

Sweetheart Brooches – By Simon Wilson

This piece concentrates on a general description of sweetheart brooches and a brief look at their history. Examples will concentrate on the Army, but I do intend covering the Royal Navy, Royal Air Force and souvenir badges in later articles.

“Sweetheart brooch” used to refer to inexpensive brooches given by young men to their sweethearts. Its meaning changed until, by the 1970s, it was mainly applied to brooches showing miniature representations of military badges, which were traditionally given by soldiers to their mothers, wives and girlfriends. It has also extended to cover souvenirs of military service and to cover things like tie pins, which, being male jewellery, are probably misnamed. In fact, if you read newspapers from between the wars, many “sweethearts” seem to have been worn by men to signify their service, and the term sweetheart is rarely seen. In those days. The usual term seemed to be “regimental brooch”. I will carry on calling them sweethearts, even if it isn't totally accurate, because that's what I'm used to calling them.



Regimental Brooches with Overseas Chevrons.

One interesting series of brooches, most likely to have been made with men in mind, was made with Overseas Service Chevrons below the badge. They were in brass or silver, and seem to be in two types. One type has chevrons underneath, attached by a screw thread. These are stamped TLM (Thomas Lyster Mott of Birmingham). The other type has them superimposed on the badge and secures them with metal tabs. This type is not stamped by a maker. They feature blue and red chevrons, just like the official cloth ones, and are often described as NCO badges by eBay sellers, despite being the wrong colour

and the wrong way up. There is, as I have often noted, no intelligence test for eBay sellers.



The Airlie Brooch – the one that started it all and is still worn today.

The first replica badge made as a piece of jewellery, is often said to be a brooch of the 10th Royal (Prince of Wales' Own) Hussars. It was commissioned by the Earl of Airlie as a wedding day gift for his wife Mabell in 1886. Reports of society weddings in the '20s and '30s often mention this practice.

In her diary, Lady Airlie says she believed she had started a new fashion, which suggests that other people started wearing them soon after. The internet says that no earlier sweetheart brooch is known. This is probably true if, by sweetheart brooch, you mean a replica regimental badge. However, please remember that since 1815 British officers had been having miniature



Countess of Airlie, wearing the first Sweetheart Brooch.

medals made by jewellers, including ones where the ribbons are rendered in enamels, and these were sometimes worn by their wives as brooches. I would suggest that these have a claim to being the first sweetheart brooches.

The Airlie brooch was made in white gold, diamonds and enamel. It is a lovely thing which makes many appearances on photographs of Lady Airlie and is still in use by the regiment today. On loan from the Airlie family, it is worn by the wife of the commanding officer. Lord Airlie had an active military career, serving in Afghanistan, Egypt and South Africa, where he was killed at the battle of Diamond Hill in 1900 at the age of 44. His wife lived until 1956.

Another brooch in the collection of the King's Royal Hussars has a local

connection to Barnwell, being the 1969 brooch presented to Princess Alice, Duchess of Gloucester, on the formation of the Royal Hussars, of which she was Colonel-in-Chief. She had family links to the 10th Hussars and to the Royal Hussars, in which her grandson would serve. She was also, amongst others, Colonel-in-Chief of the Northamptonshire Regiment and 2nd Royal Anglians.



The Brooch worn by Princess Alice as Colonel in Chief of the Royal Hussars.

As brooches became more popular, they also became less expensive. Many of the earlier brooches were made in hollow silver. In a hollow silver brooch, the front is typically pressed out and the back then closed with a plate cut to the shape of the brooch. They are normally worn with a pin and a C-clasp and often hallmarked.

A few brooches appeared in the 1880s and '90s but the first surge in numbers occurred during the Boer War (1899-1902). It was a war that involved the whole nation, with reservists, volunteers and yeomanry all becoming involved. The result was that the public took more interest in the war.



Three hallmarked silver brooches – the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry (1892), Northamptonshire Regiment (1900) and Sherwood Foresters (1915).

There were a number of medallions, badges and brooches made for this war and it saw the first large scale use of lapel

badges as souvenirs. It also saw a rise in the collection of funds to help soldiers and their families, something that would eventually turn into the "flag days" of the Great War. But most of all, it saw a large increase in sweetheart brooches. There were several sorts, though they normally took the form

of either circles or horse shoes, and were mostly in silver. These Victorian designs lasted into the Great War. It is often a surprise (or disappointment) to check a hallmark and find that a style of brooch from 1900 is actually dated years later. Many of the brooches made for the Boer War included dates on the horseshoe – “South Africa 1899-1902”, or something similar.

Horseshoes are traditional symbols of good luck and were widely used. In the Boer War they all seem to be open at the bottom. This, according to tradition, allows the luck to flow out of the shoe and onto the wearer. By WW2 the normal style was open at the top - this collects and retains luck. Of course, there is another belief – that this talk of luck was complete nonsense, but in wartime, superstition tends to be a comfort to people worrying about the lives of their loved ones.



Four brooches on swords – Worcestershire Yeomanry button mounted on a sword, Yorkshire Dragoons, CANADA on Mameluke pattern sword and Cameron Highlanders on Scottish broadsword (modern).

Badges mounted on swords became popular in 1914, though they aren't common were probably expensive. They are generally good quality silver brooches with hallmarks, though some are marked simply as “Sterling Silver” or just “Silver”. Some were produced more cheaply by mounting a uniform button on a brass sword, but even they are not common. The sword-based brooches seemed to die out as the war went on, probably as

swords themselves became less popular.



Rifles – Leinster Regiment (an unbalanced design), Bedfordshire Regiment, Army Cyclist Corps and Northumberland Fusiliers.

Rifles were also a popular motif and are found more commonly than swords, and in a greater variety of designs. Unfortunately, with no real quality control, some of the rifle designs are dreadful and unbalanced.

That held true for all types of brooch during the war. As they became more widespread, they were made in cheaper materials. That in itself

wasn't a bad thing as it was good for morale to see people wearing them, and it made sense to make them available to all. Soldiers were paid a basic shilling a day in 1914 (with free rations, kit and lodgings) and they couldn't afford expensive brooches. The range of materials allowed them to be available to all, with prices to suit the budgets of Privates as well as Generals.

A 1915 advert in the Western Daily Press advertised sweethearts with the slogan “Every Lady who has a friend or relative serving in the army should wear one of these brooches.” in brass with white enamel fronts they were 1/6 each, post free, or 4/3 for three, a discount of a penny a badge. In Sterling Silver



Left: Brass and enamel badges – an economic choice. Right: These were the ones that sold for 1/6 each. Despite the talk of accuracy they have enamelled Britannia's shield, used an emaciated tiger and based the Northampton's brooch on a collar dog.

they were 2/6 each. The extra shilling must have been a major stumbling block at the time as they rarely crop up in silver. They were also available in 9 carat gold for 13/6. I have never seen one in gold. They are just referred to as brooches, in this advert, the only mention of “sweetheart” occurring in the list “Mothers, Wives and Sweethearts”.



Mother of Pearl discs – a popular choice. RE WW1, RASC WW2, RAOC Post 1953 – the disc is actually plastic – and WW1 pattern with silver rim – Inniskilling Fusiliers.

In 1918 a Buckinghamshire jeweller was offering badges by post for 1/6 in a “neat box”. They are of a poorer quality than the ones advertised in 1915 (rapid inflation having been one of our wartime problems) and are called “Regimental Badges as Brooches”, which are suitable for “mother, wife, sister and sweetheart”.

Brass brooches and those mounted on Mother of Pearl discs were very popular at the budget end of things. A popular series were badges on white enamel shields (as mentioned above), with tortoiseshell brooches also being popular. Many of them were hallmarked on the silver rim, which makes them easy to date. They were, of course, less popular with the turtles who actually provided the “tortoiseshell”. Some of them may actually be *faux tortoiseshell* as it is described by many sellers, as Celluloid was widely available from the middle of the 19th Century and was used for many things, including fake tortoiseshell.

The variety also extends to a vast range of units, many of them only raised for the war, including the Machine Gun Corps, Tank Corps and Cyclist Battalions.



Left: Two silver-mounted tortoiseshell brooches, dated 1916 and 1918 on reverse.

Right: Celluloid flag designs – brooch or fund-raiser, or both?

A set of celluloid brooches was made in the Great War in the form of pennants hanging from safety pin type fastenings. They are sometimes described as fund raising flags and, to be honest, I don't have evidence either way.



A Leicestershire Regiment button in a wreath – one of the type made by factories and described in the newspaper article. The officers' pip attached to a tie pin is neatly made but verges on trench art. The other two are hand cut from Mother of Pearl in the Middle East, probably WW1.

Brooches were made using buttons and badges, some were clearly made commercially, like the Worcestershire Yeomanry badge shown with a factory made sword and a button, others were equally obviously made by amateurs using bits and pieces they had purloined from uniforms, despite regulations to the contrary. These latter types fall into the category of trench art. A whole sphere of collecting is Mother-of-Pearl sweethearts – hand carved in the Middle East (sometimes marked “Bethlehem” on the back) and often true works of art. Unfortunately they aren't really wearable as the pins tend not to be firmly attached. Several dealers sell these with the warning that they should not be worn.

The Yorkshire Evening Post of Friday 26 March 1915 has an interesting article under the title “The Latest Thing in Brooches”. It reports that the jewellers of Leeds were doing a brisk trade in converting military buttons and insignia into brooches for the women of Leeds. These included, buttons, rank pips and cap badges.

The buttons of Belgian soldiers were prized as souvenirs, despite them only having a number on them. Patients of Beckett's Park Hospital (2nd Northern General Hospital) included many Belgians who were, it seems, happy to part with their buttons to lady visitors. It also reports that British buttons and badges were available from the manufacturers in Birmingham and London who were selling ready converted brooches in wholesale

amounts. As usual in wartime stories, it is the girlfriends who are referred to as “sweethearts” and not the brooches.



Left: Silver brooches – the two on the left are hollow silver with Great War period hallmarks. The two on the right are more typical of WW2 – coloured enamels, solid construction and marked “Sterling” or “Silver”.

Right: WW2 types – plastic, chromed dangle, field-service cap and ARP badge on upturned horseshoe, are all typical of WW2.

As hallmarked silver became less common as a material, it becomes increasingly difficult to date a lot of the later sweethearts. A knowledge of cap badges and changes to regimental titles come in useful here, as does the style of brooch. Chromed metal is generally an indicator of WW2 vintage, as is plastic, and anything worn as a dangle beneath a side cap.



Mizpah brooches are based on the religious brooch of the same name. The word “mizpah” is Hebrew for “watchtower” and civilian brooches usually feature the biblical verse “The Lord watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from one another.” They often have other motifs such as padlocks, anchors, flowers and ivy on them. Padlocks symbolise the bond between the couple, the flowers are forget-me-knots and the ivy signifies many things, including fidelity, everlasting love, and eternal life.

MIZPAH brooches. The silver one is dated surprisingly late – 1922. Most are around 1905 – or wartime. The Royal Signals and the RE brooches are both WW2.

Anchors are a widely seen motif in western religion and they represent loyalty, lasting relationships, stability, hope and salvation. What they do not signify, despite the insistence of eBay sellers, is that

it is a naval sweetheart brooch. It's possible they were given by nautical types, but as you may have noticed, it's also possible that sellers on eBay are not as accurate as they could be.

When searching for "Mizpah brooches" on eBay, be aware that from 1948 a company in Birmingham, A. Hill & Company Ltd., made brooches under the "Mizpah" and "Miracle" brand names. Some are decent brooches, some aren't (like the ones made from the feet of dead grouse). However, if you search for "Mizpah" on eBay resign yourself to a large number of useless results featuring brooches by "Mizpah" rather than actual Mizpah brooches.

In general, early Mizpah brooches were produced in hollow silver, with later ones being produced in stamped brass or (occasionally) silver. Checking the dates of my hollow silver Mizpah brooches I have a range from 1905 going through to 1925, though the majority are dated between 1914 and 1916, even though they look Victorian. Of the WW2 selection I have, eight of the 13 are definitely WW2 period and one is post 1952, as it has a Queen's Crown. I'm fairly sure that they are all WW2, despite eBay sellers often attributing them to the Great War. I refer you to my previous comments on this subject.



Post-war brooches can be high quality, as jewellers like Aspreys continue to make them for weddings and special gifts. At the budget end of the market quality has declined. Badges with military motifs can still be seen, and the Royal British Legion does a range of poppy brooches with military badges but the fashion seems to be moving to commemorative badges rather than gifts to sweethearts. One exception to this is the brooch given out to wives of the Queen's Royal Irish Hussars on the return of the regiment from the Gulf War.

Left: One of the brooches given out to partners of soldiers of the Queen's Royal Irish Hussars on their return from the Gulf War in 1991.