

THE UNIQUE NAMES OF LACE BOBBINS USED IN THE OLNEY MUSEUM.

Brian Lemin. Reviewed December 2010

Introduction

If you are not a lace maker then you will remember that Olney is famous for the two hymn writers William Cowper (1731 - 1800) and John Newton (1725 - 1807). Of course John Newton has valued connections with the abolition of the slave trade in England.

If you are a lace maker then you will know that Olney was the place of trade of Harry Armstrong, the founder of the Bucks Cottage workers Agency. This was an agency that brought together the wares of all the Lace makers in the area.

Olney is also famous in the lace making "society" as being the base of a local historian named Thomas Wright. Most lace makers have his book "The Romance of the Lace Pillow."

It was Armstrong who published this invaluable history, and the story goes that Wright rode his bicycle around the lanes and villages of the area to collect the information that he eventually included in his book. (This story is sometimes attributed to Huetson)

The Museum

The town hosts the Cowper and Newton Museum dedicated to them. The museum was William Cowper's actual house, and was given to the town in 1905 by the publisher William Hill Collingridge (who had been born in the house himself). In this museum there is a less than reasonable space given over to the lace industry and to lace bobbins themselves. (*My personal opinion*)

The bobbin collection could be said to be small compared with the museums of Luton and Bedford, but none-the-less it is an enormously interesting museum from the viewpoint of the assumed influence of Thomas Wright and Harry Armstrong had and the recorded local history relating to lace and lace bobbins.

I am not too sure but I am under the impression that other collectors and writers of repute also had associations with Olney, those of Huetson and Knight. At some time their collection was merged together, and though never part of the museum collection still forms a great historical resource in the form of a catalogue accompanied by small (sadly) photographs of each page. The collection was acquired by a Mr. Baker and it was his daughter who catalogued the collection, I believe after the death of her father. I am very pleased to tell the reader that this catalogue is soon to be produced in electronic form together with digital pictures of the trays and also details of the other interests and collections of Mr. Baker. This work is being undertaken by Baker's daughter, Jenny Baker.

I think it reasonable to say that it will be available during the year 2011.

The Collection

It is some years since I visited the museum, but I remember thinking that that even the labels of the collection appeared to be “old”. As I avidly perused the bobbins I noted with great interest that whilst many of the bobbins were named according to a “modern” naming approach, there were many that had totally unique names.

I have never been in a position to photograph any of the collection but my notes and sketches are very specific, and to this day I have not found these unique names repeated anywhere in the literature or in other museums.

Here are my recollections of these special bobbins.

1. The most impressive bobbin of the whole collection is called a “Bishops Crozier”. It is bone and spangled, it is slim but is punctuated with three (4 if you count the tails of the bobbin) Bulbs which themselves are decorated with coloured dots. In between is about 10 mms of narrow bone. There are no loose rings on them. This surprises me, as in my experience the maker (Joseph Haskins) would normally have at least one or even two loose rings on each of these exposed portions. (See C and D Springett page 30 for similar style of bobbins)

The origin of the name is fairly obvious as it has at least some similarities in appearance of a Bishops Crozier (But no shepherd hook of course)

2. Old Grandfather Variety.

These are wooden and quite thick and comparatively heavy. They are spangled. They have the bottom half of the shaft turned in consecutive bulbs. There are some similarities with the bobbins from the Saunders factory. If you are looking for an older date of manufacture then possibly David Haskins fits the bill.

Similar bobbins to these can be found in many collections and are variously named with the title “gimp” probably most frequently seen in any description.

I find it is nice to have a name to put to such bobbins.

3. Old Chessmen” (Bucks Gimp)

These are made of wood, long and comparatively slim. They are ‘baluster turned” i.e. imitating the baluster of a stair post. The interesting thing about these is that they are clearly labelled as to their function in being the Gimp bobbin.

Again these can be seen in many collections and speculation as to the maker is similar to those mentioned in the “grandfather” above.

4. Bucks “Spotted Dog” bobbins.

They are what we know in more modern terminology as "Leopards". These are bobbins with pewter spots inlaid into the shaft. The interesting thing about these bobbins is that they are almost certainly suffering from pewter degradation as all the spots are protruding from the shaft.

It is doubtful that the maker did this purposefully, but that over the period of time since they were made, the degradation has caused them to protrude. If I am right then the next stage would be for the pewter to fall out (Good job they are in a museum and not handled very much).

The lace makers use to like these bobbins as they thought that the contact their hands had with the pewter helped ward off or "cure" arthritis of the hands and fingers!.

Conclusion.

What is in a name? Probably most bobbin names that we use are of modern invention, so it is nice to see that the museum that has the oldest association with bobbin collectors and authors, has some very real differences in the names they have given to their bobbins.

I like to think that these are possibly more accurate than those found in other bobbin displays. But of course I may well be wrong and if you have any other theories or facts, please feel free to contact me.

I regret that I was never able to get permission to photograph any of these bobbins. I was on holiday and the red tape required to gain such permission would have taken too long. If I may express a personal opinion it is that the museum does not fully understand the value of its small, but historical, collection of lace bobbins. I fear that the popularity of Cowper and Newton has clouded the administrator's view of this important exhibit; but then... I am biased. 😊