

THE BUTTON-MAKING INDUSTRY IN BIRMINGHAM

This trade was even more confined than the “gun quarter”. There were 5700 button makers in 1861 throughout the Midlands, 5100 of whom were located in Birmingham. Metal buttons were for uniforms. There were amongst others gilt, pearl, ivory, linen, horn and hoof buttons as well as cheap iron ones. Very much dictated by fashion, horn and hoof were on their way out in the 1860s. About 20% were metal, 35% pearl.

Pearl came from the East Indies and the Pacific, but as the volumes were relatively small, the cost of transporting the raw materials was still small compared to labour costs in manufacture.

By the 1870s button making as an industry was already in decline because of foreign, particularly French, competition. There was also a shortage of pearl shell, maybe a case of overfishing, the book does not say.

In the 1880s the gentlemen’s fancy waistcoat had gone out of fashion and so the demand for pearl buttons diminished, but women’s buttons tended to be made on the continent, as were the Parisian dresses then in fashion. Half the output of pearl buttons used to be exported to the U.S.A. but tariffs were put in place to halt this.

Ref: “The Industrial Development of Birmingham and the Black Country 1860-1927” by G.C. Allen, Cass 1929.