Buttoning Down Archaeology

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Although there is plethora of material about historical clothing, very little is ever said of the button's used to fasten them. While buttons as collectibles are also well represented in the literature, the emphasis is on the exotic rather than the mundane, with little connection to the garments from which these 'treasures' were derived. This paper initially looks at the main button types likely to be encountered on Australian excavations, with an emphasis on those ordinary buttons which dominate the archaeological repertoire. Further discussion about buttons in the context of an urban environment focuses on eight houses from the CSR site at Pyrmont, excavated in 1996 by Casey & Lowe Associates. To develop our understanding about the 'use' of buttons the paper ends with a discussion about buttons within the context of clothing.

It is in the small things that are lost or misplaced that the details of everyday life may be found. Small artefacts from urban excavations relating to everyday and personal activities do not often form a major component of the percentage of artefacts recovered, or figure significantly in the final assessment of the results of the excavation. Buttons found on urban archaeological sites are one example of the small things that are often not considered as having high significance in the final analysis of the social context of a site. Although there is a substantial corpus of material relating to past fashions, and buttons as collectibles, there is little that relates directly to the majority of buttons found on urban archaeological sites. Fashion studies and collections tend to focus on the feminine elite and to either ignore or gloss over the variety of fastenings used over time, while button collectors emphasise the more exotic button types, specialising in buttons from England, Europe and America.[1] There is very little literature relating directly to buttons in Australia in either general terms or specifically as they appear on local archaeological sites. In 1987 Judy Birmingham published a brief introduction to buttons as artefacts, and since then very little has been published locally apart from student studies and site reports which are by their nature specific to the artefacts recovered.[2] The intent of this discussion is to provide a more general introduction to the main types of buttons that are likely to be found on urban sites, and whether they have the potential in giving an insight into another dimension of past lifestyles.

BACKGROUND

The saying 'clothes maketh the man' implies that a man's status is defined by his attire, thus it must follow that we should be able to recognise the social standing of women. Unfortunately the archaeological record rarely yields much in the way of clothing to assist in the identification of the roles played in society by either sex. What is found is the occasional button from which style and taste, and hence status may perhaps be extrapolated. Buttons appear as almost incidental, small, and usually quite ordinary artefacts. In the analysis of activities revealed by the artefacts from a site they are not usually regarded as having major significance in the identification of the character of past occupants. Assessment of the various button types found on urban sites is dependent on a diversity of sources ranging from books and articles written by and for button collectors, site reports, and an occasional article in archaeological journals.

Clothes form the important social functions of modesty and protecting the body from the elements, as well as indicating the social status of an individual. From the beginnings of the European settlement of Australia clothing was an important issue for the colony. The First Fleeters consisted of 212 military personnel, of whom 210 were volunteers overseeing 565 male and 192 female convicts with 18 children.[3] Despite the myth of an egalitarian social foundation, from the beginning Australia's European population emulated the British hierarchical three-tier rank system with the colonial Governor Phillip and his officers at the apex, the military as the middle rank and the convicts at the base. Even before landfall, clothing, or the lack of it, had become an issue which continued into the nineteenth century. Maynard discusses in some detail the privations caused due to the lack of adequate clothing for the military as well as the male and female convicts.[4] Despite this scarcity Elliott has argued that, based on the Account Books of a number of early Sydney merchants, even convicts aspired to sharp dressing wherever possible.[5] Buttons are listed as one of the commodities imported into Sydney and supplied by local merchants, but do not form part of Elliott's discussion.[6] It would seem that there was an interest in self presentation from the earliest days of the colony, with clothing being bartered and apparently used as a form of payment for employment, including prostitution.[7]

The fashions worn during the nineteenth century were dictated by the prevailing European styles and their availability, from the loosely revealing Empire style at the beginning of the century, to the restrictions of the crinoline and bustle for women in the second half. Maynard emphasises a distinctive style derived from the fashion dictates of Paris combined with what appears to have been local preferences or adaptations to create an idiosyncratic style.[8] What made the colonial style different from the dictates of European fashion was a preference for brighter colours and variations in hem length. White was worn in response to the local warmer climate as well as being used as a signifier of status due to the problems of maintaining its cleanliness, which also restricted undue activity by women.[9] Textiles were also by necessity of a lighter weight, which no doubt contributed to the wider use of bright colours from the mid century when saturated colours were the vogue and especially with the introduction of chemical dyes in the 1860s.[10] Although more subtle colours were favoured from about 1870, scarlet day petticoats were the rage under crinolines.[11] Contemporary literature of the day indicates a convergence of style among the classes with society ladies decrying the habit of ordinary people dressing in a style above their station.[12] Whether the working classes did in fact earn such high wages that they could compete with the upper classes in their appearance is dubious though it would seem that aspirations to gentility motivated imitation, albeit in the form of a poorer tailoring and fabric. The extremes of fashion could be found in the contrast between Melbourne society which conformed more closely to the European mode, and the almost theatrical attire of the Sydney larrikins and their female associates. Thus an apparent, though not necessarily real, egalitarianism in dress was one area that distinguished Australian style from the European.

Collections of historical costumes tend to concentrate on the ensembles worn by members of the upper classes with matching fabrics and buttons or, as in the collections of some museums, a complete absence of buttons which have been replaced with zips and velcro. It is in collections such as the

Sydney-based *The Cavalcade of History and Fashion Inc.* which holds exhibitions on a regular basis, that more mundane buttons can be seen in context. Examination of the underclothing and ordinary shirts in the collection reveals that there has been some mixing of buttons of different fabrics on a single garment. Similar evidence is beginning to be revealed from cemetery excavations such as the Spitalfields Project in London where at least one male was interred in a shirt fastened with alternating Cartwheel and mother-of-pearl buttons.[13] It is expected that the publication of other cemetery excavations will reveal more details concerning everyday attire and button use to further enhance our knowledge.

SOME ORDINARY BUTTONS

Ordinary buttons form the greater percentage in this class of artefact assemblage from archaeological sites. In the days before zippers (patented in the United States of America in 1893, but not widely used until after World War II), buttons were the primary form of fastening for clothes so they needed to be plentiful and generally hard wearing. Although from the second quarter of the seventeenth century hooks-and-eyes were also an important fastening for a wide variety of clothes, they do not form a part of this discussion.[14]

There are almost as many button types as there are items of clothing that may be worn. Shirts, trousers, dresses, waistcoats, overcoats, as well as underclothing, have been provided with a wide variety of buttons. They come in various sizes which are measured in 'lines', a term derived from the French *lignes* of 40 'lines' to 1 inch (25 mm). Small buttons for underclothing, shirts and waistcoats range in size from 14-24 lines (8-15 mm), while the medium 26-34 lines (16-21 mm) fasten coats, jackets, pyjamas and trousers.[15] There are a variety of terminologies employed to describe various buttons and their functions, though there are only two broadly defined types of attachment which are also descriptive of the button type. A sew-through is a utilitarian button usually with two or four holes, though three- and five-holed types do occur, and they can be made of any material or combination of materials. The other form of attachment is a shank, usually a metal loop which can be soldered onto a metal disc, fitted into the back of a two-piece metal button. Metal loop shanks also appear on buttons of glass, mother-of-pearl, and bone.

The earliest button types that are likely to be encountered on Australian archaeological sites are bone sew-throughs or button blanks, pinshanked buttons of bone or mother-of-pearl, or metal rings (Fig. 1). The earliest bone buttons, possibly pre-dating the 1700s, had a single hole for either a pinshank, or for use as a blank (base) to a thread or fabric-covered button known as Dorsets or Cartwheels. Copper alloy rings were also used as a base for Dorset buttons which had gone out of fashion by 1830.[16] Such buttons are not, as far as I know, recovered with cloth or thread coverings though the bone blanks and the copper alloy rings are commonly found. Alternatively the rings may be all that remains of 'three-fold linen' buttons which were patented in 1841 by John Aston and consisted of a metal ring encased in linen.[17] The 'three-fold linen' button superseded the Dorset buttons and was apparently more hard wearing than mother-of-pearl buttons because it could 'withstand the mangle'.[18] However mother-of-pearl buttons tend to be more frequent in archaeological contexts than metal rings. The earliest bone buttons, other than button blanks are either the single holed pinshank types or five-hole sew-throughs. The pinshank type date to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and can also come in mother-of-pearl. They are thicker than the blanks, and are sometimes decorated with etched or cut decoration, or insets of other materials with a loop shank of copper alloy terminating in a pin-head. The sew-throughs are also cut from animal bone or horn and usually have five holes, though three- and four-holed types do occur, and date to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The central hole serves to hold the button in place while the other holes are drilled.

Two- or four-holed sew-through buttons made of bone, mother-of-pearl, or porcelain with a diameter of 10-12 mm (16-18 lines) are common and functionally interchangeable. They can be used as closures for shirts, though the smaller examples are more commonly used on underwear or pillowcases and are also known to be used together on the same garment. The earliest known use of mother-of-pearl buttons is as 'three small pearl buttons' fastening an undershirt belonging to King George IV, dated 1827.[19] The term mother-of-pearl is used in a generic way to describe all buttons made of shell which were initially hand-made and then mechanically mass-produced from about the mid nineteenth century.[20] Despite surprisingly high survival rates, the eroded nature of examples from excavations often precludes certainty of manufacture, and thus chronology. The earliest form is the single holed pinshank type (see above), though the commonest form is the two or four-holed sew-through with either a

Fig 1:
Right column from top: Bone pin shanked with split pin (face and back); 'Golden Age' jacket (face and profile); two-piece dome with separate shank with fouled anchor on azure ground (face and profile).
Left column from top: 'Gaiter' with metal loop shank (face and back); 'birdcage' (face and back); 'piecrust' and 'hobnail' sew-throughs (face only); face only of 'Ne Plus Ultra' 'trouser'.
(Drawing by the author.)
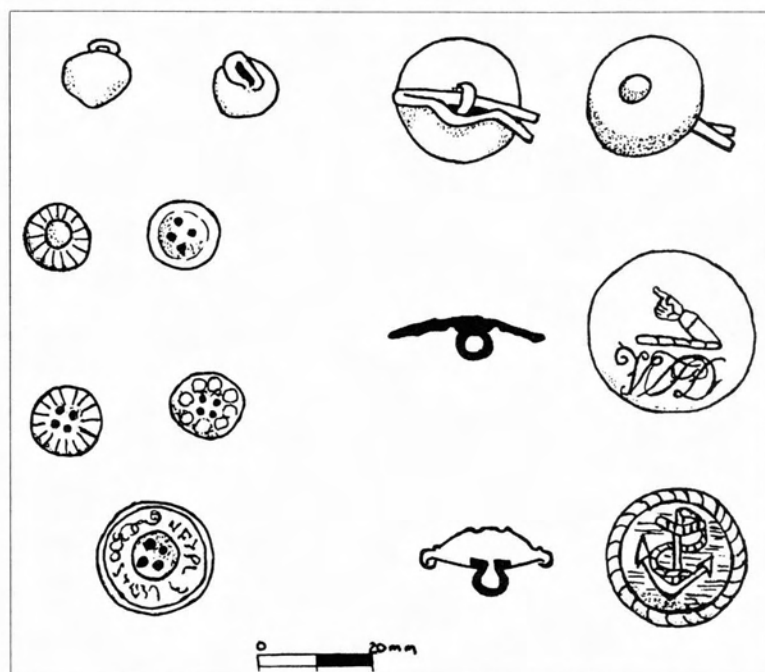
circular, or lozenge shaped fish-eye. The sew-throughs are occasionally decorated with an etched scalloping to the edge, a radiating star or asterisk pattern, as well as the more common 'piecrust' or 'hobnail' patterns shared with porcelain buttons of similar size. Not only do the mother-of-pearl and porcelain buttons share decoration in common, they are frequently found in close proximity on sites and, as seen on the underclothing in the exhibition *Cavalcade of History and Fashion Inc.* (Don Bank Museum, North Sydney November 1997) they can be used together on the same garment. It should also be remembered that as buttons tend to outlast garments they are often retained to provide a ready supply of replacement buttons.

Porcelain two-, three-, and four-holed sew-through buttons known as 'small chinas' are often mistaken for glass, which they closely resemble, over which they have the advantage of not cutting the cotton thread as they do not have sharp edges.[21] They were made during the 1830s using a wet porcelain paste until 1840 when the Englishman Richard Prosser introduced the method of compacting a dry porcelain paste into moulds, making them much cheaper, and thus more numerous. A French version of these buttons, *Bapterosses,* were made using paste moistened with milk.[22] There is quite an extraordinary variety in the 'small china' range, the commonest being the plain white sew-throughs, the 'piecrust' with impressed rays around the rim, and the encircling impressed dots of the 'hobnail' type. The less common, though not unknown from local excavations, are the plain 'small chinas' 'calicoes' and 'ginghams' with colourful transfer-printed patterns. The rarer forms are the 'whistle', 'birdcage' and 'gaiter' forms. 'Whistle' buttons occur in other fabrics including mother-of-pearl and have a single hole on the face which divides to form two holes on the back, and is often hollow. The 'birdcage' button has the appearance of a 'piecrust' with a dark coloured 'pearl' in the centre, and a four-way cage-like self shank. 'Gaiters' usually have a bullseye painted on a solid dome with a copper alloy loop shank and plate.[23] According to Luscomb the term 'gaiter' may be a misnomer as they have been found on women's and children's dresses as well as men's waistcoats.[24] This illustrates a problem in the identification of a button's function. Although the more delicate and ornate buttons may be assumed to have come from feminine garments, they frequently belonged to an item of male attire, particularly a waistcoat. In fact men were the primary market for buttons of all types, the gaudier the better. This demonstrates some of the problems involved in the identification of sex and/or age of the wearer from the buttons. This is further compounded by the popular white porcelain studs for ladies shirtwaists (1890-1930), of which many are found on sites without the more usual painted decoration.[25] Shirt studs are usually assumed to be exclusively a masculine accessory.

Small bone buttons were also often used as closures on underclothing, while the larger examples appear to have been largely used as closures for shirts and trousers. Young discusses a pair of side-buttoning convict trousers in the Western Australian Museum which have 'eight bone buttons' from 'waistband to hem' to facilitate the wearing of leg fetters, though does not mention the buttons used on the fly front of the same trousers, nor the fastenings of the other four items of clothing.[26] However a 'convict man's blue striped cotton working shirt with bone buttons', now in the Hyde Park Barracks collection helps to complete an image of the fastenings on early convict clothing.[27] There are two processes involved in the making of bone buttons. Those made in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century are cut directly from the animal bone or horn, but in 1832 T. W. Ingram patented a horn button press which he improved in 1837 with a die for producing patterns on the buttons.[28] The bone or horn was prepared to be press molded by being boiled down to a slurry,

often with a dye added. Thus although both button types are made of bone, they are differentiated by the terms 'bone' button, and 'pressed horn' button. The preferred colours for the processed buttons were black and red, with the result that many buttons assumed to be synthetic may be dyed pressed horn. Pressed horn buttons appear to have superseded plain bone buttons during the nineteenth century, though more ornate carved and inlaid bone buttons were made from 1850.[29]

In Britain a two- or four-holed sew-through button is described as a 'trouser' button, and a 'suspender' button in America, and were used to fasten work shirts and trousers in much the same way as bone buttons. These plain buttons are cut from a sheet of metal and are either concave, or have a depressed circular or ovoid eye, sometimes surrounded by rouletted dots. The majority of these buttons are made of a single sheet of copper alloy, though iron examples are known. There are also some with an iron base and copper alloy face. Due to the mundane nature of the 'trouser' buttons it is difficult to find a date for their initial appearance. In 1995 I suggested that their appearance related to the introduction of the fly front fastening trousers in c.1823.[30] However as braces (the American suspenders) had been introduced in 1787, this may prove to be a more likely inception date.[31] They also often bear generic slogans, or the name and address of a tailor, or haberdasher such as 'Our Own Make', 'Best Ring Edge', 'Excelsior' etc which should provide some chronological data.

Jackets and coats were usually provided with buttons which exhibit a chronological progression from a flat or convex type with a wire loop shank soldered onto the back, to the press-molded two-piece dome type with separate metal shank; a military type uniform button. Rather than being stitched onto the coat or jacket, these buttons were attached by a split pin, facilitating removal for cleaning, or a change of season. However, as a convict magpie jacket in the collection of the State Library of New South Wales with six japanned 'trouser' buttons (one at each cuff) dated c.1840 demonstrates, there were no functional absolutes. This is also illustrated by another not uncommon 'trouser' button inscribed 'Ne Plus Ultra', which was used at the hip joint of a kid bodied doll made in Germany and France from the 1880s until the 1920s.[32] The popularity of generic and specific inscriptions on the 'trouser' buttons may have been inspired by inscriptions on the 'Golden Age' jacket buttons which were, as the name implies, gilded, handsomely decorated, and popular between 1830-1850. Inscribed slogans on the back of these buttons such as 'Double Gilt', 'Triple Gilt', 'Rich Colour' etc., indicated the superior quality of manufacture, and colour of the button. That these generic inscriptions on Golden Age buttons were the inspiration for the appearance of similar slogans ('Best Ring Edge' etc.), and makers marks on 'trouser' buttons seems probable, and would also support Iacono's assertion that they were 'manufactured in abundance from the mid 1850s onward'.[33]

A decline in quality and the ultimate disappearance of Golden Age buttons by the mid century, is paralleled by a rise in popularity of fabric-covered buttons which are represented by two types that are recovered from sites.[34] One of these is a two-piece dome-shaped shell made of iron with what appears to be a fine thread woven across the top, and a hole in the base for the shank which is always absent when found in the field. It is quite possible that the shank used on these buttons was a flexible canvas loop riveted into the iron shell, patented by B. Sanders Jnr of Birmingham in 1825. Although the rusting from the iron precludes identification of colours or design, these buttons are similar to those covered in fine textiles often seen on good quality garments.[35] By the 1880s haberdashers were covering buttons 'in house' using hand machines developed for this purpose.[36] This may explain the appearance of the second type of fabric-covered button. This is a more mundane

Fig. 2: Plan of Sydney City with the location of the CSR site in Pyrmont. (Drawing by Tony Lowe.)

utilitarian two-piece, two-hole sew-through which was covered in cotton or linen to match articles of clothing. Made of copper alloy, it is rarely found intact, though the recovered face often bears the impression of fabric, or has remnant fabric adhering.

CASE STUDY

In the archaeological urban environment we are presented with a scatter of lost items which can at times be quite substantial. Beaudry et al. express some surprise at the variety and quantities of artefacts left by Mill workers who appeared to be not only aspiring to the middle-class ideal, but to be expressing themselves as individuals.[37] Similar quantities and varieties of possessions are also characteristic of contemporary populations of similar circumstances in Sydney, so confirming similar aspirations to middle-class gentility and individuality. Where Beaudry et al. may find surprise in variety, Karskens sees this as a reflection of cultural diversity and proximity to a major sea route, so that the appearance of even exotic artefacts is not considered to be surprising.[38]

On the rare occasions that a large number of buttons are recovered from an archaeological site they tend to be dispersed across a wide area with very few that could be described as matching sets. The only way that sets may be defined, with the potential to link to a specific item of clothing, is when more than two or three matching buttons are recovered adjacent to one another. The Harvey Street Precinct of the CSR site at Pyrmont, excavated by Casey & Lowe Associates in 1996, is one of the few urban sites in Sydney to yield a substantial number of buttons. From the four separate areas of the site came nearly two thousand buttons, a quantity rarely found on domestic sites in the Sydney region making it an ideal resource for the analysis of button use. As with the majority of urban sites in and around Sydney, the largest classes of buttons are more utilitarian and thus less likely to feature in button studies.

The CSR Site, Pyrmont

The Harvey Street Precinct of the CSR site was composed of four residential areas of which areas A, and C yielded an almost unprecedented quantity of personal items (Fig. 2). The four houses in Area A numbers 15, 17, 19 and 21 New Street may have been built by the head lessee William Smith, of which No. 15 was built by 1865, while the other three were built after this date, but prior to 1870. The houses were all brick, had two

storeys of which No. 15 had four rooms, the others only three. Area C is also composed of four houses on the western side of Alfred Street (earlier known as McCredie Street), numbers 1, 3, 5, and 7 were all built by 1865, of which No. 7 was brick, the others being stone and probably built by Robert McCready (McCredie), stonemason. Numbers 1, 3 and 5 were each two storeyed with three rooms, while number 7, which also had two storeys, had five rooms. The houses in both New and Alfred Streets were acquired by CSR in 1914. The residents belonged to the social groups that are today described as lower middle, and working class. Over 600 buttons were recovered from the houses in each of the two areas, a total of 1335, from underfloor deposits which were excavated within a 50 cm square grid, in spits of 5 cm in depth to provide the potential to determine any chronological sequence in the deposition.[39]

The Buttons

Tables 1 and 2 list the quantities and types of buttons recovered from the underfloor deposit in the Front room and Kitchen in each of the houses in Area A, and Area C, and the Back room of the larger house at Number 1 Alfred Street in Area C. Thus a total of 17 rooms from eight houses are surveyed. The 'Brass' column incorporates all one-, and two-piece dome jacket buttons including those with iron base, and the more numerous two-piece fabric-covered sew-throughs. The 'Iron' column is exclusively composed of the fabric-covered iron shell buttons. Buttons which were too eroded or fragmentary for certain identification are not included, nor are shirt studs, solitaires, or hooks and eyes. The general pattern of distribution shows high concentrations of buttons localised to the kitchens. The higher incidence of deposition indicates the probability that the kitchen, as a centre of household activity, functioned as workroom for the repair of clothing, as well as presumed casual loss. The variation to this at Number 1 Alfred Street (Table 2), is the five roomed house built and occupied by Robert McCredie. Despite having three rooms, front, back and kitchen, the number of buttons throughout these three rooms is considerably lower than in any of the other houses, suggesting perhaps that the floors were tongue-and-groove rather than butt-jointed, or had floor coverings.

Small plain sew-throughs dominate the repertoire of buttons recovered, particularly the mother-of-pearl, copper alloy fabric-covered, and bone, no doubt relating to underclothing, shirts, pillow cases, and children's clothing. Only four medium to large (16-26 mm) bone button blanks were recovered from the upper spits of the kitchens of house 15 in Area A, and house 5 Area C. Other variations to the small, and occasional medium plain bone sew-throughs are a single delicately carved floral, and a pinshanked button both from Area C. Although the mother-of-pearl buttons are also dominated by the standard small sew-throughs used on underclothing, shirts or pillow cases, the occasional medium sew-through, and the even rarer self-shanked, and examples with expansion plate and loop shank are present. As with the solitary bone pinshanked button, there is also only one pinshanked mother-of-pearl button which are of little chronological significance as they were both recovered from the upper layer of the deposit.

As with the mother-of-pearl and bone, the majority of the porcelain buttons are also small, plain two- and four-hole sew-throughs, with very few 'piecrust' or 'hobnail' types, and no 'birdcage', 'calicoe', nor 'gingham' types. A variation on this pattern comes from house 15 Area A where a number of very small (6-7 mm) three-hole buttons were recovered, among which come four 'piecrust' buttons including a black and a grey. These buttons, along with an equally small 'trouser' button inscribed 'A. Hessl, Wien' and two two-piece copper alloy dome buttons from the same deposit, are the only buttons of such a small size found on the site. Due to the small size they

could relate to clothing for a child/infant or a doll. A number of marbles and the occasional lead soldier, as well as three small porcelain shoulder/doll's house type doll's heads, two dated 1890-1910, and other unrelated porcelain doll's legs and toy tea-set pieces, are the extent of children's playthings. The only other indication of children or toys among the buttons are a solitary 'trouser' type doll's hip joint button inscribed 'Ne Plus Ultra' (1880s-1920s) from house 7, Area C, also associated with a few unrelated toys. The small two-piece dome buttons could perhaps be from a pair of gloves, while the tiny 'trouser' could be a tailor's sample. Small buttons of almost any type are not only used on underclothing, but also on children's clothing, thus the high number of mother-of-pearls no doubt include some from children's attire. Other buttons of uncertain attribution are a small single four-way self shanked plain white ball from house 17, Area A, and a 'gaiter' button from houses in Area C, but they do not have the usual, distinctive painted bullseye. If these 'gaiter' buttons had never been painted with a bullseye, then perhaps they were intended for more simple, or plainer clothing for a woman or child, rather than the fancier masculine garments (see above).

From the eighteenth-century glass buttons had been mounted on metal frames until the development of press molding and the insertion of a metal back plate with loop shank in the 1870s. By 1875 the technique of press molding had been perfected to such a degree that the result appeared to be cut with no further work required.[40] There were a number of glass

buttons recovered from the two areas under discussion of which the vast majority were black, and despite the quantity there are no distinguishable matching sets, apart from the odd pair. All categories, with sew-throughs, self- and metal-shanked examples in small, medium and large sizes are represented (Fig.3). The style and quality indicate that the glass buttons would have been used to fasten better quality clothing as indicated by a number of buttons which are of interest. From houses 3, 5, and 7 in Area C come a few small ball buttons with metal back plates and loop shanks, one is white, one clear, the others are black but all have a marbling decoration which includes gold mica swirls. These are paralleled by black beads of similar design from the same houses which would lead one to assume that the buttons relate to female attire. However these buttons, manufactured by a method called lampworking, belong to a man's vest, or waistcoat and were popular from the late nineteenth century.[41] It is possible that some of the smaller facetted black glass buttons are also 'Fancy Vest' buttons, rather than dress fastenings. The apparent lack of buttons specifically related to mourning, or the fashion for wearing black in the latter part of the nineteenth century may merely reflect a fashion choice for fabric-covered buttons which are well represented in the iron shell buttons.

Following the death in 1861 of Albert, the Prince Consort, Queen Victoria went into deep mourning with the result that black clothing, buttons and jewellery apparently became the height of fashion.[42] As McCall has pointed out, based on her

Table 1: Buttons in CSR site, AREA A, House Nos 15, 17, 19, 21 New Street, Pyrmont.

Context	MoP	Porc	Bone	Glass	Brass	Iron	Trser	Total
House 15								
Front Room	3	0	0	1	1	1	7	13
Kitchen	98	40	11	37	47	70	67	370
House 17								
Front Room	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Kitchen	30	6	2	5	9	3	16	71
House 19								
Front Room	6	1	0	1	1	1	1	11
Kitchen	47	16	4	13	13	5	20	118
House 21								
Front Room	2	0	2	1	0	0	1	6
Kitchen	25	6	2	3	10	3	12	61
Total	212	69	21	61	81	83	125	652

Table 2: Buttons in CSR site, AREA C, House Nos 1, 3, 5, 7 Alfred Street, Pyrmont.

Context	MoP	Porc	Bone	Glass	Brass	Iron	Trser	Total
House 1								
Front Room	12	1	3	2	1	1	4	24
Back Room	4	0	0	0	5	0	5	14
Kitchen	20	3	0	0	2	5	5	35
House 3								
Front Room	19	9	1	12	15	3	15	74
Kitchen	12	35	14	26	27	14	47	175
House 5								
Front Room	27	10	3	17	9	4	25	95
Kitchen	24	18	9	11	14	5	20	101
House 7								
Front Room	2	1	0	0	1	1	0	5
Kitchen	34	21	10	11	30	11	43	160
Total	154	98	40	79	104	44	164	683

analysis of beads from the CSR site, there may be a divergence between the actuality and the assumed practice.[43] Jargstorf notes that until the 1870s most of the glass buttons made in the major glass producing centre of Gablonz, were black, and that there were quite distinct periods, or seasons of preference in styles of glass buttons. From the 1860s these peak seasons were 1865-67, 1870-74, 1878-86, and 1894-95. At the same time large black, faceted beads were preferred around 1850, but by 1870 these had been superseded by large melon-ribbed beads with silver lining, with not a single black bead being produced. In fact from 1880 until 1897 these metal-lined beads were all the rage.[44] Perhaps the production of silver-lined beads was in response to attempts at relaxing the depth of mourning required by society toward the end of the nineteenth century. The acceptability of silver jewellery at the end of the period of 'deep' mourning, as illustrated in Russell's example of a black dress trimmed with silver worn for a first public appearance at a dancing assembly, cannot be denied.[45] Although there are no identifiable silver-lined beads, nor discernible sets among the black glass buttons from the houses under discussion, numbers indicate that the buttons recovered were used to fasten more than a single, fashionable garment.

The domination of buttons related to ordinary work wear is indicated by the quantity of 'trouser' buttons, of which a number bear generic inscriptions such as 'Suspender', 'Excelsior', or 'Best Ring Edge', while others bear the name of a retailer or tailor. Unfortunately there are insufficient numbers in any one or more spits within a single room to offer any chronological progression. Among the known Sydney merchants represented are 'Farmer & Company' (1870-), 'R. C. Hagon' (1882-1905), also 'Hagon Bros.' (1886-1914+), 'Jeffreys & Golding' (1883-1890) and 'Thomson Gates & Co.' (1886-1902). These buttons are representative of the general chronological range, as are the earliest buttons of this type 'Mannix Bros. 109 King St.' (1864-1879) 'Holle Sydney' (1861-1914+), thus indicating a date range consistent with the period of occupation of the houses from the later 1860s. Among the two-piece dome jacket buttons occupations of some of the residents are suggested. Uniform buttons of the New South Wales Military Forces were found in houses 15, 17 and 19 of Area A, and house 7, Area C, while from house 5 came a New South Wales Tramways uniform button. Of these buttons the Tramways button can date no earlier than 1879 when steam trams were first introduced for the International Exhibition, while the King's Crown on the face should place it early this century during the reign of Edward VII. Two of the New South Wales Military Forces (1871-1901) buttons bear the marks of local tailors: 'C. Anderson' of Sydney (1885-1907) and 'Price & Co. Sydney' (1871-1914+). A number of the two-piece dome uniform buttons bearing a fouled anchor on azure ground from houses 15 and 19 in Area A, with even more from houses 3, and 5, and a couple from house 7 in Area C, with or without crown, may indicate naval occupations. Also from house 15 were recovered three of the split pins used to attach the jacket buttons to a coat.

The suggestion that the localisation of a high incidence of buttons to the kitchens is the result of either casual loss or repair, is supported by relatively high numbers of associated dressmaker pins and the occasional thimble. The distribution pattern of buttons and sewing utensils in the kitchens shows a clustering in the vicinity of the hearth indicating that this was the location of sewing and clothing repairs in the evening. However this pattern is not followed in the kitchen of house 15 Area A, where a much higher number of buttons and sewing implements were concentrated in the region of the door leading to the rear yard, suggesting that the woman of the house was a seamstress working by the back door during the day.[46] This is also the only room where buttons were recovered in numbers greater than one or two within any one half metre square. The distribution of thimbles raises other questions related to room function. Of 20 thimbles recovered from the two areas, five came from the back room of house 1, and an English silver thimble was recovered from the front room of house 21. This may indicate that although the kitchen may have been the location of more casual repairs, the parlour, or front room was reserved for the more ladylike pastime of embroidery or intricate needlework.

DISCUSSION

The period of occupation of the eight houses in Areas A and C at the CSR site from the second half of the nineteenth century and into the second quarter of the twentieth century by a population of semi-permanent mainly working-class tenants is represented by a quantity of artefacts which were recovered in the underfloor deposits of their homes. In general terms the buttons recovered exhibit the characteristics of a standard working-class wardrobe with the emphasis on ordinary buttons for underclothing, work shirts, trousers and jackets. The presence of children is also perhaps indicated in the plain and ordinary buttons, and the few very small buttons. However the

Fig. 3: Top: two lampworked black glass beads with gold mica trails and coloured paste dots.
Glass buttons clockwise from top centre: clear moulded floral 'fancy' vest; large black faceted; black with added 'silver' geometric; small faceted black 'fancy' vest; large black with moulded 'etched' floral and foliate decoration.
Centre: cream lampworked 'fancy' vest with gold mica and white trailings.
(Photograph by the author.)

55

very ordinariness of the buttons hampers definition of the sex or status of the wearer. Certainly the 'trouser' and jacket type buttons relate to the working man's attire, but the small mother-of-pearl and porcelain buttons were used on the underclothing and shirts worn by men, women and children from all social groups.

Beaudry *et al.* state that working women emulated their betters by making deliberate choices when buying and wearing less costly imitations of current fashions.[47] This is supported locally by the evidence provided by Russell of a digger's wife deemed to be overdressed in the Botanic Gardens, and of servants wearing such large crinolines that the process of making up the fire could be fatal.[48] The sources for information concerning the dress of the working class is via members of the upper and middle classes who are subject to a particular bias, such as the description of women in the Rocks as 'slovenly' and wearing dirty clothes.[49] Many female occupations in Britain required dress modifications. Shrimp catchers, bait girls, and mine workers hitched their skirts up, or wore 'mini' skirts and trousers, while shorter skirts were in general use for a variety of occupations.[50] There is no information about the possible transmission styles of work dress to the colony, though shorter skirts seem to have been rather flamboyantly adopted by the associates of larrikins.[51] Working men's clothing is described by Maynard as continuing essentially unchanged from the heavy duty slop trousers and shirts worn in the early days of the settlement.[52] This description would not appear to encompass uniformed workers such as tram workers or the military, and nowhere are the buttons used to fasten these various clothes described other than the aforementioned bone buttons for convict men's trousers and shirts. As mentioned earlier, men were the primary target for the button market, whereas clothing worn by women was often tied, laced or fastened with hooks and eyes rather than buttoned. Thus despite an absence of buttons which can be described as functioning specifically to fasten women's work clothing, this should not be perceived as indicating an absence of such clothing, nor a lack of interest in the presentation of sexual identity.

As far as I know there have been no studies on the use of fancy buttons by the working class, though Jargstorf's description of buttons as 'the costume jewellery of the 19th century' is perhaps suggestive.[53] Although there are in fact too few fancy buttons to describe more than the occasional item of clothing, there are a sufficient number to suggest that the inhabitants also aspired to the ideal of middle-class gentility, as did Karskens' women of the Rocks.[54] It is not just the women who are emulating current fashions, men too had the same desires as we can see by their gem-like waistcoat buttons as well as the occasional ornate shirt stud and solitaire. Bohemian glass buttons and beads were manufactured and supplied in large quantities, and at low costs so making them accessible to all members of the community as the ideal accessory to brighten up a dress or waistcoat.[55] Thus we are presented with a population with the ability to fulfill the aspirations of apparent gentility, so much so that outsiders could be confused by the messages presented and assume the Australian community to be egalitarian.[56] It seems therefore, that the 'convict dandy's' interest in dress and appearance has persevered to the present, contributing to the myth of Australia as an egalitarian society.

This paper developed as a result of the dearth of practical information available to archaeologists about buttons as a class of artefact from the archaeological excavation of urban sites. Buttons can add another dimension to the overall image of society by providing information on aspects of style and taste. The issue of social status can be confused by the dominance in the repertoire of ordinary buttons which may be assumed to relate specifically to the working-class man. That aspirations to gentility may be perceived in the presence of the occasional 'gem-like' button is also true, but again there are usually comparatively few such buttons in the archaeological record to propose more than the suggestion of the occupants as stylishly attired.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTES

1 Maynard 1994:4; Epstein 1968:25.
2 See for example Chamberlain 1996, Davis & Dodson 1995, and Iacono 1996.
3 Flannery 1996:19.
4 Maynard 1994:9ff.
5 Elliott 1995:390.
6 Elliott 1995:376, 384.
7 Maynard 1994:25, 32.
8 Maynard 1994:80ff.
9 Maynard 1994:83; Russell 1994:95.
10 Willett & Cunnington 1991:98.
11 Willett & Cunnington 1991:107.
12 Maynard 1994:96; 162, Russell 1994:80.
13 Reeve & Adams 1993:111, #2274.
14 Noël-Hume 1991:255.
15 Birmingham 1992:105.
16 Willett & Cunnington 1991:87.
17 Houart 1977.
18 Willett & Cunnington 1991:87.
19 Willett & Cunnington 1991:79.
20 see White 1977 and Claassen 1994.
21 Jargstorf 1993:67.
22 Kohrs 1998:1-2.
23 Kohrs 1998:2. I know of only three 'gingham' buttons from local excavations, one from the Cumberland/Gloucester St. excavation, Iacono 1996:57, and two from an excavation at the Hawkesbury Museum, Higginbotham 1993.
24 Luscomb 1997:76.
25 Luscomb 1997:191.
26 Young 1988:73.
27 Maynard 1994:21.
28 White 1977:77.
29 Luscomb 1997:25.
30 Casey & Lowe 1995.
31 Cunnington 1964:117, 103.
32 Fainges 1991:110.
33 Epstein 1968:41-44.
34 Iacono 1996:55.
35 See for example Scandrett 1984:86 fig. a., and Morley 1971:plate 86.
36 Luscomb 1997:70.
37 Beaudry et al. 1991:166-7.
38 Karskens 1996:162.
39 Casey & Lowe 1996:7-12, and M. Casey pers. comm.
40 Jargstorf 1993:67, 69.

41 Jargstorf 1993:73.

42 Epstein 1968:48, Fink & Ditzler 1993:13.

43 McCall 1998:7.

44 Jargstorf 1993:58, 73.

45 Moorey 1971:67, 71, and Russell 1994:121.

46 M. Casey pers. comm. and Lydon 1993:132.

47 Beaudry *et al.* 1991:167.

48 Russell 1994:80.

49 Maynard 1994:81, 101. This may also reflect the perception of a need to clean the area up.

50 de Marly 1986:99, 127, 130-131, plates 5 and 6, skirts seem to be about mid-calf length.

51 See fig.23 'Cafe Belles' dated 1885, Maynard 1994:95.

52 Maynard 1994:147, 153.

53 Jargstorf 1993:67.

54 Karskens 1996:90, 119, 125, and 139 (male interest in attire).

55 Birmingham 1987:19; Jargstorf 1994:20.

56 See above n.12 – egalitarian.

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