

WHEN DID EAST MIDLAND BOBBINS BECOME SPANGLED?

A beginning contribution to the question.

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Please note that since writing this I have some other ideas that are less scientific but fun to cogitate upon.

I also need to say that this article was challenged by more than one person of knowledge; it was also refused publication at the time. That is OK by me but I have yet to see an alternative theory put forward.

I offer it in the spirit in which it was written, as a contribution towards one day (perhaps) finding the real answer.

Introduction.

Why and when East Midland bobbins began to be spangled has been subject to much speculation by those interested in lace and lace bobbins. Until comparatively recently I have only interested myself on this subject in a peripheral manner, but I have taken the opportunity to ask many lace makers in person and through the Arachne email list what, in their opinion, was the value of spangles. I have gleaned a few answers over the years, but as to dating the introduction of this feature to the bobbins there are few theories.

In my visit to the United Kingdom a few years ago I was fortunate to be able to handle a large amount of bobbins from some very excellent private collections, and in one of these collections I saw something which may well contribute to the answer as to the date of the fashion or need for East Midland bobbins to be spangled.

Some theories that are current.

Two of the main ideas for spangling are to bring tension to the lace and secondly to stop the thread from unwinding.

In my discussions and search for answers I have come to the conclusion that the first theory of the spangles being used for tension is a very tenuous argument. There may well be some contribution to tension from the spangles but a majority of lace makers I spoke to felt that tension is more an attribute of the lace maker's actions than the weight of the spangles.

Regarding the second theory, that of prevention of the thread from unwinding, this relates to the introduction of machine-spun thread, initially via the fabled "Spinning Jenny". The proponents of this theory maintain that the machine spun thread had more of a tendency to "unwind" than that of the hand spun thread. This may well be so, but critics often ask why the "continental" lace makers who used lace techniques that were "non-sewing" did not adopt the same spangling as the English lace makers did. That is not to say that spangles are never found on continental bobbins as they are. In particular one can see the intricately carved hinge spangle used in some European countries. They also site that many English lace making regions managed the problem of the thread unwinding without the use of spangles.

In regard to the dating of the introduction of spangles, we can make a contribution to this by looking at the date of the introduction of spun thread to lace bobbin making. Pat Earnshaw 1980 (The Identification of Lace. Shire Publications) states; "A cotton

thread smooth enough and strong enough for hand made laces could not be spun by machine until 1803 and was scarcely used for bobbin laces before 1833..." pg.23. These dates give us a starting point for possible dating the introduction of spangling.

The evidence of history.

The oldest bobbins excavated are most interesting. Bodil Tornehave 1987 (Danske Frihandskniplinger. Notebene p 17) has a photo in her book of seven bobbins excavated from middens that could be dated from 1570 to 1650. The oldest amongst them is a slim single neck bobbin made of bone that is un-spangled. The rest of the bobbins are unmistakably in the bulbous continental style.

A somewhat similar un-spangled bobbin was unearthed near Gloucester that Carol Morris 1988 (Lace Vol 49 p19,20) has suggested could be dated late 1600's or early 1700's. This bobbin was un-spangled. In the accompanying photo you will see a reproduction of this bobbin along side another bobbin, which I found in one of the collections I examined. There are indeed some similarities between them.



(Please note the top bobbin is just one that I found in a collection)

When did the change happen?

It is reasonable to say that all lace historians agree that early English lace bobbins were not spangled, but we have difficulty in dating the change to spangled bobbins in the East Midland. Of course spangles were never introduced to Bedfordshire, East Devon, Malmesbury or Downton bobbins.

In the accompanying pictures are two sets of bobbins. In the first picture they are all un-spangled and in the second they are spangled. Studying the heads of these bobbins, one comes to the conclusion that the makers of these bobbins include Joseph Haskins. The tails are not necessarily indicative of these makers' later spangled bobbins.

In the second picture, the bobbins include some bobbins by the same makers; this time they are spangled. As a note to this picture you will also notice that those bobbins that have a "square base at the tail are with one exception, what is known as "staple" spangled, i.e. there is no hole drilled in the bobbins. As a theory I suggest that staple spangling is more easily undertaken as a DIY project than drilling or burning a hole in the bobbin in the time which we are discussing. At that time small drills would be specialists equipment, and I personally find that burning hole through wooden bobbins is not at all easy. Later bobbins would be pre-drilled by the bobbin maker for spangling.

If we accept these pictures as a contribution to the date of the change over to spangles then we need to consider the dates when the Haskins' were making bobbins. These dates are late 1700s to the mid 1800's.

Conclusion.

The dates of these bobbins coincide quite nicely with the dates of the introduction of spun thread, i.e. 1803 - 1833 (See Pam Nottingham above). Most of the other bobbin makers whose making we can date come after the Haskins brothers and would therefore produce bobbins ready for spangling.

I would caution readers of this article not to use my arguments as being definitive in this question, it is but a contribution to the discussion that I believe will continue to be debated amongst those interested in studying this question.

I fully admit that I can be challenged, and would welcome further discussion on the topic as through this type of interchange we may be able, one day, to become somewhat more certain of when and why East Midland bobbins were spangled.



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A set of spangled bobbins and in the following photograph you will see the "same" bobbins unspangled. This gives rise to the theory that either the bobbins were being used for a different kind of lace or that it



was during the time of this maker that bobbins began to be spangled