Family Sweethearts by Simon Wilson

It's sometimes hard not to think what sweetheart brooches meant to families. It's not possible to link many brooches in my collection to individuals but I do know what happened to a handful of the men who were represented, and it wasn't always good. Based on probability a good proportion of sweetheart brooches are all that is left of a personal tragedy. Depending on the way that family members handled grief these brooches would have carried a lot of meaning – some to be worn in memory of husbands and sons, others to be thrown away or left to tarnish in jewellery boxes until the story was forgotten.

Sweetheart brooches are much more personal than many of the items soldiers left behind them. They had very little choice about cap badges or medals, for instance, which were issued as part of a massive bureaucratic process, but they did have a choice with sweetheart brooches and I'm sure a lot of thought went into many of the purchases. Similarly, those people buying them as tie-pins or lapel badges after the war were making a personal choice whether to remember or to forget their past service.

One type of brooch that always makes me think more than any other, is the family brooch, which is even more emotive than an ordinary brooch. I have four, as pictured above, representing two families with two away at the war, and two with three. We often think of them all being sons, but it's also possible that some represent fathers and sons, or brothers. In addition, it's likely that three of the brooches had to be specially made, which adds yet another dimension to them.

The first one I bought is the RAF and REME brooch combination (*left*). It appears to have been made by removing the fittings from the back of two commercially available brooches which have then been soldered to a well-made pin back, which may have come from a third brooch. The whole effect is quite tidy and, with the REME badge, it is possible to date its manufacture to 1942 or later.

The second is a commercial brooch designed to take two photographs. It has a chromed hanging bar and plastic pendant. The art deco style hanging bar is a common feature on brooches of WW2 date. It looks like they have one son in the navy and one in the army. Plastic sweetheart brooches from WW2 are another interesting field of sweetheart collecting, though they aren't always to modern taste.

The third is a bit of a mish-mash. Someone has taken a sterling silver tie-pin to the Essex Regiment then added a silver Royal Artillery badge and a chromed brass RAOC badge to the bar. The result isn't too bad, though there is quite a lot of lead solder in evidence around the RA badge, which isn't quite level due to the bar being a little short and the RA badge being a bit too long to fit. The RAOC badge is the 1920-47 pattern, which again places this brooch in WW2.

The final brooch (*above*), is Canadian and feels solid in the hand. The bar is stamped “STERLING” with an unknown mark after it. It is about the same length as the previous badge but the badges are smaller, which allows for a neater job. The three badges appear to be silver, and don't show signs of previously being anything else. I'm not sure if I will ever be able to prove it, but it seems as if the pieces were specifically made to be made into this sort of brooch. More research is necessary. The badges, from

left to right, are the Royal Canadian Engineers, the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps and the Ontario Tank Regiment. The Ontario Regiment added the word “Tank” to the title in 1936, so once again, we are in WW2.

In conclusion – a word about families at war. It's difficult to find figures, but with new research sources it has become clear that a number of families suffered significant losses in wars.

During the American Civil War Abraham Lincoln sent a letter to a Mrs Bixby, saying that he had been informed that she had lost five sons in the service of the Union and expressing his sympathy. It turns out that he had been misinformed. Two of her five sons had been killed and one had died of TB contracted whilst a prisoner of war. One, we're not sure about as the records are unclear – he may have either died as a POW or agreed to join the Confederates to secure his release. The fifth was definitely a deserter, and returned home after the war.

Most of the examples on the internet seem to be from the USA. The Sullivans – five brothers from Iowa who served on the *USS Juneau* in WW2 were all killed in the same action, and four of the six Borgstrom brothers were killed within a six-month period in 1944. The family petitioned for the return of the fifth surviving brother, who was posted home, and the sixth, and youngest, brother, was exempted from service.

This was the basis of the USA's Sole Survivor Policy, which has provisions for removing surviving siblings from combat. It has been used twice in recent wars – Iraq and Afghanistan. The Hubbard Brothers and the Wise brothers were two groups of three brothers where two were lost and the third was posted home.

The British, having stiff upper lips, don't make so much fuss, and information is harder to find. However, reference to the Great War Forum shows that there is plenty of information if you can find it – including eleven families who lost five sons.