



# Dorset Buttony



# Countryside Crafts: Dorset Buttony

## Summary

It's hard to believe so much history can be wrapped around such a little button. Dorset buttons are unassuming thread covered buttons, created using simple embroidery stitches. Incredibly, the method used to make these buttons has remained unchanged for centuries.

These buttons are traditionally associated with the county of Dorset, hence the name. Abraham Case started the Dorset button industry, known as Buttony, in the seventeenth century. At the time, buttons were a status symbol and Case saw a gap in the market and began producing buttons.

The earliest buttons produced were High Tops and Dorset Knobs. These were made of discs of sheep's horn, which were covered with linen and worked over with fine stitches to form the distinctive cone.

About 1750, buttons woven on a wire ring, rather than the disc of horn, were introduced and quickly developed into many different styles. Blandford Cartwheels, Ten-Spoke Yarrels, Basket Weave Honeycomb Cross Wheel of Spiders Webs, Spangles, Birds Eye and Mites to name a few. These types of buttons are now better known than the original High Tops and Knobs.

Case's business grew quickly and by the early eighteenth century the Dorset buttony industry employed thousands of people. It was a popular source of income among the rural poor, a good Buttoner made between six and seven dozen buttons a day and could earn up to 3 shillings.

Unfortunately all this ended abruptly in 1851, when a button making machine was invented,

which made handmade buttons redundant. The industry collapsed and the thousands employed were suddenly penniless and on the brink of starvation. Three hundred and fifty families from Shaftesbury alone were forced to emigrate to America and Australia.

Luckily, the art of the buttoner did not completely die out. The technique has been passed from generation to generation of knitters and stitchers. Nowadays it is also recognized as part of the local heritage of Dorset and has its place in local museums, which run workshops to pass the buttony craft on to the next generation.

Part of the charm of this button is it is so easy to do. All you needed is a brass curtain ring, a long piece of thread and a needle. If you can do blanket stitch and back stitch, then you can make a Dorset button.

A quick look on the Internet shows the endless possible uses for this little button. I have seen amazing hairgrips, broaches, necklaces, Christmas tree decorations and they really are a special finishing touch to a hand knitted jumper. For me there is something immensely satisfying to know the method of making these buttons has been passed down through the generations since at least the early 1600's.





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## Case Study

### Rachel Clare Reynolds

Rachel is an artist and craftsperson, originally from Sussex, but now based in South East London. She has been a craftsperson for over twenty five years. Rachel started her creative life as a metal worker, has spent time as a maker of concrete furniture and more recently has returned to her childhood fascination with embroidery and textiles, focusing on traditional hand stitched techniques, predominantly British. Her decision to return to textiles is largely driven by a desire to emulate the highly skilled work created by traditional embroiderer's and a fascination with how, through traditional textile techniques, heritage and culture can be passed down from generation from generation. By making an item using a traditional technique, a craftsperson today is contributing to an unbroken chain, linking them directly with craft people from many centuries ago and crafts people of the future.

Rachel is fully committed to ensuring this chain remains unbroken, through teaching and writing about traditional craft techniques and textiles. She runs workshops for schools and adults and writes a blog about traditional regional crafts. Rachel also continues with her own textiles practice.



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## Activity Idea

Dorset button making can be a fiddly exercise. A traditional Crosswheel is not beyond the capabilities of Year Six pupils, but requires a high degree of one to one and undoing of knots. A full tutorial, with images, for a Dorset Crosswheel button can be found on my website [www.potterwrightandwebb.co.uk](http://www.potterwrightandwebb.co.uk). Here, I have created a simplified version, for younger pupils and larger groups.

### YOU WILL NEED

Wooden Curtain Rings

Double knit or 4 ply knitting cotton or string or wool in a variety of colours

Small rubber bands

Blunt ended, large eyed needle

Scissors

Cardboard inner tubes from toilet rolls (to make bobbins)

### TIME TO MAKE

1 Hour

### SUGGESTED SUPPLIERS

[www.argos.co.uk](http://www.argos.co.uk) -wooden curtain rings, or any DIY stores have these.

[www.merrick-day.com](http://www.merrick-day.com) -small brass curtain rings, or any sewing shop have these

[www.fredaldous.co.uk](http://www.fredaldous.co.uk) - large, metal craft rings. These are sometimes called Dream catcher rings and can also be found on [www.ebay.co.uk](http://www.ebay.co.uk)

Wool and yarn are best bought from educational supply companies.



### USEFUL WEBSITES

[www.henrysbuttons.co.uk](http://www.henrysbuttons.co.uk)

[www.rachelclare.co.uk](http://www.rachelclare.co.uk)

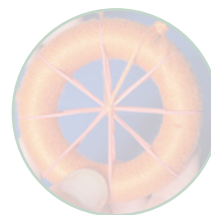
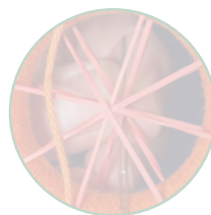
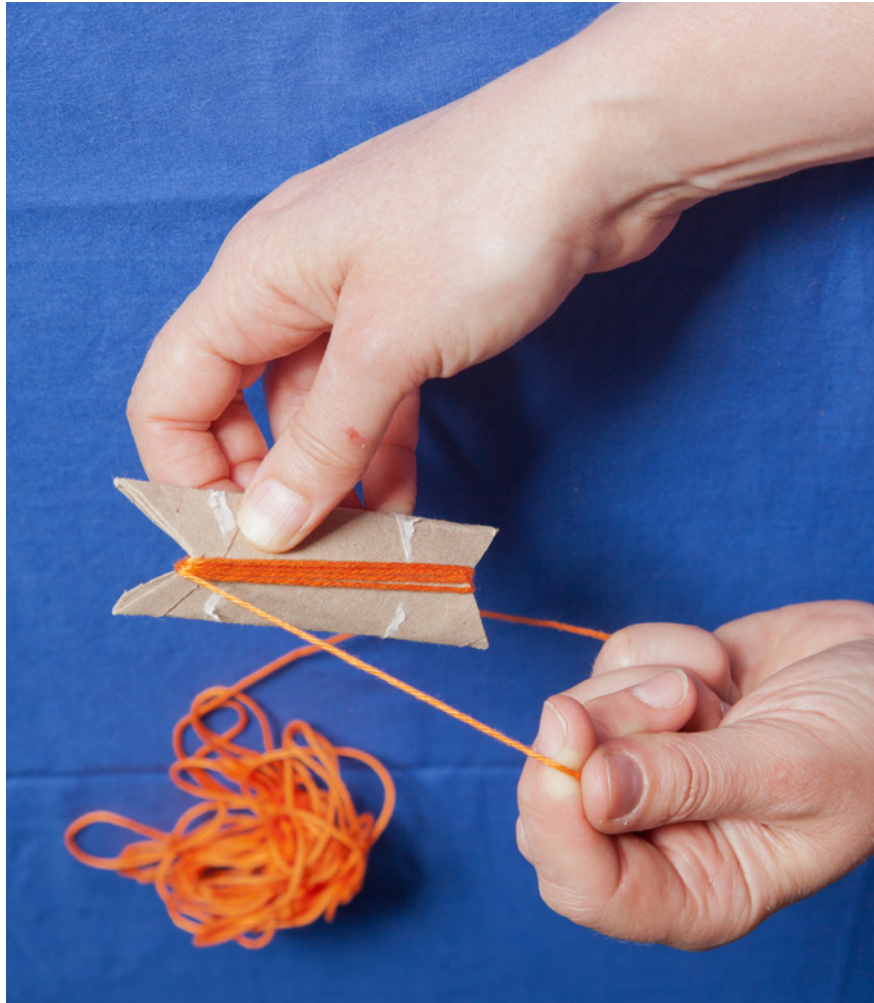
[www.potterwrightandwebb.co.uk](http://www.potterwrightandwebb.co.uk)

[www.dorsetbuttons.co.uk](http://www.dorsetbuttons.co.uk)

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## STEP 1

Cut a long (approx 5m) piece of thread. Wind this onto a small cardboard 'bobbin' as shown in illustration (This can be prewound if nec). Tie end of thread securely to base of the metal eyelet at the top of wooden ring.

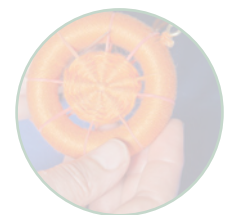
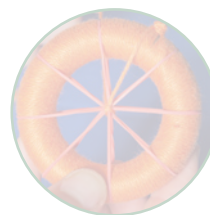
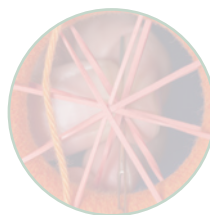




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## STEP 2

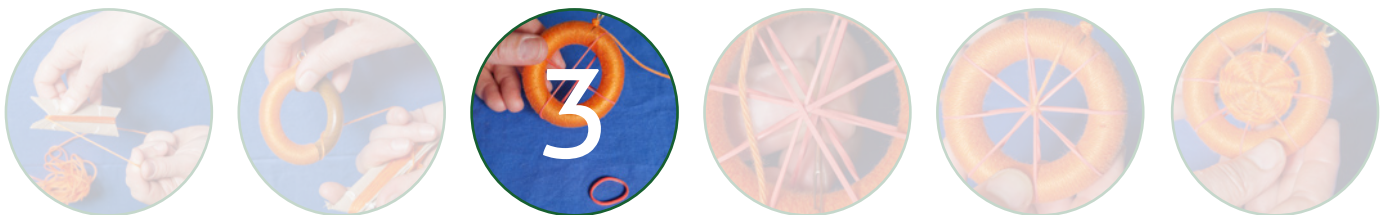
Bind the thread around the ring, passing the bobbin through the centre and then around the ring. This needs to be done over and over until the whole ring is covered with thread, using a bobbin means the thread will not get so tangled.



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## STEP 3

When all the wood is covered, secure thread to eyelet and cut.



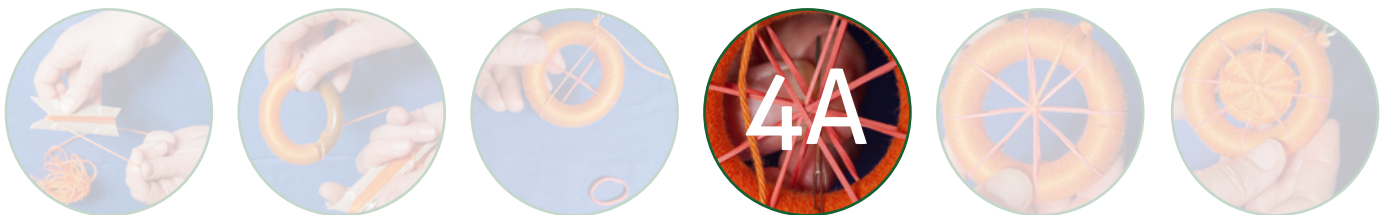
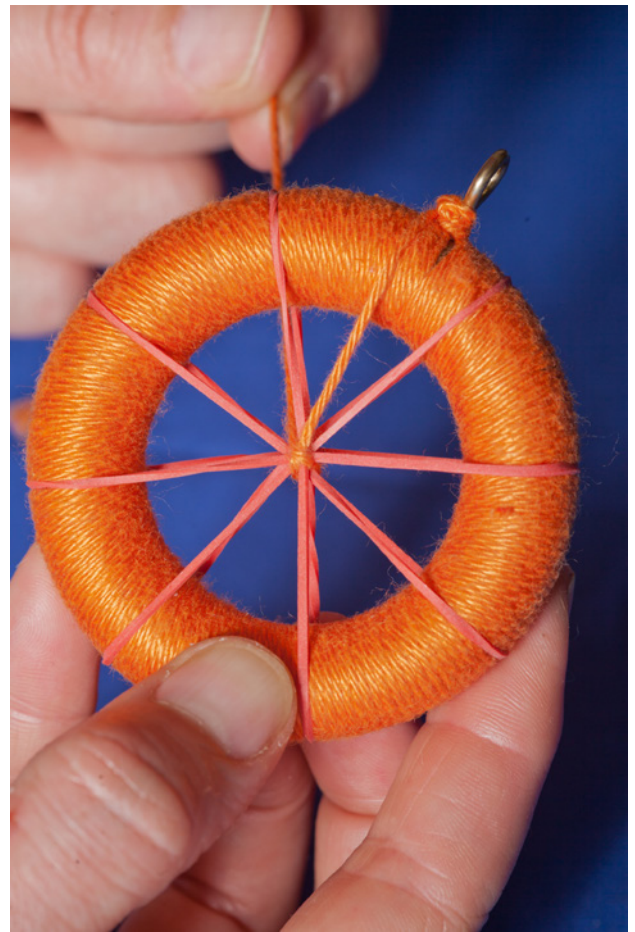
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Do one of the following; A is the simplest, B is for older children or small groups

## STEP 4 - A

A Stretch four rubber bands across the covered curtain ring. Dissecting it into 1/8th's so that they resemble the spokes of a bicycle wheel. Thread needle with contrasting colour (approx 50cm), secure to eyelet. Take thread to the centre of your bicycle wheel to create one more spoke. Make a stitch in the centre of your wheel to secure all your spokes (back and front) together. This extra spoke will mean you have an odd number of spokes.

or

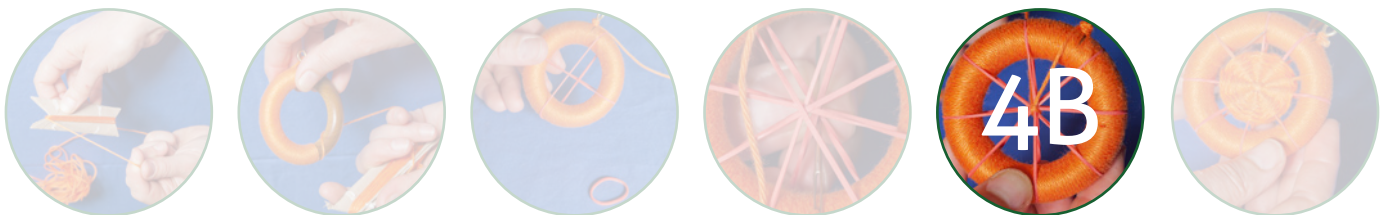




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## STEP 4 - B

Thread needle with contrasting colour, approx 50cm. Again tie end to eyelet. With your thread at the front of the ring, bring it down to the bottom and take round to the back of the ring and then up to the top. Dissecting the ring in half. Turn the ring and continue to wind over and over to create the spokes, like a bicycle wheel. The aim is to divide the ring into sections. Don't worry if the spokes look off centre at this stage. When you are back to the eyelet, make one last spoke that stops in the centre of the button and make a stitch in the middle of all the spokes, to stop them moving about. (full illustrations of this stage on website) This last spoke should mean you have an odd number of spokes.



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## STEP 5

Weave in and out of the spokes to fill in the button, because you have an odd number of spokes the weave will naturally form a basket weave, so that extra spoke is very important. The whole button can be infilled or left partly open. If you need more thread then take needle down through the weave. When finished secure thread by tying around one of the spokes, or take the needle down through the weave and hide amongst the spokes.

When hung altogether, these make an impressive display, or make great Christmas Tree decorations.

