

PINS IN HISTORY AND LACE MAKING.

A SHORT REVIEW.

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introduction

Bullock tells us that Dr. Johnson says that the word “pin” is derived from the Latin work(sic) [read “word”] “spina” which means “thorn”. (p 72.)

Encyclopaedia Britannica describes pins as “a small, pointed and headed piece of wire. They go on to inform us that “Bronze pins 2 to 8 inches (5 to 20 centimetres) long with gold heads or decorative gold bands have been found in ancient Egyptian tombs.”

Most histories include the information that those who could not afford the pins used thorns or fish bones, probably depending on whether they lived in a fishing community or country community. Other general histories also mention the use of bone slivers as pins.

Whilst pins had been made in England from 1347, Wright tells us that the brass pin dates from 1530 and quotes an Act of 1543 that controlled their price at 6/8 per 1000. Even then Wright tells us that “most of the pins used by English workers were imported from France” (p 36) In 1626 the first pin making factory was commenced by John Tilsby in Gloucestershire and the Pinmakers Corporation of London was established in 1636.

On the other hand Huart tells us the following about the history of pins, this time from the viewpoint of a French speaking writer and researcher.

...but short pins imported from England must have appeared in the continental shops sometime during the 14th century and must have been well known by 1391, when they were being copied by a man as important as Jehan le Braconnier, supplier to the Court of France..... It has been impossible to trace the source of these famous fourteenth century English pins, but what emerges is, as we have seen, that they were sufficiently esteemed to be copied on the continent. ...English imports did not put an end to the production of pins in Paris, as is proved by the Pins made in Paris were sold in France alongside the pins from England until about the end of the sixteenth century. On the other side of the Channel, in Britain, pins were also very common during the Middle Ages, and they too were made of brass or latten. British output must have increased enormously during the fifteenth century, for the importation of foreign pins was forbidden by law in 1483. Was this because the pin makers complained and requested protective measures? Was it because the French exporters tried to sell their cheap pins made of tin Plated wire in England? England never allowed these cheap substitutes to be sold on her territory. But one thing is certain: a few years later French pins were again allowed into England, though without any danger to British production which had forged ahead and was probably now the most important in Europe. ...By the middle of the seventeenth century, the French practically gave up and contented themselves with imported English pins, while some English women still preferred imported French pins. For the French did not cease

Production altogether, and pins made of latten were still produced in France during the eighteenth century: a kind of cottage industry, each pin still being made by hand instead of manufactured with machine tools, as in England and, of course, Germany. In England also the production of pins had been a kind of cottage industry, but it expanded suddenly when in 1626 a certain John Tilsby opened a pin factory in Stroud (Gloucestershire), soon employing up to fifteen hundred workers. Ten years later the first guild of pin makers was created in London. This dealt the final blow to French production: the Paris workshops closed for good, and during the eighteenth century there was only a small output in L'Aigle and in Normandy. Starting in Stroud, British production moved first to Bristol as a main centre, then to London and later, of course, to Birmingham.

There appears to be something of a conflict between the conventional wisdom about the history of pins quoted in our (English) lace books and that described by Huart. Not having undertaken any original research in this field, one can only present the two sides of the story. Part of the answer may be found to relate to the position from which the writers are coming. The English writers have a particular interest in the pins used in lace making, whereas Huart is taking a more general approach to pins. Could it be that the issue of "brass" pins enters into the English description and perhaps confuses the issue?

LACEMAKERS PINS

Readers who have looked into the history of Lace will be aware of the various exoduses from Europe of persecuted groups to different parts of England. It is thought that these groups brought with them the brass pin which has become popular with lace makers on account that they did not rust.

Freeman tells us that the "fine brass pins were specially made" (p28) for the trade.

Pins were not always made with solid heads The earliest heads were made by twisting fine wire around the shank and compressing it tight by means of a block and die. Later the heads were made separate with a hole in them for the shaft of the pin to be pushed into. Both of the manufacturing methods allowed the lacemakers to "customise" their pins with various decorations and to improvise different types of heads. It was not until 1840 that the solid heads that we are used to became a standard feature.

Laceworkers ornamented their pins in a number of ways. They used a blob of sealing wax of red or gold, they also threaded on tiny beads, (as many as six or seven) which were held in place with a collar. This collar was usually a pin head pushed on from the point of the pin. Other things used were burr heads from goose grass, bone heads, which were often inscribed or decorated and glass heads. Some very ornate pin heads were used, ie., decorated bone, wood, possibly ivory and certainly highly decorated Venetian beads.

There were various names and functions for many of the decorated pins. For the headside (or turnside or dykeside) red wax heads or beaded heads were used and for the footside gold wax

head or green beaded pins were used. The names given to the multi beaded pins differ from region to region.

Huetson suggests that the beads having wax or burr heads were called Hariffe pins.(p85) and Hopewell adds that they were also known as burrheads or sweethearts.. (p 11)

Wright reports that the workers at Olney, “in order to time themselves, used to stick in a specially ornamented bead pin called the striver, and they would notice how long it took before that pin was worked out again.” (p 123)

Extra long pins (2 or 3 inches long) were used for fastening the parchment pin cushion or bobbin bag to the cushion, these were called “corking pins”.

Hopewell records the following lace tells. (p 11) that are about pins.

Nineteen little round holes

Gaping for a wire,

Every pin that I stick

Gets me one the nigher.

The children had to stick ten pins a minute, and if they ran out of pins they would sing:

Polly or Betsy a pin for the poor

Give me a pin and I'll ask for no more.

There are a few other tells recorded (See Wright p 179 ff) that mention pins in them.

PIN NAMES AND USAGE IN HISTORIC LACE MAKING.

The following is a list of names culled from the various books and histories of bobbin lace in England:

- Beaded Head pin
- Burr Heads or Sweethearts.
- Corking pins
- Detachable heads.
- Divider pins.
- Glass Head pins
- Goose Grass seed heads.
- Hard head

- Hariffe pin
- Head Pin
- King Pins
- Lanking
- Limmicks
- Long Toms
- Needle pin
- Prickers
- Sealing wax ends
- Stabbing
- Stacker pins
- Strivers
- Venetian
- Yellow Pins.

GENERAL USE OF PINS IN LACE MAKING

Pins are essential to lace making and of course it is reported that both fish bones and thorns were used as pins by some lace makers.

The general use pins were called either “Long Toms” or “Yellow Pins” and as mentioned above the heads of the earliest pins were made from a separate piece of wire twisted around and squeezed, by means of pressure from a block and die, on to the top of the pin. It was not until 1824 that the solid headed pin was invented.

Lace makers often modified their pin heads. They used both sealing wax and seed heads, either of goose grass or various burrs. They also decorated the pins. The early wire headed pins were had beads slipped on them and a second “head” slid on to hold them in place. When solid heads came on the scene they used various methods to keep the beads up tight including the old pin heads that they had left, but on the whole they stopped being made.

Later there was a variety of pin heads available to them, glass heads, and what they called Venetian heads that comprised a colourful Venetian bead as its head. The other form of decoration was of bone, ivory or wood, shaped in various ways (hearts being especially popular) and often inscribed with initials or small designs. These pins were usually larger and used as Prickers.

The workers liked to use the decorated or distinctive pins as markers. Wright tells us that they used “pins with red waxed or [red] beaded head for the Headside or Turnside of the lace and gold waxed or green beaded pins for the footside.”

Some times they used the pins that had been threaded with six small beads threaded alternatively either blue and white or red and white. The names for these pins are:

North Bucks ; *Limmicks*

South Bucks, *Bugles*

Beds, *King pins*

The “striver pin” seems to have been used only by the Olney workers who used this specially decorated pin to set themselves goals to achieve and to time themselves to see how long it would take them to reach that pin

Extra long pins (2-3” long) were used to pin the lace makers tools to the pillow. The pins used were called “Corking Pins”. The dressing of the pillow not only included the various cloths but also an “oily” pincushion pinned to the pillow. The oiliness was to reduce the rusting of the pins. [I thought that brass pins did not rust?] The Honiton lace makers had a Needle pin which they used to join their lace pieces together with. [they also used fine crochet hooks for this work]

POSSIBLE DESCRIPTIONS OR DEFINITIONS.

The following are entries from the “dictionary” that I am compiling and they range a little wider than the subject under discussion, but all have a “pin” relationship.

beaded head pin. A pin which has its head replaced with a bead. Sometimes a few beads. The “crushed” wire heads of early pins enabled this to be done quite easily.

bone head pin. A pin decorated with a bone head. Often inscribed with initials. Some times in particular shapes, i.e. a heart shape when the initials would be of the two lovers.

brass pinned bobbin. Brass pins are driven into the shank and cut off level with it. Similarly thorns were driven in to form a pattern. Initials of a persons name or their Christian name, is most often the chosen when the bobbin has an inscription. See pinned bobbin. pin spot, inlay. inlaid thorns

bugle. (1)A South Bucks term for a decorated pin. Early pin heads were separate rings of wire fixed around the end of a pointed wire and, as these could be removed, the beads could be pushed on to one pin and held in place by the head removed from another pin. Usually there are six small beads placed on the pin.

bugle. (2)A type of drawn bead that is varies greatly in size and length. Generally they are much longer than their diameter, but as they come in all lengths the very smallest of them appear round.

burr heads. Heads made from the seeds of goose grass are pushed on to the head of the pin and allowed to dry. The process is that the seeds were usually soaked in vinegar or milk. They would swell allowing the skin to be removed. The burr was then pushed over the head of the

pin. They dry quite hard. Those soaked in vinegar dried darker than those soaked in milk. One presumes they chose the media according to the depth of colour required.

corking pin or corkings. A large brass pin used to secure equipment, such as bobbin bag, pin cushion, pricking and so-on, to the pillow.

decorated pin. A pin decorated with beads, goose grass seeds or sealing wax as headpins and/or footpins.

detachable heads. Early pins had heads that were made of small pieces of wire that were pressed on to the wire pin with a press. There were “easily” detachable. An easier explanation would be “opposite to a fixed head pin”.

divider pin. A highly decorated, long pin, used to separate the bobbins on a pillow. They may have a wooden, bone or perhaps ivory head or just a nice bead or series of beads to make it look different and to be easily seen on the pillow.

fish bone. Used by poor lacemakers as a substitute for pins; possibly origin of the term bone lace.

footpins. Ornamented pins used for the “foot” of the lace.

glass head. Pins having fixed glass heads. Hopewell reports that they were usually imported from France.

goose grass seed heads. As described in “burr heads above.

hardhead. As described in “Burr head” above

hariffe pin. Pins having wax or burr heads.

head Pin. A decorated pin used at the head of the lace.

kingpin. A Bedfordshire term for a decorated pin. Until 1824 pin heads were separate rings of wire fixed around the end of a pointed wire and, as these could be removed, beads could be pushed on to one pin and retained in place by the head removed from another pin. Now glue is used to fix the beads in place. See also bugle, limmick striver.

lanking pins. A pin that has a conspicuous head, placed along the foot and the head of the lace in order to keep a firm edge

Limmicks North bucks name for a King pin or Bugle. These were pins decorated with beads and used for various functions on the pillow.

long Toms. Fine brass pins that were specially made for lace making. Also called yellow pins.

marker pin. A pin used to mark ones position, [particularly at the end of a lacemaking session.

needlepin. A sewing needle, usually size 8 or finer, set in a handle and used for taking needle pin sewings in Honiton lace. The taper towards the needle indicates a good functional design .

pin Brass pins have been used historically. Lace makers used a variety of pins on their pillows each having different uses. See article on pins later in the book.

pin lifter. A small implement for lifting pin heads that have been pushed down hard into a pillow. Care must be taken to avoid cutting threads when using. Also known as a lifter, push-me-pull-you.

pin. A small pointed piece of stiff wire. Originally not headed. Lacemakers used brass pins and often decorated them specially. (See article on pins) (See Wright p 36 p 123) and see if incorporated the info into the pins article.)

pin-vice. An pencil shaped implement, having a chuck or screw to hold the needle firmly in the end. The needle can be replaced whenever necessary. See also pricker.

pricker. A needle, having the same diameter as the pins to be used in the pattern, held in a pin vice or stuck in the end of a broken bobbin. The old ones were made of brass and quite ornate. Used for making a pricking. See also chubby pricker.

sealing wax ends. A pin that has a sealing wax end. Different colours were used for pins having differing functions.

stabbing pins. Long pins, approximately 17 cm long (6.5 inches) in length, used to store continental bobbins while working.

stacking pin. Large pins used to "stack" continental bobbins out of the way of the current portion of lace making. Six or eight are stacked away using two pins. One is fixed first, the second pin is passed under the thread of the bobbins, needed to be stacked, with the point close to the first pin and then levered up (thus "stacking" the bobbins) and pressed into the pillow

striver. A decorated pin, its name reflecting its function - i.e., to mark a position at which to aim in order to work quickly, such as when working a pattern repeat or a length to be made in a certain time. Often workers would compete against each other. Today, the name can be used for any decorated pin.

sweathearts Burr head pins

Venetian Pins decorated with an ornate Venetian Bead

yellow pins. See long toms. The standard brass pin used in lace making.

Conclusion.

Pins have been a very important part of social history. Lace makers, in particular use a great many pins. Traditionally they have used brass (non rusting) pins. Lace makers used these pins for different functions on their pillows and used their ingenuity to decorate them with bead, burrs, sealing wax etc. The names for different pins varied from place to place as also did many of their uses.

The lace makers used mainly brass pins for their work and the role of the pincushion was as much as a storage place for pins as it was for preventing tarnishing or indeed rust if non brass pins were used. Pins cushions were often filled with oily or abrasive substances. Modern developments of the pin allows for such developments as stainless steel pins, though most lacemakers stick with the brass pins

This article is written using mainly already published material. From the writings consulted there appears to be a difference of opinion on the roles of France and England in the manufacture and supply of pins. This will hopefully be clarified by some researcher in the future.

Readers are invited to correspond with me on this topic to correct facts or to make suggestions for improvement and especially if the reader is able to contribute further knowledge on the subject of pins.

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RANDOM NOTES ON PINS AND NEEDLES.

"Brass wire was invented in the 11th century, and by the 14th century steel wire drawing was being done by water power." -A.C. Crombie, *Medieval and Early Modern Science*, 1953, p. 216

"1573 - children in Sir Henry Sidney's household at Penshurst in Kent received an allowance of 3s worth of pins to last them six months. 1597 - L40,00 worth of pins and needles were said to be imported.

1609 - claimed that £60,000 worth of pins used in England every year, but the English pin makers could not produce enough or as cheap as the Dutch who made 13 to 19 different kinds they were made of metal and various sizes, long white, short white, double cawkins, angel, red number.

1578 draper's shop stocked 16,000 @ 1/2 d/m, 1,000 @ 18d/m, and rowd headed @ 13d/m.

1608 - 2 to 3000 said to be employed at pin making in and around London.

In 1560s or 70s, pins started being made in England using brass wire imported from Sweden and Germany to reduce importation from Holland. The Dutch production was mainly by paupers in workhouses. English proudly claimed their pins made by free men.! On average Dutch pins cost 1/3 less than English."

There's an informative small book *Needlemaking* by John G. Rollins, from Shire Publications Ltd. that gives more information.

Here is a quote from ""The New Gresham Dictionary of the English Language"" (1927)

""pin, n. [same as A. Sax. {pinn}, L. G. and D. {pin}, Dan. {pind}, G. {pinn}, W. {pin}, Ir. and Gael. {pinne}, a pin, a peg, &c., fr. L. {pinna} or {penna}, a feather, a pen. PEN.] A longish piece of metal, wood, or the like, used for a fastening, or as a support from which a thing maybe hung; a peg; a bolt; a small piece of wire pointed at one end, and with a rounded head at the other, used for fastening clothes &c. ; a peg in stringed musical instruments for adjusting the tension of the strings; the centre part of a target; a central part. - v.t. pret. &c. pp. {pinned}, pind; ppr. {pinning}, pin'ing. To fasten with a pin or pins; to clutch; to hold fast. --v.t. to inclose; to confine; to pen or pound.""

While some bobbin lace makers today finish and mount their own lace, in the past this was done by a specialist called, in French, a monteuse. The fineness of the needle depends, of course, on the thread to be used which typically, is a size thinner than the thread used for the lace itself. "

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