

## IN PRAISE OF ANTIQUE LACE BOBBIN MAKERS

Brian Lemin. October 2010.

First Draft

### INTRODUCTION

I love my lathe, firm bed, adjustable speed a variety of lathe chucks and suite of high quality steel tools. It's great, but wood turners did not always enjoy turning as a hobby, they had to make a living from it and in far worse conditions than we can imagine now. Were it not for the assiduous research by Christine and David Springett, and consequent publication of their book "Success to the Lace Pillow", we would remain in ignorance of those who made those tools, which are often works of art, some 200 years ago. This is my homage to those men of old whom I admire immensely.

Where else can I go for a framework upon which to hang this essay but the makers that David and Christine (D and C) have shared with us in their book.

### A TIMELINE.

D and C, offer dates of birth for some makers and others they have made educated guesses as to when they were making. They concentrated on what they thought could possibly be the "Elite" makers of the time. I will do the same.

This is based on DoB.

Jesse Compton 1793- 1857

William Brown 1793-1872

Joseph Haskins 1779-1855

Archibald Abbot 1815-1889

David Haskins 1819-?

James Compton 1824-1889

Arthur Wright 1857-?

"The Bitted Man" 1810-1830 (Working period)

Robert Haskins ? (Grandson and uncle of the above Haskins?)

"Blunt End Man" Mid 1800's working period.

### HOW DID THEY LIVE?

I started off with the idea that all bobbin makers were poor and illiterate. How superior could I be and how wrong could I be? In the late 1700s wood turning at least could well have been a profitable occupation. I did a search on the web and found more than a few well educated and well respected wood turners whose skills and products and design ability were well sought after and gave them a source of good income. I would guess that this was not the lot of most of those we will talk about today. Mind you they did have to buy the tools. Firstly a treadle lathe was about the best available at that time.



It worked similarly to a treadle sewing machine, you peddled and the shaft went around. It was quite effective and it was a long time before they became electrified.

Then there were the tools. Woodworking chisels were well available at that time and catalogues show various pictures of tools and sets available. The bobbin maker would not have needed a lot of tools, he could probably have made do with one chisel if he had to, but he would also have needed a drill and drill bits and also a small circular saw type of bit too. These guys were very ingenious and no doubt would have developed their own tools and jigs from available materials to meet their needs. It is also obvious that some turner would have inherited the tools of their trade from the family.

I am guessing they would have had a shed at the bottom of the garden or possibly in the courtyard of their hose if they lived in a built up area. I can't think that his wife would have coped with that in the house in any way at all, mind you more about what she had to put up with later!

As yet I have not been able to discover what these tools may have cost them. Perhaps I will as I go along.

#### WHAT DO WE ADMIRE IN THESE MEN?

Before I talk about the individual makers, there are few things I need to admire in general.

Firstly they had good business acumen. They saw a niche for their skills (lace bobbins) and pursued this as an income stream. It was not easy, they seem to have the label as being "itinerant" which basically means that they made their wares and then had to go out and sell them. They sold them to the lace makers but considering the hold many lace traders had over the lace makers, they would have sold to the traders too. They sold them at fairs and high days and holidays when the communities would get together to enjoy fun and a day out.

Their sales to some traders would have been quite profitable as traders often gave them as gifts to their workers. Politicians too bought them and used them as advertising media so every now and then they would get a good order, which means a good run of the same bobbin with the same lettering etc.



They would have had good relationships with their local woodman for sources of wood. Possibly they would be good friends with the orchardists who would have some wood for them from time to time. Then there was the local butcher who was their source of bone. Nowadays big bones have been bred out of our beef and horses, but in those days some really thick string bone could be accessed via the hind "shin" (I suppose) of a good Shire Horse or Bull. Even the cows would be able to produce decent bone for turning in those days.

They often needed dyes and paint, so they had factories or chemist to deal with too.

VI 95 Leatr was a purveyor of all things laec and often gave bobbins as gifts to some of his customers



Just a moment to admire what their wives had to put up with and this is based on personal experience! To prepare bone the fat has to be boiled out of it and it has to be made really clean. To do this they boiled the bones in water and caustic soda (possibly some bleach too) Well, the smell of that process invades anything and everything around it. It is truly terrible and “sticks to you”. I can well imagine Mrs. Haskins saying, “Joseph, stay out of the kitchen until you have been down to the stream and washed that smell off you!” She might well have told him to be sure that the wind was blowing away from the neighbors when he was doing the boiling process. I just cannot imagine any wife allowing that to be done in the kitchen! I obey all those rules, but even when I have been turning bone I am thrown out of the house until I smell sweeter!

Their husbands would chase off to sell the bobbins for days on end and little hope of them accompanying them when they had children to look after; and for all of that I am not too sure that they got much more than an average income from his business.

#### LET'S LOOK AT THE TURNERS AND THEIR TURNING

First on my list is “**The Bitted Man**”. His skill was to be able to insert bits of contrasting wood into a bobbin blank so that when it is turned it reveals a pretty and sometimes complicated intertwined pattern of coloured wood. That is a totally amazing skill. I have tried it and it is very difficult. There is no way that I could reproduce his complex designs. Ticks and slashes, OK but nothing more than that I am afraid. Then he used narrow grooves up the shank of the bobbin; that might seem easy but it needs a lot of concentration.

He experimented too with using thorn inlays for initials, the occasional pewter. The example that C and D shows of his beaded shank bobbin reveals a love for design and beauty. It is not hard to infer that he had reasonable education as his printing was of a very good standard and his bone bobbins are distinctive because of his ancillary decorations that he uses, the slashes (reminiscent of his bitting) corn head cuts and crosses all simply done with a knife or chisel.

I will talk about other bobbin artists later who produced beautiful bobbins, but this man is the wood turner's icon.

VI 102 The Bitted man. Excellent examples of both curved and straight bitting. This is most difficult to achieve.



Jesse Compton.

Yep, he seems to have been a bit of a wild boy, in jail for vagrancy in his early 20s then met his wife, Catherine. I like to think that she tamed the wild boy. Modern marriage counselors seem to say that you will not change a man by marrying him, well, I think Catherine did and it was for our good to, as he turned out to be one of this elite group I am talking to you about.

He was lucky to go into bobbin making when he did as lace making was going through a prosperous period. Perhaps this is why he could afford to produce what I would call "up market" bobbins, both in bone and wood with pewter.

The lace maker historians among you would know why he tended to make his bobbins a bit thinner than later makers. It appears the lace being made at that time was much finer; but this did not stop him from producing some excellent bobbins with inscriptions upon them. He seemed to prefer straight inscriptions but he also produced many spiral inscriptions too. I wonder at the man's ability to space some of his inscriptions so that only few of them had "scrunched up" words at the end of them. True, many are hard to read despite him colouring alternate letters in different colours. Even if he did lay it out on paper to start with, and I do not know if he did, he then had to turn it into a cylindrical production. Very hard indeed! He was far from illiterate, he had a flowery a firm signature and his lettering is well proportioned and very neat.

I do feel sorry for him in one aspect of his work. In his search for perfection it would seem that he chose high quality pewter for his pewter inlaid bobbins. The result of that was a great shame for we modern collectors...it all fell out (well not all of it) and we have been denied seeing some of the best pewter inlays produced on bobbins; the "fly" decoration with five pairs of wings around the shank, flowing pewter spirals which mimicked his spiral inscriptions. I, as a bobbin maker who lay out his spirals around the shank with care and accuracy. It is a difficult job and he did it so well. His son James Compton, followed in his father's footsteps, doing very well what his father must have taught him. He produced a variety of bobbins, some low end bobbins (quick and easy sale) and some that opened up his abilities for truly artistic work. Of all the bobbins that I have seen of his I love the beaded spiral, rather fat bobbin the inscription "When you see this remember me J Roberts". In my eyes excitingly beautiful.



We now come to the Haskins family. I am daring to say that Joseph was the consummate bobbin artist. He continues to surprise you with just beautiful bone bobbins, highly decorated, intricate designs and perfectly executed. His colours his tinsel his loose rings; they make you gasp with delight. D and C tell us that he was also a lapidary and he includes a coloured stone on some of his bobbins, sadly for us they are often missing when they come on to the market. I find it hard to pull out a favourite from his work. Five mother and babes in a shank, one full shank length mother and babe in a shank; both amazing bobbins! He carried his skills into his wooden bobbins too, wire bound, loose rings, pewter flies and even biting. The consummate bobbin maker who is an inspiration to us all.

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Joseph Haskins. Bone mother and Babe. Full length window with spiral decorated babe. Unusual. Nice bobbin



I am sorry to say that David, though well taught by his father did not reach the same heights of artistry. Make no mistake his bobbins are of a high standard and also appears to have a wider variety of designs than those of his father. Perhaps he was more commercial and found his market in the mid range of cost. His beading and tinsel work has clear attributes of his father. He loved his bold dots and wire binding, but what I like most about his work is his pewter inlay and in particular the wings on his flies. They curve so well and with a romantic mind like mine I see the butterflies flying!!

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A fine David Haselme butterfly bobbin. Large and curves flowing butterfly wings are his speciality. It has pewter rings above and below, plain grooves at the tail and coloured grooves at the neck. A good example of his pewter artistry.



Robert, nephew of David, was making bobbins when lace making was in decline. He had good basic turning skills and the range of techniques that indicate he could have reached greater height of artistry, but one has to doubt if he would have been able to sell his work economically if he moved away from bread and butter bobbin making.

I love our next maker's work, Bobbin Brown. I think he could do anything that he wanted. True he did not get into the high end market of artistic bobbins, but I am sure he could should he have wanted. Thomas Wright says of Brown's bobbins, "...spiral, bold, and very neat". My biggest problem with his bobbins is that they look skinny! Probably for good reason, but I would like them to be fatter (but what do I know?)

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A very nice Bobbin Brown tiger with a waisted and belted top third. A well made classic bobbin.



I have always appreciated a young lady who has a nice waist. Please do not label me with a "sexist" label of any kind; it is just an appreciation of lovely ladies that remains with me! Often Brown made a lovely "waist" just below the neck, it is unmistakable when you see it, and sometimes he even added a belt to it... just two thin lines above the hips! Enough of this nonsense, but it is a nice feature of his. I like also his "domino" spots, which are fun and attractive.

Happy for me he is a poor speller (that is because I spell badly even with a spell checker!) His lettering is mostly horizontal. He clearly enjoyed his pewter work especially he seemed to like putting a lot of stripes on his tigers!

It would appear that Arthur Wright could well have been an apprentice to Brown. His passion turned out to be the inscription of Christian names. Perhaps he had a good market for them, possibly people had them made for gifts to lace makers. He could turn out quite poor work but also some very engaging work too. There is a possibility that he gave up making bobbins a bit early and this could mean he became un-commercial or had a better offer somewhere.

“The Blunt End Man” is an example of commercial success with rather limited skills. It would be unfair of me to say his work was rubbish, but it did not match up very well against those going before in this essay. However he clearly had a flair for what we would call marketing. Bobbins inscribed “dear Aunt”: “Dear Sister” abound. Well, when you were at a fair I am sure you would sell a pile of those for people to give as gifts. Then there was the hanging bobbins, everyone wanted a piece of that excitement and the famous John Bunyan, loving inscriptions like “Love me my love”, religious inscriptions, “I love Jesus. He must have had it all over the competition.



Archibald Abbott is the last on C and D's list. He is unique as the only maker that actually signed many of his bobbins. He seemed to have a stamp set that he used, usually near the tail. Abbott it proudly proclaims. He was a good turner and a very good printer. He did Mother and Babe bobbins, he inscribed bone bobbins as well as wooden bobbins, pewter flys and tigers, wire bound... in fact the lot! He seemed to enjoy his work. He is mainly known for what is known as his “screwthread” shank bobbins. Narrow screw lines that take you to the very top of the shank. D and C suggest he did it with a jig and a nail or chisel. Screwing the bobbin through the jig and creating the thread as it went. Most ingenious. I think I like his dyed bobbins mostly, they have kept their colour well and still look very attractive.

Dyed green. Archibal Abbott



#### CONCLUSION.

I don't quite know how I will end this homage to the lace bobbin makers of old. We have not kept much of the tradition that they set us. Sure, we still do have inscribed bobbins, makers do intricate mother and Babes etc, bone bobbins could possibly be seen a niche market. When we makers venture into the artistic mode we usually copy the old makers, and very difficult it is too. For example I copied a Joseph Haskins bone creation. It took me a very long time and two attempts at that! Even then it did not match up very well.

We seem to concentrate of a variety of woods and of course more recently the painting of bobbins (which I love!) There appears to be many more bobbin makers now and that is probably because the lace making hobby is more popular, worldwide and we have more spare money to collect bobbins.

Never the less there would be few of us who did not enjoy seeing or handling antique lace bobbins and having them on your pillow is even better.

ENJOY.

I do.