

Two livery buttons from Ashton Court.

Livery buttons were made to embellish the uniforms or liveries of footmen, coachmen and other servants of the wealthy. Personalised devices of all kinds were used to decorate these buttons but by far the most popular were crests taken from the coats of arms of families entitled to bear arms.

The fashion for crested livery buttons started in the reign of King George III and by the time of his grand-daughter, Queen Victoria, it had been widely adopted by the elite who maintained household servants. The practice reached its peak during the Edwardian period prior to the Great War before gradually fading away in the face of increased taxation and a period of changing social conditions.



The first of the Ashton Court livery buttons displays the full coat of arms of the Smyth family. This comprises a shield upon which the crucial heraldic devices are displayed surmounted by a crest.



The second button illustrates the important heraldic feature of impalement. This is the method by which a husband's and a wife's arms are shown conjoined in the same shield. The husband's arms appears on the spectator's left and the wife's on the right.

The arms are those of Smyth impaling Way and the button commemorates the marriage of Greville Smyth and Emily Edwards, Greville's cousin, which took place in 1884. The bride was the widow of George Oldham Edwards, who had died the previous year, and the daughter of the Rev. Henry Hugh Way, of Alderbourne Manor, Buckinghamshire.

The Way arms are quartered, a fact that implies that one of Emily's forbears had married a heraldic heiress and as a result his descendants had been able to bear quartered arms, the original Way devices in the first and fourth quarters and the newly acquired arms in the second and third.

An interesting feature of this second button is that the arms are displayed on a lozenge and not a shield.

This tells us that the arms are those borne by a lady, in this case a widow. A spinster's arms would not be impaled. Greville Smyth had died in 1901 so the button must have been produced after that date when the widowed Emily was head of the household at Ashton Court.

Text and images by Stephen Tudsbury-Turner.

The buttons are held in a private collection.

They were generally made of gilt, but other material such as silver, pewter or gold was also used.

A servant's accounts of life at Ashton Court mentions the livery and the buttons.

Queenie Froud, who was the housekeeper's (1898-1910) daughter, recalled:

"The two footmen used to make us laugh. They wore black swallow-tail coats with brass buttons and red waistcoats with thin white stripes. They were always cursing and swearing. Whatever their real names the first footman was always called William, and the second Arthur - to avoid confusion."

