

A Bit about Buttons

by ReadWorks



Buttons seem to be everywhere: on our shirts, the remote control, our jackets, and our phones. (Okay, not so many on the phone anymore!) They can be round or square or spider-shaped, made of wood or plastic, have stickers on them or numbers, but we see them wherever we look. Where did they come from? What were they first made for?

Push and Fasten

The English word "button" comes from the French verb *bouter*, which means "to push." But before buttons got their English name, they were used mostly as decoration on clothes and jewelry. The earliest buttons were made of animal bones, horns, and skin.

The first time a button was actually pushed through a buttonhole was in the 13th century. Now, the most common use of buttons is as fasteners in clothing. They hold two pieces of fabric together.

Buttons from many ancient civilizations have been found. Some of them were found by archaeologists, who study the people of the past by recovering the things they left behind. The Indus Valley people used buttons, as did the ancient Egyptians and the ancient Chinese.

Useless?

"Even the simplest things had a glorious pointlessness to them. When buttons came in [...]"

people couldn't get enough of them, and arrayed them in decorative profusion on the backs and collars and sleeves of coats, where they didn't actually do anything. One relic of this is the short row of pointless buttons that are still placed on the underside of jacket sleeves near the cuff. These have been purely decorative and have never had a purpose . . ."

- Bill Bryson (historian and writer of *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*)

Buttons aren't exactly pointless, even if in some cases they just serve a decorative purpose. Do this quick exercise: count the number of buttons on a man's (suit) jacket-front, pockets, sleeves, and the rest of the jacket. They were placed there not because of their functionality, but because someone, centuries ago, thought they looked good. Hundreds of years later, they are still with us.

"Pearly King of Somers Town"

Our friend Bryson might not think too highly of buttons, but some people have taken them very seriously. One such man was a street sweeper in London called Henry Croft. He would wear suits with thousands of white pearly buttons to attract attention towards the cause of local hospitals. He started a tradition of men and women wearing suits and dresses decorated with mother-of-pearl buttons. These people became known as "Pearly Kings and Queens." Even today, Pearly Kings and Queens continue to wear pearly clothing and collect funds for charity.

Fun Facts about Buttons

- Did you know that the word button is a relative of the verb "to butt," which also means "to push"?
- Button collecting is a very popular hobby. The National Button Society was formed in 1939 in Chicago. There are also many local button clubs all over the United States!
- Till the 18th century, buttons were very expensive. Only the rich could wear them, and they were a status symbol.
- Special metal buttons were used to hide compasses during the World Wars.
- The Waterbury Button Museum in Waterbury, Connecticut, and The Button Room in Gurnee, Illinois, have large collections of buttons. The "button room" was an actual room in Elizabeth Hewitt's house in Gurnee, where she loved telling stories about her collection of buttons.

Bread Baking Now and Then

by ReadWorks



Did you know that bread is one of the earliest human inventions? Bread is a food made of flour and water. Other ingredients and shape can vary. Scientists have learned that humans have been eating bread in some form or another for 30,000 years.

Ancient Egyptians ate a lot of bread. In fact, because they had no potatoes or rice, bread was the most important carbohydrate source in the ancient Egyptian's diet.

Egypt gets little rain. Ancient Egyptian farmers relied on the annual flooding of the Nile River to irrigate their fields. Egyptian farmers paid a portion of their grain harvest to the Egyptian treasury.

Archaeologists have discovered illustrations of bakeries and loaves of bread in ancient Egyptian burial sites. Professional bakers and home-bakers used the same production techniques. Home-bakers, usually women, baked only the bread they would need for that day.

Egyptians used a grain from emmer wheat for their bread. The grain was ground by hand on a millstone. This process cracked and crushed the grain into coarse flour. The flour was mixed with water and sometimes a little old dough. It was placed in a pot and baked in a clay oven.

This Egyptian bread was a flatbread. Indian naan and Middle Eastern pita are two examples

of flatbreads eaten today. At the end of the ancient Egyptian period, however, around 300 B.C., Egyptian bakers added to their bread an important ingredient: yeast. Yeast is a microscopic fungus. It makes bread rise.

Today bread production is more complicated. Yes, you can still bake your own bread at home with store-bought flour and yeast. You can also buy bread made at small bakeries. But the fluffy bread you see in grocery stores in the United States today is made in large commercial facilities. These commercial facilities, or plants, have business contracts to bake many different bread brands.

Most breads today are made using four basic ingredients: flour, yeast, salt, and water. Farmers across the United States grow wheat in large quantities. Half of the wheat produced is used in the United States. The other half is exported to other countries.

Grain is processed into flour by companies which then sell the flour to commercial bakeries. These bakeries produce the dough and bake the bread, then package it and arrange for its distribution to stores.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Use the article "Bread Baking Now and Then" to answer questions 1 to 2.

1. The article discusses bread production in two different time periods. The first is the time of ancient Egypt. What is the second time period?
2. Does the topic of the article change between the sixth paragraph and the seventh paragraph? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

Use the article "A Bit about Buttons" to answer questions 3 to 4.

3. What does this article tell readers a bit about?
4. This article is divided into different sections. One section is called "Push and Fasten." The next section is called "Useless?" Does the topic of the article change between these two sections?

Use the articles "A Bit about Buttons" and "Bread Baking Now and Then" to answer questions 5 to 6.

5. What is different about how the information in each of these articles is organized?
6. Is one article more clearly organized than the other? Support your answer with evidence from both articles.