

The Bridge Buttons

AS A COLLECTOR OF SYDNEY HARBOUR BRIDGE (SHB) MEMORABILIA, **NICK PEZIKIAN** RECENTLY HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO PURCHASE A BATCH OF BUTTONS DEPICTING THE BRIDGE... AND AS HE EXPLAINS, THAT'S HOW THE INVESTIGATIONS STARTED.

My initial discussions with my peers indicated that these buttons, made by Stokes, were very scarce and little was known about them. Furthermore, an extensive online search of the SHB buttons showed that they had only ever appeared once before in an auction by Noble Numismatics in 2008.

The design of the button is the front view of the bridge, with two ships in the foreground waters and a raised flag on one of the pylons. The sky shows puffs of clouds above the bridge. The buttons have a flat front and back and are hand soldered with an elongated eye shank. There are two main button sizes, the larger coat or jacket buttons and the smaller epaulette buttons (*Fig. 2*).

The fact that so little was known about these buttons prompted me to undertake research to find evidence as to when these uniforms were worn by toll collectors. This study included consulting several veteran SHB and button collectors, contacting public and private organisations, undertaking online searches and interviewing past toll collectors to help unravel the mystery of the buttons.

This story also has a personal connection as my late father, George Pezikian, was a toll collector from 1982 to 1999. Accordingly, finding this little button also reconnected me to my father and by a stroke of luck, my sister had kept the contact details of his close

work colleague and union delegate, Jude Singarayar.

According to Jude and his colleagues, some time in the 1950s toll collectors were issued with new and elaborate uniforms, including two-toned light brown suit jackets that were adorned with these special brass buttons. This move was presumably to improve the image of the toll collectors, as they represented the body and soul of the bridge. However, by 1983 cost-cutting measures had been implemented and those uniforms were replaced with more basic garments without these buttons. This time frame ties in with my recollection of my father proudly wearing his beautifully-made uniforms in the early 1980s.

Very little direct information on the buttons was found, although I learned the elongated shank meant the buttons were made to be used on thick garments and the shanks were hand soldered, indicating significant time and effort was required to produce these buttons, presumably in limited numbers.

From the very opening of the iconic SHB, tolls have been collected. In March 1932, 18 men from the transport department, who were mostly tram conductors, were chosen to become toll collectors because of their experience in ticket collecting. However,



Opposite top, Figure 3: Sydney Harbour Bridge toll collector's overcoat, four button style c.1950s-1960s. Made by Swedex. Private collection. Above, Figure 4: Sydney Harbour Bridge toll collector's men's jacket, four button style c.1950s-1960s. From the 'Celebrating Sydney' lift-out Daily Telegraph, September 1966.

their uniforms were identical to tram conductors so these buttons were not of that era.

Over the following 77 years, until the bridge went cashless on January 11, 2009, the toll collectors' uniforms changed several times, with corporate branding of the Department of Main Roads and later the Roads and Traffic Authority. A thorough online study of the Transport for NSW Historical Archive resulted in finding photographs of these jackets worn by toll collectors in 1959, 1966, 1968 and 1980. My study revealed the following facts which will allow me to draw conclusions and presumptions on these buttons.

1. The buttons were made by Stokes with the back stamp of either 'Stokes & Sons' or 'Stokes & Sons Melbourne', indicating that they were produced before 1962.

2. Three different shades ranging from brown to bronze coloured buttons exist, indicating different copper contents were



Figure 1: Sydney Harbour Bridge toll collector's uniform button. Stokes; copper alloy; stamped; flat front and back; soldered on elongated eye shank. Noble Numismatics Sale 89 Lot 1623 November 2008. Figure 2: Sydney Harbour Bridge toll collector's epaulette button. c.1970s-1980s; Private collection.





Figure 5: Toll Collector's men's jacket, two button style c.1970s-1980s. Made by Barotex. Private collection.

used in at least three production batches.

3. The button with the 'Stokes & Sons Melbourne' back stamp has the lightest shade of penny copper. This button is also slightly thicker and presumably the first one to be issued.

4. The buttons are not recorded in any published works including the 323 page book, *Stokes: A Proud Heritage, 140 years in Australian manufacturing industry*.

5. Both back stamps have been used on each of the two known uniforms, indicating the buttons were used interchangeably.

6. Four different jacket styles featuring these buttons are known to have been made.

They range from an overcoat (Fig. 3), two types of men's jackets (Figs. 4 and 5) and a women's jacket (Fig. 6). The jackets pictured in figures 3 and 5 are in private collections.

7. The two uniforms in private collections are made by Swedex (Fig. 3) and Barotex (Fig. 5). According to ASIC, both companies were registered in 1957, Swedex was deregistered in 1977 while Barotex was in operation until 2010. A search in Trove generates results for Swedex from 1950 to 1980 and Barotex from 1955 to 2010.

8. The clothing label on the Swedex uniform shows the Queen's crown dating the garment after February 1952, following the passing of the King.

9. Toll collectors were measured up by a tailor to produce handmade and customised uniforms. In 1952 there were 45 toll collectors, a number that increased to 110 in 1959.

10. In 1949 six additional booths were installed, increasing the number of booths to twelve. In 1959, the Department of Main Roads invested significant dollars to install new toll booths, which were claimed at the time to be the best ever built.

With the above facts in mind, my conclusion is that these uniforms and the accompanying buttons were in use from the late 1950s to the early 1980s. The buttons were made prior to 1962 based on the backstamp. In 1957, Swedex became a registered company, which was presumably a requirement to bid for government contracts. Finally, in 1959, state-of-the-art toll booths were installed, so it would have been timely to upgrade the toll collectors' uniforms at that time. The design of the buttons with the hand soldered shanks is also consistent to the style of the 1950s. The last known images of these uniforms are June 1980 and based on toll collectors' accounts, they were replaced in 1983.

So, the question still remains as to why these buttons are so scarce and unknown. In addition to their rarity, they are extremely sought after given the collectability of vintage SHB items. The following factors help us paint a better picture and give us a better understanding to their scarcity.

1. The uniforms with these buttons were in circulation for a limited time;

2. The buttons appear to have been reused, as the later jackets had buttons made prior to 1962;

3. There was a finite number of toll collectors, with many toll collectors working on the SHB for decades;

4. Workers were required to hand back their uniforms upon retirement or resignation.

Furthermore, it appears that the use of



Figure 6: Toll Collector's women's jacket, two button style c.1970s-1980s. /historicalibrary.transport.nsw.gov.au/ image 114653

these buttons was strictly controlled by either Stokes or the tailors and any that remained in 1983 were possibly destroyed. What happened to all the old uniforms, especially the jackets, is unknown, although I have been told some were donated to the Powerhouse and South Pylon Museums.

I am happy to say my batch of buttons has now dwindled to only a few, with many SHB and button enthusiasts having now added them to their collections. At this time, I wish to give special thanks to the button experts who gave me invaluable advice and assistance throughout my research and a personal thank you to my father's past colleagues for providing invaluable anecdotal evidence. Hopefully, with the publication of this article, more information will come to light on these vintage uniforms and the very special little treasures that they were adorned with.

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