

# Old China Buttons

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(from talk given at Sally Lewis Week)

My husband was in the habit of attending auction sales, and of buying the entire contents of households, and old stores going out of business. In this way he had acquired a number of boxes of old buttons, which he stored in the attic awaiting leisure to look them over. This leisure time came in the fall and winter of 1937 and 38. At that time there was no N.B.S. with rules and regulations regarding button mounting, no button books had been written, and we knew of no button collectors; in fact, we knew nothing about buttons, and we did not even think of ourselves as button collectors. We did realize that we had some unusual antique buttons, and our chief concern was how to display them. Being entirely on our own, with nothing to guide us, we decided on a 7" by 9" white card of medium weight as best suited to our purpose. Never having entered our buttons in competition, we have never changed our method of mounting, and so this is the explanation of our buttons not being on standard cards, and in compliance with National regulations.

In the button kingdom my first love was the calico button, and it still remains a great favorite. In searching for them I constantly ran into the cousins of the calicos, the banded and plain types of china buttons. Their sturdiness and beautiful coloring fascinated me, and I soon found myself saving every one I came across, so, in amassing my calico collection, I also amassed an

amazing quantity of the calico cousins, the banded, the ringers, the piecrusts, the hobnails, and other types.

Information to impart about these buttons is meagre, except we do know the material is iron-stone china, like the calicos, colored and fired in the same manner, and produced at the same period of time. They were the common work-a-day clothes button for over 60 years, extending up to, and even into the "gay nineties"; a general utility button used on men's shirts, frocks, and jumpers, women's underclothes and wrappers (the forerunner of the present-day zippered house dress), and especially did they lend themselves to the adornment of children's clothing. Color is their outstanding characteristic, and they are found in every color of the solar spectrum, including the tints and shades, except yellow, which is conspicuous by its absence. Why no yellow, I cannot explain. If you are collecting these little ceramics, you are always hunting for a certain color, or a certain size, to fill out a set, and it's a real thrill when you chance to find it. A bigger thrill still to note that it doesn't even dent your pocketbook to buy it.

The first to show, and to speak about, is the one-hole, or so-called "whistle" button, a class of large variety, including banded, fluted, calico, raspberry, spherical and hemispherical, large and small, and in plain colors and lustres, the latter being particularly attractive.

Next is the two-hole flat ringer

with its double and triple bands, but never have I found in this class a single band. These occur in sets of four sizes, and in each color, if you are persistent and lucky enough to find them. Continuing with the two-hole, we have the single banded lustre button. Note that these buttons never have the double or triple band. These lustre buttons are rather thick and heavy but their coloring is rich and lovely. They occur in many sizes, and in two styles of sew-through; one has a deep circular eye, and the other a shallower oval eye. The latter type also occurs in the plain solid color, including some with a lustre ring, either in gold or silver, and the plain all-over lustres in different colors. In this type we get a yellow lustre, the only yellow button I have found in the little ceramics.

The next step would naturally be the three-hole chinias, but they are so rare, comparatively, that I show, and mention them, in the classes with which they belong, so we go to the four-hole button, and we have a large class of four-hole ringers, in both single and double rings, and in sizes ranging from the inch wide button down to the tiny three-hole size, and in all the colors except yellow. Another four-hole ringer is the inkwell or truncated cone shape. These buttons are smaller, and very attractive, as many of them have rings of two colors on the white body, such as a pink and a green ring, or a brown and a blue ring on the white. They range in size from the  $\frac{5}{8}$ " to the little three-hole type, and they all have double rings, no single rings. The wide banded inkwells are beautifully colored, and it is possible to get each color in sets of six, ranging from the large, high inkwell down to

the tiny three-hole size. These same sizes come in the solid colors, also, including lustres, and the marbled, or variegated colors in blue, brown, green and gray. I do not consider this as a calico button belonging to Class #193 of W. B. Morgan's Calico List, although I am aware that there are collectors who do so consider it. In all of these types the three-hole size occurs, and we are showing several examples.

Another kind is the broad-banded flat button, always four-hole so far as I have ever discovered, and can be arranged in sets of graduating sizes in all the common colors.

We now come to the really lovely piecrust, a fluted four-hole button in lustre, plain white, also with broad bands, and narrow rings of bright colors. Sometimes one is lucky enough to find two bands of different color on the same white piecrust, occurring in both the small and large sizes. The white three-hole piecrust is quite plentiful, but not the other colors, and a two-hole piecrust is a rarity, indeed. In all my collecting I have never found but two, both of which are alike, plain white.

In the hobnail class we have solid colors, lustres, ringers, hobnails or color on white, and, rarely, a brass rimmed one. I have one small and one large brass rimmed hobnail. They occur in both four and three hole types.

The "knob" china button, sometimes called the "igloo," is rare. It is a flat disc with a knob set in the center over the two-hole sew-thru. It is usually white with a white knob, or with a colored knob, or it may have rings of color on the disc, or the knob and rings may be in contrasting colors. I have never found

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