



**Hawley  
Collection**  
@ Kelham Island Museum

## HAWLEY COLLECTION SHORT GUIDES TO SHEFFIELD TRADES

### TOOLS OF THE TRADE

## Pearl Button & Handle Trade

### Pearl Button-maker, Pearl Fluter, Pearl Cutter

#### Overview of the trade

Mother-of-pearl, or Nacre, is one of the inner shell layers produced by molluscs e.g. pearl oysters and abalone. Mother of pearl is iridescent and can be bleached or dyed without losing its lustre, and though brittle is strong and flexible. Pearl button-making often went hand in hand with the making of handles or slabs for table cutlery and flatware, and the making of scales (handle coverings) for razors and pen and pocket knives.

#### The people, the work, the tools

**Pearl Button & Handle Maker:** working in small workshops, the maker would use a **circular saw** with fine teeth to cut out as many larger pieces as possible from a shell for use as handles and razor/penknife scales, using the remainder for buttons. To cut out buttons they used a **tubular 'hole' saw** – a metal tube with teeth on the end. This saw was attached to a simple **lathe** operated by a foot treadle, so that the saw would be rotating and the piece of shell would be placed against it to cut the button. A **hand-powered drill** would then be used to make the hole(s) in the button.

Firms like W Gillott & Son of Sheffield, established in 1897, used mechanised circular saws and carborundum grinding wheels to cut and shape buttons, slabs and buckles – see film on [www.yfaonline.co.uk](http://www.yfaonline.co.uk)

**The Pearl Fluter** applied the decoration on mother of pearl buttons and handles after they had been shaped. They used **small files** or small **rotary cutters** (rotating discs about the size a dentist might use) to cut intricate decorations in finished items.

Whether decorated or undecorated the mother of pearl would then be 'buffed' and polished to show the full lustre and colours of the original shell.



Shell showing clear marks where buttons have been cut out, from the Hawley Collection



Mother-of-pearl buttons



Decorated mother of pearl handles and file from the Hawley Collection



Razor with mother of pearl and silver handle courtesy of Ken Hawley

**Information from:** Ken Hawley and The Hawley Collection at Kelham Island Museum, Sheffield, June 2011

**Further Information:** W. Gillett & Sons Film [www.yfaonline.co.uk](http://www.yfaonline.co.uk)