

## Dorset Buttons

**Dorset buttons** are probably the most widely known needle-lace buttons. They were made in a cottage industry in southern England from the early 1700s until about 1860. During the height of production, hundreds of thousands were made annually and shipped around the world. Women, men, and children were all employed in the industry. Employees were in such short supply that prisons and orphanages were contracted to **make buttons**. (The social justification was to teach these people a marketable skill.) For more information about the history of **Dorset buttons**, read **Dorset Buttons—Fact File** in the Helpful Books section on p. 109.

Many styles of **Dorset buttons** were produced using different mold materials and coverings. Both bone disks and wire rings were used for molds, and both fabric and **thread** were used for coverings. Four button styles using **thread** are described in this section. (One fabric style, called the Singleton, is described in detail on p. 100.) The **buttons'** names describe their patterns: crosswheel, bird's eye, basket, mite, knob. Similar patterns were sometimes developed in different communities in England but would be given different names. Sometimes a family would **make** an exclusive **Dorset** pattern, such as the Singleton.

### Dorset ring buttons

**Dorset ring buttons** are among the most versatile of buttons. They can be made in any size, from ½ in. or less to 1¼ in. or more, and any **thread** or fine cord will work: crochet, lace-weight linen, fine tapestry wool, pearl cotton, buttonhole twist, and metallic braid. If you want to match a garment, you can unravel the end of yard goods or split yarn down to 1 ply.

### PREPARING THE RING

**A.** Blanket stitch, covering ring completely.



**B.** Turn ridge on blanket stitches to inside of ring.



**C.** Form spokes using clock wrap.



**D.** Center and align spokes with cross-stitch.



**Dorset buttons:** clockwise from upper left, Dorset knob, Dorset crosswheel, grindle, Dorset basket.



The most critical step in making a **Dorset** ring button is to center the spot where the spokes cross. If the crossing point is off center by even a little, the button will look crooked, and once you start weaving the pattern, you can't move the center.

**Covering the rings** All **Dorset** ring buttons begin by working a blanket stitch over the ring. Just the weaving patterns vary.

To cover a ring to **make** a **Dorset** button, you'll need:

- $\frac{1}{16}$ -in. brass ring
- 30/3 topstitching thread
- #24 tapestry needle.

Cut  $2\frac{1}{2}$  yd. of thread. **Make** sure you start with a long enough piece so that you don't have to add thread because it's difficult to **make** a join look neat. Tie thread onto ring with an overhand knot. Work blanket stitches, as shown in the drawing on p. 18.

Have the first few stitches cover the thread tail and then trim the tail. Pack the stitches closely so that the ring doesn't show. When you have covered the ring, slip the needle through the first stitch to hold first and last blanket stitches together. Turn the ridge of blanket stitches to the inside of the ring.

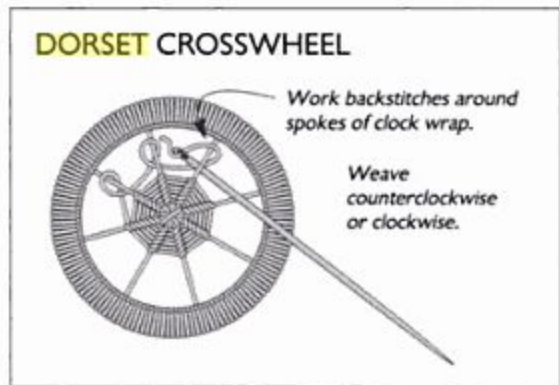
Next, **make** spokes across the center of the ring, using the clock wrap, as shown in the drawing on p. 18. **Make** as many spokes as you like, but six wraps for 12 spokes is a good number to start with. After making the last spoke, move to the center back of the button and work a cross-stitch over all of the spokes (both front and back) where they intersect at the center to align the front and back spokes. Tie thread but do not cut.

The front and back spokes should now line up and are treated as one for weaving. Weave over the front and back spokes using one of the following patterns. Then move the thread to center back and tie off. Sew the button onto the garment by passing the needle up through the button near the center, cross the center over the cross-stitch, and go back down through the button. If you prefer a shank, you can work a woven shank (see p. 13) using two spokes on each side of the button for anchors.

## Dorset crosswheel

EASY

To **make** the sample in ecru on p. 19 (upper right), start at center front of the button and work one backstitch over each spoke all the way around. Fill the spokes out to the ring (drawing below). Lay thread back to the center of the button, catch a few threads, and tie off.



## Dorset basket

EASY

To **make** one of the samples in the lower left corner on p. 19, begin at the center of the button. Backstitch over two spokes. Move forward four spokes. Backstitch over the two unused spokes. Continue completing the first round. On the second round, backstitch over the same pairs of spokes used in the first round. On the third round, move over one spoke. Backstitch over two spokes until all of the spokes are used. This will offset the backstitches between the second and third rounds by one spoke. The fourth round uses the same spokes as the third round. The fifth round is offset by one spoke again, and the pattern is repeated to fill the spokes (drawing below).

## Variations of Dorset ring buttons

The basket and the crosswheel are just two variations of the **Dorset** ring button. But don't feel limited by these two choices. Variations are fairly simple to achieve. The drawing at right shows three different ring **buttons**, but you may also want to try the following:

- Combine other embroidery stitches for the central weaving pattern.
- Combine weaving stitches.
- Change **thread** color while weaving.
- Include beads on the spokes.
- Vary the number of spokes or lay down spokes asymmetrically.
- Vary the stitches over the spokes to create a pattern to coordinate with your garment.

### DORSET BASKET

*Begin at center.  
Backstitch over  
spokes, alternating  
spokes on each  
successive round.*



### OTHER DORSET RING BUTTONS



**Honeycomb  
pattern**



**Swanston**  
by Marion Howitt



**Daisy**  
by Elizabeth Gilbert

## Dorset knob

MODERATE

The Dorset high top, a tall, conical version of the Dorset knob, was the first needle-lace button to be produced in southern England. The buttons were tiny, about 9mm in diameter at the base. High tops were used on men's waistcoats, including the one that King Charles I wore to his execution. Queen Victoria owned a gown lavishly trimmed with Dorset knobs.

When the Dorset button industry collapsed around 1860, the construction method for the Dorset knob was lost. In the 1970s, Elizabeth Gilbert of Wincanton, England, experimented with reproducing the knob. She finally resorted to picking apart a valuable antique to unravel its secrets. Originally, the mold was made of a wad of cloth held in a ball shape with glue. A small disk of horn resembling a modern-day sequin served as a base for the button.

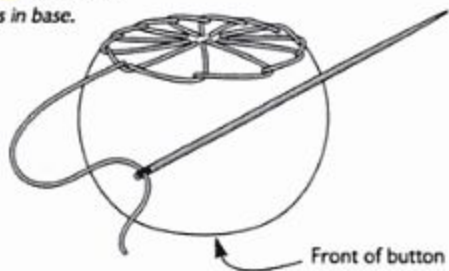
The charm of the Dorset knob is in the ridges formed by the stitching. Use a relatively small thread for the size of the mold to achieve intricately plaited ridges. You can vary the number of ridges, but use enough so that the thread never travels more than  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. between ridges. The version described below uses a stuffed mold. Because it is difficult to stuff a large mold firmly, try to keep this button small. If you need a large knob, substitute a fabric-covered, high-domed wood mold.

For sample in tan on p. 19, you'll need:

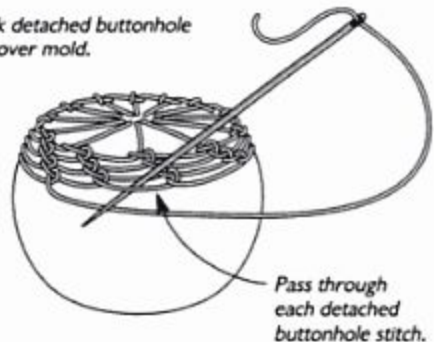
- $1\frac{1}{4}$ -in. circle of fabric to make a  $\frac{3}{8}$ -in. stuffed mold
- 4 ft. 30/3 topstitching thread
- #7 embroidery needle.

## DORSET KNOB

**A.** Make 12 blanket stitches in base.



**B.** Work detached buttonhole stitches over mold.



Use the  $1\frac{1}{4}$ -in. circle of fabric to make a stuffed mold (see pp. 9-10). Thread the needle and knot the end of the thread. Make 12 blanket stitches around the closing of the stuffed mold, as shown in the drawing above. This will be the base, or back, of the button. Work one detached buttonhole stitch in each blanket stitch. Pull back on each detached buttonhole stitch so that the loop is aligned over the corner where two adjacent blanket stitches meet. Continue working de-

tached buttonhole stitches around the mold, placing one in each stitch of the previous round. Again, pull back on the stitches so that the loops line up on top of each other. The stitches will form a ridge that spirals toward the center front. Near the center front you will run out of room to work more stitches. So pass the needle through each detached buttonhole stitch, then from the front center through the mold to the center back, and tie off. If you would like a shank, **make** a woven shank (see how on p. 13) across the back.

## Grindle

**MODERATE**

Grindle is an old name for a stone. Although in terms of technique this button is in the same family as the **Dorset buttons**, there is no evidence that this particular style was made by the **Dorset-button** cottage industry. The original that I have is from early this century and has a paper mold (remember, paper was made from 100% cotton then). I have included it here because of the similarity of technique.

The surface of the grindle is worked the same as the center for a **Dorset** crosswheel: spokes covered with backstitches. As with the **Dorset ring buttons**, you can change the mold size, the number of spokes, and the weight, fiber content, and color of the **thread** to create a variety of **buttons**. You might also weave or embroider other threads over the backstitches. If you change mold or **thread**, begin with enough **thread** so that you don't have to add more. It's impossible to get a neat, clean join. For the mold, I use a  $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. axle cap made for toy wooden vehicles (cap sizes range from  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. to  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. in diameter—the cap sizes also are available in different heights). I drill a hole in the top of the cap so that I can pass the needle and **thread** through.

*For sample in white on p. 19, you'll need:*

- $\frac{1}{4}$ -in.-diameter,  $\frac{1}{4}$ -in.-high domed wood mold
- 3 yd. #30 crochet cotton
- 2-in. circle of lining fabric to cover mold
- #24 tapestry needle.

Cut a 2-in. circle of lining fabric. Line the mold according to instructions on pp. 10-11. Tie off **thread**.

**Thread** #30 crochet cotton onto the tapestry needle. Knot **thread** and take two or three stitches through the lining near the center back to anchor the **thread**. Use the clock wrap (see drawing on p. 17) to **make** 12 spokes for weaving. With **thread**, cross-stitch over the spokes where they meet at the center back. Center the cross-stitch and knot, but don't cut the **thread**. To anchor spokes on the front, go from the back through the center hole and cross-stitch over the spokes where they meet in the front center. Pull tight but do not cut. If the spokes are not evenly spaced, the button will look lopsided, so pick up the spokes on front with the tip of your needle and align them.

To weave the pattern, backstitch around all 12 spokes until the mold is fully covered, as shown in the drawing on p. 20. Check spoke spacing each round, and adjust if necessary. Push the backstitches along the spokes toward the center if the lining shows between rounds. Knot the **thread** on back and cut. Sew through the center back of the button and through the garment fabric to attach the button to clothing, or add a woven shank (see p. 13).