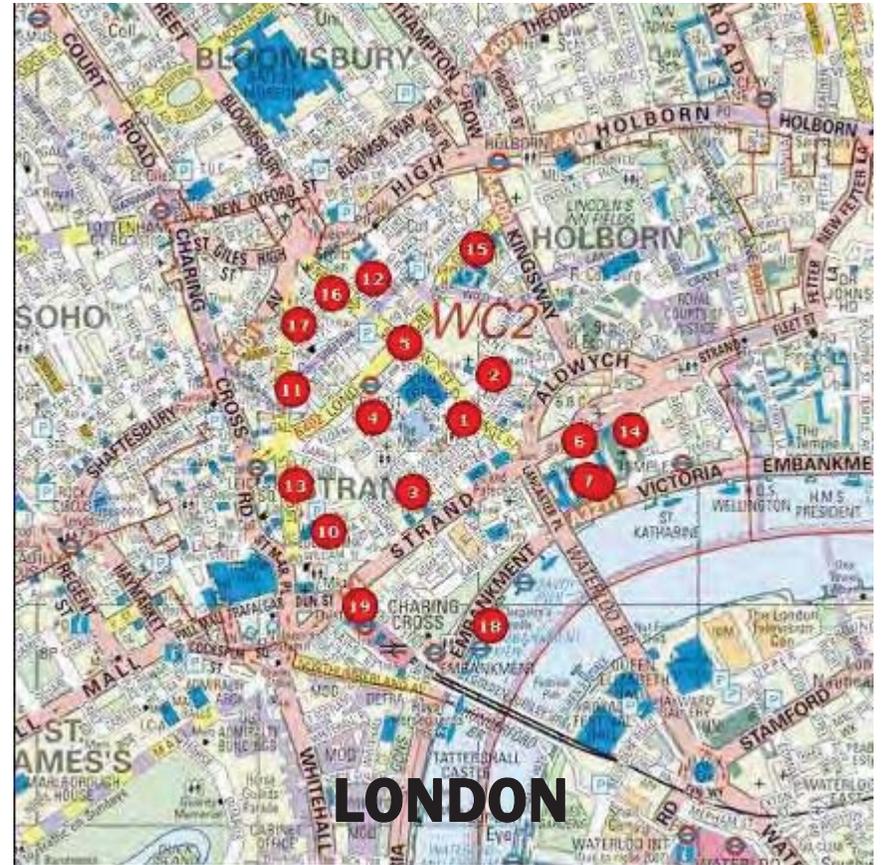
Henry was born and raised in an orphanage in Charlton Street, Somers Town, London.

He shared his birth date with Queen Victoria (May 24) and hoped, in the style of the day, that

he might share in her glory. At that time, Victoria was the dowager Queen, titular leader of a vast empire, yet preoccupied with the death of her beloved Consort, Albert, and disappointed by her many children.

The Royal Family would often parade in their finery in the London Parks on Sundays so that the common people could appreciate their grandeur. Class sentiment and station were vigorously defended.

At 13 Henry had to leave the orphanage and make his own way in life. His first job was a municipal road sweeper in the markets of Somers Town. Henry worked hard and soon made many friends. Henry was fascinated by the Costermonger way of life. Their devotion to one another, their "society within a society" (they even had their own secret language), must have seemed, to an orphan boy, the closest sort of family relationship. In an attempt to copy the "flash suits" of the Costermongers, as he swept the streets he started to collect all the pearl buttons he found that had fallen off clothing.



Because Henry was an orphan he had no one to help him with his suit, so he had to learn to improvise. Perhaps a “lampooning” of the royal finery? Perhaps an embellishment on the Costermonger traditions? We cannot tell for sure. It might have been both.

In his suit covered with buttons, Henry was a recognizable figure and became much in demand for his charity work, and as many of London’s hospitals, workhouses and orphanages needed help, he turned to his friends the Costermongers and they did not let him down. Henry must have had an engaging personality, and obviously enjoyed people. He must also have had the gift of organization.

Many of the Costermongers became the first Pearly Families. There were 28 families, one for each of the London boroughs, one for the City of Westminster, and one for the City of London. At every available opportunity, they would dress up in their distinctive costumes and collect money for charity.

A Pearly Suit is instantly recognizable. The fabric used is often black velveteen, and jackets, pants, caps, ties, dresses and purses are covered with pearl and shell buttons.

There are many designs for the suits, which usually reflect the family’s interests. There are two styles of suits: the Skeleton Suit, with few buttons often placed in a geometric grid, and the Smother Suit, which is totally covered in buttons. The Pearly Queens adorn their wide-brimmed hats with Ostrich plumes, often in bright colors.

Here are a few common button themes that you may see and recognize on Pearly Suits today:

- ♥ Horseshoe Luck
- ♥ Doves Peace
- ♥ Heart Charity
- ♥ Anchor Hope
- ♥ Cross Faith
- ♥ Wheel Circle of Life
- ♥ Playing Cards Life is a Gamble
- ♥ Flower Pots Costermongers
- ♥ Donkey Carts Costermongers
- ♥ Bells Sound of Bow Bells—true Cockney

Each outfit can hold many tens of thousands of buttons on it and can weigh as much as 50 pounds or more! The clothes have often been passed



Carole with the statue of Henry.

down through the generations of a pearly family or are remade by the successor, but the tradition is for the man (Pearly King) to sew on all the buttons. You can find charming photographs on the Internet, which show entire families, including children and dogs, in full Pearly regalia.

Almost every area of London has its own royal family within the Pearly Society. A prince or princess may graduate to the status of King or Queen once their elders are sure of their maturity, knowledge of history, and their commitment to the job of collecting for charity.

Sadly, during the two World Wars many of the original families were lost and the Pearlies had to recruit new members. This was achieved by enlisting people who had helped the Pearlies over the years with their charity work. This is a controversial policy, which is evidently not accepted by all Pearly Families. There consequently has been a schism between “born” Pearlies and “made” Pearlies since the 1970s. The main succession today of a Pearly is still by inheritance. In 1975 the Original Pearly Kings and Queens Association was reformed and now meets every month in the crypt in St. Martins in the Field, Trafalgar Square.

Henry died in 1930 at age 68. His funeral was a spectacular affair. It was filmed by the local news and all of the Pearlies (roughly 400) attended and followed the coffin to where Henry was buried. The charities that he had helped over the years all contributed to pay for a statue of Henry for his grave. Unfortunately in 1995 the statue was vandalized and no longer stands in the cemetery. It has been replaced with a headstone, inlaid with Henry’s photograph, so it can easily be found by visitors. The statue has now been fully restored and can be seen in the crypt at the church of St. Martin’s in the Field, Trafalgar Square.

The Pearlies are dedicated to helping the Church of St. Martins and all attend the Harvest Festival Service held on the first Sunday in October. They also hold a Memorial Service for past Pearlies on the third Sunday in May. They choose this date as it is the nearest to Henry Croft’s birthday, which was May 24th.

Although original Pearly Suits remain treasured possessions of the

Pearly families, other button suits occasionally appear. In the 1950s Mrs. Daniel Flood, of Oregon, stuck up a lively correspondence with Pearly families in England. Inspired and encouraged by their enthusiasm and generosity, she created both male and female Pearly costumes of her own. Her style was impeccable, and the costumes complement each other very well. Her accomplishments were well documented in the *Oregonian* newspaper, which, I'm sure, delighted her London friends.

The Oregon State Button Society now owns these costumes and often brings them out for display at their yearly state shows. They are a marvel of workmanship.

Several years ago, button Collectors Dale and Betty Parkhurst were contacted by a neighbor who was cleaning out her basement. In Betty's own words:

"...so she called to say she had a suit in her basement that had a lot of buttons on it, and I could have it if I were interested. Well, it definitely sounded like something to at least look at, so my husband and I...went over to take a look. She brought out a black garbage bag and I reached down inside to pull out the suit! The buttons on this wool suit were individually sewn on by hand by a lady named Mrs. Ethel R. Fuller. She and her husband Charles lived in the Portland area when she put this together. He wore it in parades and on other special occasions."

Dale and Betty have made the "Charlie" suit available for viewing at several Washington State Button Society Shows, and Mrs. Fuller's originality is immediately apparent; if she didn't like the color of the buttons, she painted them to suit her designs. It is interesting to speculate if Mrs. Flood inspired her.



Betty in the "Charlie" suit.



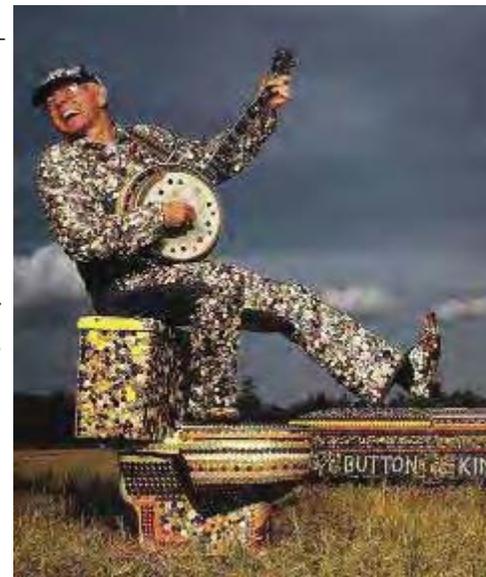
Gloria's Pearly Skeleton Dress.

Well, you know that I can't let an imaginative tradition like that go to waste, so, of course, I started working on my own Pearly costume. So far I have completed a Skeleton dress, a Smother vest, and a rather fabulous hat. Just attempting a project of this magnitude made me aware of the time, effort, and the number of buttons it takes to make a proper fashion statement.

The garments are quite delicious to wear, actually. The sheer weight of the buttons, if equally distributed, gives the clothing a heavy, regal feeling as if one were wearing royal robes. I have also been careful to incorporate my own personal symbolism in my vest. Any embellishments I use should honor a tradition, not merely imitate it.

The Pearly tradition has survived for over 125 years and hopefully it will continue for many more to come. There are still a few families who can be traced back to the original generation of Pearlies.

Henry Croft's family still carries on the tradition with his Great-Granddaughter wearing the title of 'Somers Town.'



Dalton Stevens, is known in the U.S. as the "Button King." He made this suit with 16,333 buttons in 2 years and 10 months during a battle with insomnia. He went on to cover many other items with buttons.

Here is a selection of Costermonger Rhyming Slang words. They used their slang (Slang=Secret Language) to speak privately in the hustle and bustle of the Covent Garden. Can you find most of these words and translate?

"I am off for a ball & chalk down the Frog & Toad to the rub a dub dub for a pint of pig's with me old trouble to have a sing song round the old Joanna."

Slang	Meaning	Slang	Meaning
Bo-peep	sleep	Jack the ripper	kipper
Bottle and glass	arse	Jam tart	heart
Bow and arrow	barrow	Jim skinner	dinner
Brown bread	dead	Joanna	piano
Bubble & squeak	speak	Joe Blake	steak
Burnt cinder	winder (window)	Lemon squash	wash
Butcher's hook	look	Loaf of bread	head
Cain & able	table	Mince pies	eyes
Chalk farm	arm	Mutt and Jeff	deaf
Cherry-'ogg (Hogg)	dog	Peckham rye	tie
China plate	mate (friend)	Pig's ear	beer
Coach 'n badge	cadge (get money from)	Plates of meat	feet
Cock & hen	ten or £10	Pork pie	lie
Currant bun	son/sun	Rocking horse	sauce
Daisy roots	boots	Rosie Lee	tea
Derby Kelly	belly	Rub a dub dub	pub
Dicky bird	word	Salmon and trout	gout
Dicky dirt	shirt	Saucepan lid	kid (child)
Dig in the grave	shave	Sexton Blake	cake
Ding dong	sing song	Skin 'n blister	sister
Dog & bone	phone	Six to four	whore
Frog & toad	road	Sky rocket	pocket
Ginger beer	queer	Taters in the mould	cold
Gold watch	scotch	Tea leaf	thief
Ham & eggs	legs	Tit for tat	hat
Hampstead heath	teeth	Tom and dick	sick
Harry Line	time	Tummy tucker	supper
Heap of coke	bloke	Trouble and strife	wife
Hen 'n fox	box	Two and eight	state
Holy friar	liar	Uncle Ned	bed
		Whistle and flute	suit

The Western Regional Button Association is pleased to share our educational articles with the button collecting community. This article appeared in the May 2009 WRBA newsletter, *Territorial News*. Enjoy! And consider joining WRBA! Go to www.WRBA.us

