

THE SHEPHERDS BOBBIN FROM THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM CAMBRIDGE: A SECOND LOOK.

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INTRODUCTION:

Carole Morris first visited this bobbin in the Lace guild Magazine; *A Shepherds Gift*. Lace Number 58 Spring 1990. She records the circumstances of this find and the accession information which tells us that the bobbin was "Given by Mrs. E. M. Stevens, Bury St Edmunds, and Accession Number T.7.1944.

Carole Morris tells us that the bobbin is 84mm long. I calculate this as being about 3 inches and 5/16ths long. She is emphatic that the bobbin is totally hand carved and whilst I have no reason to disbelieve this as on the photographs the marks of the knife are clearly seen in the concave carving of the tail of the bobbin, I do raise some questions on this statement.

It has a short neck and a single head in the manner of the South Bucks bobbin style. Carole Morris' description of the bobbin is excellent and I commend reading her article in association with this more detailed analysis of a wonderful find and addition to lace bobbin history.

The purpose of this article is to present a photograph of the bobbin with the kind permission of the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge and to make easily it more easily available to historians, lace makers and lace bobbin collectors.

THE PHOTOGRAPH.

As you will see, just as Carole Morris did a projection of the decoration in her detailed sketches which accompanies her article, I have manipulated the pictures sent to me by the Museum to similarly project as if on to a flat surface. I find this a most useful device to study the bobbin in absence of the original in ones hand.

I clearly stand by what Carole Morris has said in emphatic terms that the body of the bobbin is hand carved, she has seen it and handled it; however I am forced to say that other than the concave carving at the tail, that *from this picture* I could be quite easily be convinced that the head, neck and main body of this bobbin was turned on a lathe.

I experimented with cutting the image in half lengthways, flipping it and laying it (with a slight margin for demonstration purposes: *see the top 2mm margin* between the layers) to show a degree of cylindrical accuracy that I doubt would occur in a totally hand carved bobbin. I fully admit that I may well be wrong.



© Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
T.7-1944
Lace Bobbin (detail)
English, c.1795
Wood, carved with figures

It is great not writing an academic paper as I can just chat to you readers how I feel about what I am saying.

Firstly, I have never handled this bobbin; I am working purely from photographs. Secondly, manipulating photographs at the skill level I have can be challenged. However there are many examples of bobbins being firstly turned and then carved. In the recent sales of the Springett's bobbin collection I have seen on a couple of occasions that he tells us that the bobbin was first offered up to the lathe and then carved. I need to emphasize that I am not taking away anything from Carole Morris's description as I consider her much more qualified in this field than I am. I am purely expressing an opinion, and I am well aware that it is a "second hand" opinion. *After all that (which I put in to fill up a space that this picture would not fit in!!), here is the picture.*



This has to be a unique and beautiful bobbin.
 What a wonderful story it has to tell, if we could only hear it.

© Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge'

T.7-1944

Lace Bobbin

English, c.1795

>Wood, carved with figures

You will notice that I did the right hand inset in a more simple manner to take away some of the difficulties you get when trying to make a cylinder (the bobbin) flat. However it is all there on the left hand side for you to see.

The bobbin is skillfully carved, not exactly in the "scratching" form of scrimshaw, but the tradition of representative detailed pocket knife carving is maintained. If you want to know the story, just look at it and tell it to yourself, it will be much better than I could ever tell it!

☺

Well, I had better get to the analysis of the bobbin from the viewpoint of a self styled "Lace Bobbin Historian" and a wood turner. I propose to take each of the features of the decoration and make some comments upon them.

THE DECORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS BOBBIN.

The Initials:

They are **EB** ... two sets of decoration and then **F**
As far as I can tell they have no specific interpretation as to names that they might represent.

The presence of initials on such a bobbin has been suggested that they represent the giver and the receiver of the bobbin.

Let us have a look at them



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Firstly we see some attempt at using seraphs in the overall set of initials. This was quite a common approach in carving letters, both comprising a series of dots (East Midland) and straight carving of letters (East Devon/Downton) [general comments, of course there are exceptions]

As a person who probably looks at bobbins on a daily basis, this form of initials looks familiar to me. Let me show you some examples. I am not particularly trying to match them with the Shepherds bobbin, but just to give you an idea that it is not a unique bobbin decoration.

Firstly here are some letters I have collected from various bobbins



Below are the wide Maltese cross and the narrow Maltese cross separators



I think I have made my point, that the use of initials and those particular separators is very common in East Devon bobbins and possibly in Downton bobbins. (I had just as well make a plea for more decorated Downton bobbin pictures... never miss an opportunity!)

Now I propose to move over to another design feature.

THE LEAVES

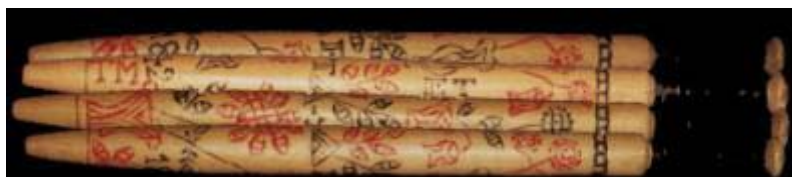
The designs of these leaves are all on a stem and both stand alone in an upright position, or intertwined in a somewhat realistic manner. The identification of these leaves would be both difficult and probably impossible as they are in a representative form. However their overall function gives the bobbin both a "full" look and enhances the rural atmosphere. Their curves enhance the shape of the bobbin and can only be seen as an excellent design feature.

To save you going back to see the picture here again is a section of it. Yes, it has the bird in it but that will be the next design feature to talk about.



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Of course you know by now I am going to show you examples of this feature from other lace bobbins. Well here they are.



These examples show both shaded and un-shaded leaves. The Shepherds bobbin has un-shaded leaves. From what I am beginning to learn is that Downton bobbins have shaded leaves and East Devon bobbins have either. More study is required to answer these hypotheses.

THE BIRD

Well the bird is a very frequent feature on East Devon bobbins. It is generally thought to be a special local bird called a Chough. Robin like? Who knows, as there are a group of birds that can be readily identified as such but there are also other bird depictions that are more difficult to identify.

Here are a few of my examples.



I think the right side is a Chough and the left "doves" or love birds of some type.

None of my other birds are sufficiently like the one on the shepherd's bobbin to bother you with. I was looking for one that had protruding tail feathers and was cross hatched, but I failed. ☹️ My example should, once again, tell you that the many of the bobbin features are not totally unique.

THE STARS.

My father was a navigational officer on merchant ships and knew his skies (Northern and Southern hemispheres) so well. He would walk out in the garden on a starry night and would open the heavens to me! If only he were around now, I would have listened and learned! Is that not the way of life?

Of course I am being a bit fanciful now, but I see the big dipper (or little dipper) on the bobbin. Yes I know the numbers of stars on the ladle are not correct; but here is a shepherd out on the hills at night looking up to the sky and seeing that wonderful constellation. Here it is... please synchronize your imagination to mine!



© Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge'
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Lace Bobbin (detail)
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I do hope you can make the connection, mind you the readers from the Southern Hemisphere in New Zealand and Australia will claim the top left group as their flag!!! Yep, if I was the shepherd who carved this, the stars would be included. (You see, I am not totally cold and technical, I do have a soft spot too...) But, Oh yes, there are stars on other bobbins too, but never as romantic as the shepherds stars.



OTHER DESIGN FEATURES SEEN ELSEWHERE.

Before I get on to the unique features of design on this bobbin I will look at three of the remaining that are in some ways repeatable on other bobbins.



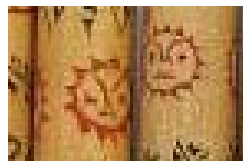
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Hearts:

They are in abundance, plain hearts, hearts with inside shading hearts with outside shading, hearts in the shape of a four leafed clover. You name it and I can show it to you. So I won't... now at least!

Suns:

I love them; a friend and I are looking at the depiction of suns on East Devon bobbins, to see if we can get clues from them as to whom might be the decorator. They are fun, so at this stage of a technical article I ought to infuse some fun so I will show you some "suns".



Mind you the shepherd's sun is a bit classy. I thought at one stage it might be a shield, but no, he does good cross hatching and uses it to good effect in his design.

The lady:

You might think that this would have stumped me, but no, I can even show you mermaids and that is something you do not see on East Midland bobbins.

I think the shepherd's lady is quite the best I have seen; many a lady would love to have her waist and hips, and possibly even her elegant clothes. So here are my ladies, they don't compete except for their hair (!) Have a look.



What lovely ladies. ☺

I can't compare and contrast them to the shepherds lady, but you good folks so closely associated with textiles, will certainly be able to teach me a few things about them.

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT THE DECORATION?

Well firstly the man. I have not seen anything like as good representations of a shepherd man anywhere before; in fact no man at all as far as I can remember.

Next there is the River/stream and goats.

Surely they are goats? I even went up the road to the goat farm to have a look and decided that they were goats. Please correct me if I am wrong. Oh, someone suggested deer or even exotic African animals. No, I will stick with goats. They are dynamic, you can see them running there is even some perspective in them with both the size and shading; just the best part of the bobbin.

Since writing this paragraph I remembered that there is an animal on another unique bobbin "Elizabeth Jones" It has a name, a fish and the following animal.



I am not sure what animal this may be.

It is the stream that sets the whole scene, two lovers out in the starlight by the stream, they startle the goats, walk through the trees, arm in arm, hope for the sun not to rise. Listen to the bird's dawn chorus.... and I had better stop there.

THE SPANGLE AND THE DATE.

To me these are two things that spoil the whole experience of looking at this bobbin. I do not want to barge into the argument of when East Midland bobbins became spangled. I "think" the current thinking is that there was a transition time around the 1820's and onward.

Certainly the evidence of side by side bobbins, both by the same maker, some drilled others undrilled and spangled, dates from mid 1800s. I know there is controversy about this, but a bobbin with a spangle on it dated 1795 surprised me.

Because of the vagaries of dated bobbins being inaccurate I am reluctant to come out with this as evidence that spangles were in vogue in 1795. Likewise, the bobbin could have been spangled at a later date. Quite possible. Let us speculate about this for a moment or two.

Firstly it seems to be a bobbin that is not East Midlands in origin. There is something of the South Bucks in it, a non spangled style of bobbin. However there are plenty of spangled South Bucks bobbins around.

To me the decoration just cries out to have been influenced by the East Devon bobbins or possibly the Downton bobbins; both of which are not spangled styles of bobbins.

Then there is my possibly ill founded supposition, that the bobbin was a turned bobbin and then carved. It is obvious that the bottom concave portion of the shank is hand carved. Could it be that this hand carving and the addition of a spangle was done at a later date? Or, is 1795 the wrong date?

CONCLUSION

I end a lot of my research articles with "I do not know", and this is no exception if we are looking at answers to the questions posed above. However I am sure that this is one of the most interesting, emotive and well decorated bobbins that I have had the privilege to see.

Thank you Carole Morris and the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge.



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