

# A MOST UNUSUAL LACE BOBBIN FROM A SURPRISING SOURCE.

Brian Lemin with Diana Smith. April 2014

## Introduction:

I have just finished Arachne correspondence about a "dubious" bobbin that was authentic as far as the bobbin maker was concerned but the inscription on it was clearly by someone else at a later time; this made me decide that it was time I shared thoughts on the Horatio Nelson bobbin that appeared on eBay some time ago.

It was presented as a French Napoleonic Prisoner of War craft bobbin, and to be fair, I found that believable except for one thing.... It was the only lace bobbin of this type that I had come across during my many years of bobbin research, and I still wonder about that; but I jump ahead of myself.

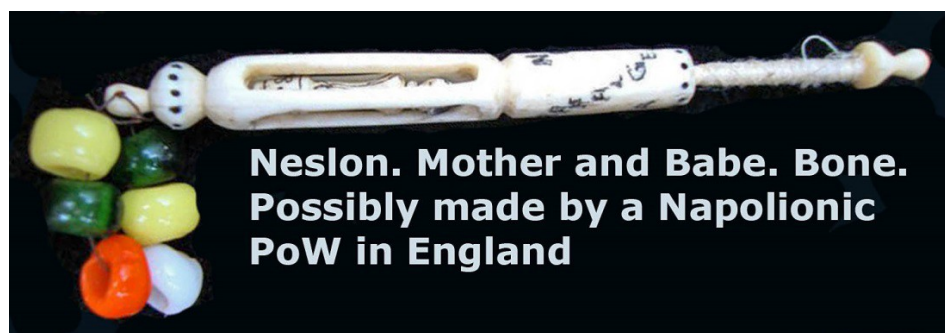
Here is the listing description:

## ***Antiques and Collectables from Suffolk***

*Rare Antique Ox Bone Lord Nelson Lace Bobbin - Scrimshaw Napoleonic PoW Interest*

*Arrived with a small collection of lace bobbins, this one stood out and is something I haven't seen before. Hand carved or whittled from a piece of ox or mutton bone this depicts a figure of Nelson that floats within the bobbin with the date 1805 carved to the base. The Bobbin has dot decoration and the words Trafalgar Nelson October carved and filled in black. I have taken a number of photos so you can see this has not been turned on a lathe and I wonder if it was produced by POW. Tried to find a similar example but haven't seen anything close - nearest was a lace bobbin referred to as a mother and baby bobbin. A real folk art piece with a slight curvature along length due to movement and some minor age related hairlines. Measures 95mm in length excluding glass beads.*

And here is a picture:



Ok all you sharp eyed people.. Yes I spelt NELSON wrongly in the caption.. Sorry! Bobbin makers are notoriously bad "spellers" so I will leave it... proof!

## **French Prisoners of War in England. 1803-1814.**

(These dates vary with different sources)

During the Napoleonic Wars, over 100,000 French prisoners of war were detained in Britain. These prisoners represent a key turning point in the history of European prisoners of war, and their predicament offers insights into the nature of the French Revolution. They were held for a long time in England and various articles I have read tell of their loneliness and very poor conditions.

Unlike eighteenth-century prisoners of war, prisoners of the Napoleonic Wars remained captive for the duration of the conflict, unable to return home through the traditional means of prisoner exchange or officer parole.

Enlisted soldiers and seamen had the worst of it with many being confined in horrific conditions on moored hulks. The luckier ones were housed in the specially built prison on Dartmoor, to which many American prisoners were also sent from 1812 to 1815.

Officers were however given the opportunity to give their parole – their word of honour, in writing, not to escape – and to live relatively normal lives in lodgings in a few specified British towns. The French established a similar regime for British officer prisoners at Verdun in Eastern France.

The Prisoners daily allowance seems to have been on the meagre side and many of the prisoners supplemented their incomes by giving lessons in French, fencing or drawing. Others seem to have made for sale, tobacco boxes, sets of dominoes and other works of art. Some may have built model ships of the type made from bone and rigged with human hair which are associated with the French prisoners – one of these occasionally appears at auction houses. Many of these craft pieces are beautifully constructed from very few artistic resources available to them.

The use of animal bone to create artefacts was a very common pastime amongst prisoners held in Britain during the Napoleonic wars. We believe that the bone they used were left-overs from their meals?

As well as acting as a diversion from their mundane and deprived lives, it was also a lucrative pastime. Items such as ship models, cribbage and chess sets, and automata were traded both within the prisons and in local markets. The money was utilized in various ways, such as to purchase extra food rations or a more comfortable sleeping place, and even to help fund escape attempts. Communities of bone workers became an intrinsic part of life within prisons across Britain, and the unskilled began to participate when the advantages of the work became apparent.

## Were they bobbin makers?

Since starting this little bit of research I have become convinced that they must have made lace bobbins. I have a few references that I would like to share with you. The first is the most persuasive and appears to be from a well-researched document (Others I have found quote comparatively recent newspapers etc.). This reference tells clearly of the success of the Napoleonic PoWs at lace making, it is talking about lace making being started by the PoWs.

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*The brilliant idea of starting this belonged to a French soldier prisoner who had been born and bred in a lace-making country, and had been accustomed to see all the women working at it. He recalled the process by memory, took pupils, and in less than a year there were 3,000 prisoners in Portchester making lace, and among these were 'capitalists' who employed each as many as from fifty to sixty workmen. So beautiful was this lace, and so largely was it bought by the surrounding families, that the English lace-makers protested, its manufacture within the prison was forbidden, and it is said that the work of suppression was carried out in the most brutal manner, the machines being broken and all lace in stock or in process of manufacture destroyed.*

You might notice that the article talks about the "machines" being destroyed. Most of you will know that machine lace was not invented until 1808 and did not come into general manufacture until about 1860. Our dates are about 1800 to 1816. What were destroyed were the pillows and presumably the bobbins.

It certainly appears that these men were good lace makers. There is no doubt they were excellent craft artisans who made many ornamental and useful articles to sell to the population in order to supplement their income. It seems very reasonable that they would also make lace bobbins to sell.

What follows is a bit gory, but give insight into the condition of the prisoners and some of their "lace" activities.

It is taken from a story about fugitive PoWs.

*..... This was seen from the shore, a fleet of boats set off in pursuit, and, after a smart chase one account says of fifteen miles the fugitives were captured, although it was thought that they would have escaped had they known how to manage a sailing boat. They were taken on board H.M.S. Centaur, searched, and upon them were found three knives and a large sum of money. They*

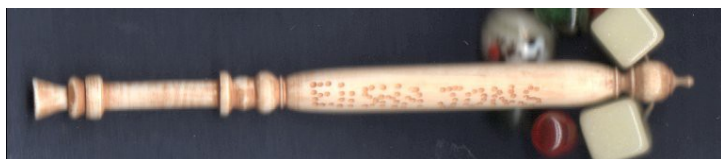
*were taken then to jail ashore. One of the prisoners was found to have thirty crown pieces concealed about him, and confessed that having saved up this money, which he had made by the sale of lace, toys, and other manufactures, he had bought a suit of decent clothes, and, mixing with visitors to the depot, thus disguised had got off. In the meanwhile the body of Brothers had been recovered, placed first in one of the casemates of Point Battery, and then taken amidst an enormous crowd to his house in Surrey Street, Landport.*

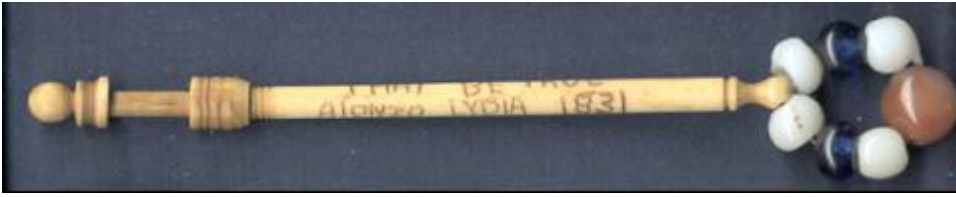
I think they did make lace bobbins. I have stated this on the reasonable suppositions that A. They made lace on a large scale; B. they organized large groups of lace makers; C. That they were skilled artisans capable of making many arts and crafts and domestic tools which they sold for income...they were clearly in a position to make lace bobbins and indeed the pillows that went with the making of lace.

For the same reasons I believe they were more than capable of making the rudimentary lathes that would turn lace bobbins. Even the established English lace bobbin makers of that time had little more than rudimentary lathes to use.

I stand to be challenged as always (you never learn unless your ideas are challenged!) but, having established that they could and almost certainly did make lace bobbins, let us look at what some experienced lace bobbin collectors consider that at least few of their bobbins within their collection are suitably different to warrant a "left of field" identification.

We tend to think that the Springetts book identified all the bobbin makers and also placed certain designs and features to these bobbin makers. Their work was and is, invaluable to bobbin collectors, but as with all research it has been built upon since its publication, and whilst no one seems to want to publish another book on lace bobbins, if they did and they chose to, there are possibly about 6 other bobbin makers that can be identified. We would need to give them numbers as did the Springetts but if you have a collection of any number, you will find that there are little groups of your bobbins that you can separate out as being all by the same maker but not from one of Springetts groups." Having said that here are few that have been presented to me as being possibly of PoW origin.





The collector firstly attributes the color and quality of the bone to that of aged, unbleached bone, typical of that used by carving a bobbin from the meat on the table. Secondly, the research seems to show that they were from an area close to the camps or settling areas of the PoWs.

Some might think this evidence could be stronger, but as I often say, if you handle the bobbins of your collection regularly you get to know and feel what you are handling. Perhaps with the publication of this article others may look within their collection with slightly different eyes.

I would like to make just one off topic comment, we often think that we need to have expensive, and ornate or different bobbins to make up a good collection, this is not so, there is so much history and tradition in every antique bobbin that we own. Love them and cherish them! *(I must be going sippy in my old age!!!)* 😊

## Tools and Skills

I have popped in this section because those of you who may be unaware of the heritage these PoWs left behind in the area of arts and crafts, can only become more interested in them. Also I wanted to show that they had access to the same tools as our bobbin makers did, and thus by reasonable inference accept that they made or had access to lathes.

These next two pictures show the use of a brad point drill by a bobbin maker and by a PoW. They both use what Springett calls the "Porthole" decoration.

Here is a PoW whistle...



Also this bobbin from a well-known, but unnamed maker. (Springett: Maker No. 1)"



Look at the "porthole" decoration on the whistle and the similar decoration of the posthole bobbin maker...

Now look at the tail of the top bobbin (above in the article, not this picture, i.e. Elisha Jons) and top of the whistle, they both share that ornate pointed tail decoration.

Here are a few pictures of the PoW crafts that they indulged in.







The  
Look up  
PoW art

Google images. It is amazing stuff they



above is a  
guillotine!  
Napoleonic  
and craft on  
made.

We need to explore one more area of the possibility of PoW bobbins being amongst us; that of "hand carved lace bobbins".

### **Hand Carved Lace bobbins and the Napoleonic PoWs.**

I have to say that this opens up a whole new area of research for me, I wonder if I will ever get to it? The fact that they did so much hand carving of bone makes me think that they may well have hand carved some lace bobbins. Look, ... I have only skimmed the net and my photo collections and I do not seem to have found a bone hand carved bobbin. Maybe you have one? If so send me a picture please! I have however seen this picture of baby teething rings that they carved and I can easily see repeated decorations from the teething rings on wooden hand carved bobbins.



Teething rings. PoW carved.



Wooden hand carved bobbin. Maker unknown





Two bone hand carved bobbins. Makers unknown... but... maybe? (More research to be done!)

## **Napoleonic PoWs location in England**

The following is a list of camps that were land based, some of them clearly located in lace making area in England.

*Napoleonic PoW camps ashore.*

Sissinghurst castle Near Cranbrook

Norman Cross Near Peterborough

Perth in Scotland

Portchester Near Portsmouth

Liverpool Cheshire

Greenlaw Valley field Near Edinburgh

Stapleton (Nr Bristol)

Forton Portsmouth

Millbay Plymouth

Dartmoor. Devonshire

The evidence certainly seems to be building up towards establishing the facts that: A. The Pows made lace and B. They had the skills and the need to make bobbins to sustain these activities.

The mechanism appears to be that the French officer who had parole, in many cases were the entrepreneurs identifying the activities that would bring them, and often their other countrymen, an income to improve their living circumstances. Those living in or near lace making areas would have seen that this was an income producing activity and thus involved themselves and their fellow prisoners in such activities, lace bobbins almost certainly as one of the products made for sale of for their own lace making activities. (Certainly in Portchester)

Thought the lace makers of that time may not have been making a great deal of money from their work, even a small income would be acceptable to a PoW.

The following map gives a general indication of where they were and it can be seen that more than a few are adjacent to lace making areas. One of the largest camps

was Norman Cross, and that is very strategically placed for such activities by the skilled and highly motivated PoWs. I am left with little doubt that would have jumped at the chance to make money by carving or turning lace bobbins.



Please ignore the Google "A" droplet!

I need to spend a little time on the Norman Cross PoW camp. Norman Cross lies in the north-west corner of Cambridge shire, south-west of the City of Peterborough and this location, up against an established region of lace making, recommends itself for a brief description. It was the biggest camp of its type and often held as many as 4,000 prisoners. I am now going to reproduce a section on Norman Cross from Wikipedia:

### *Craft and prison economy*

*At the outbreak of the war, the Transport Board wrote that "the prisoners in all the depots in the country are at full liberty to exercise their industry within the prisons, in manufacturing and selling any articles they may think proper excepting those which would affect the Revenue in opposition to the Laws, obscene toys and drawings, or articles made either from their clothing or the prison stores".*

*Many prisoners at Norman Cross made artefacts such as toys, model ships and dominoes sets from carved wood or animal bone, and straw marquetry. Examples of the prisoners' craftwork were sold to visitors and passers by. Some highly skilled prisoners were commissioned by wealthy individuals, some of the prisoners becoming very rich in the process.<sup>[6]</sup> Archdeacon William Strong, a regular visitor to the prison, notes in his*

diary of 23 October 1801 that he provided a piece of mahogany and paid a prisoner £1 15s 6d to build a model of the Block House and £2 2s for a straw picture of Peterborough Cathedral.<sup>[2]</sup>

Prisoners were permitted to sell artefacts twice a week at the local market, or daily at the prison gate. Prices were regulated so the prisoners did not undersell local industries. In return, prisoners were permitted to buy additional food, tobacco, wine, clothes or materials for further work.

At the end of the war, the Transport Board noted that some prisoners had earned as much as 100 guineas.

Thousands of Norman Cross artefacts survive today in local museums, including 500 in Peterborough Museum, and private collections. A collection of model ships made at Norman Cross is on display at Arlington Court in Devon.

During December 1804, prisoners Nicholas Deschamps and Jean Roubillard were discovered forging £1 notes. Engraved plates of a very high standard and printing implements were found. The prisoners were convicted of forgery at the Huntingdon Assizes. Forging banknotes was a capital offence at the time. They were sentenced to death but this was commuted. They remained in Huntingdon Gaol until they were repatriated to France in 1814.

Another entry says...

Boredom was also a problem, and to counteract widespread gambling the inmates were encouraged to make and sell craft items from bone, wood and other materials. Many of these survive in Peterborough Museum. Time Team found further evidence of this in the form of a large collection of bone-working debris, and some finished objects (combs, needles, buttons, dominoes).

To me, it seems unconceivable, that such a group of men, skilled and motivated, would not have "cashed in" on making lace bobbins.

Now let's get to the actual bobbin itself.

### **The Nelson Bobbin.**



I have to say that I was skeptical about the alleged origin of this bobbin when it first appeared on eBay. I wrote many times to the dealer asking him many questions and he was kind enough to send me many other pictures and answer questions for me.

One of the questions was "Does the depiction of Nelson in the babe wear an eye patch?" His reply was no, so I then researched the Nelson Eye patch and this is what I found:

*Nelson lost the sight of his right eye in 1794, but since the eye was not removed and appeared externally normal, there was no need to cover it with a patch. After 1801, he wore a green eye shade above his eyes to shield the good eye from sunlight.*

*Contemporary portraits of Nelson generally show him with both eyes uncovered and none show a patch over his sightless eye.*

So my skepticism was not resolved in that direction.

I next asked him a series of questions about the "scrimshaw" on the bobbin. I have written in some depth about scrimshaw in:

*[Lemin, Brian. An Analysis of Maritime Decorations and Possible Decorators of Ships Depicted on East Devon Bobbins, 23 pages. <https://www.cs.arizona.edu/patterns/weaving/lace.html>]*

He is an experienced dealer in PoWs Arts and Crafts and he told me that the quality of scrimshaw he saw on the bobbin equated with some of the poor quality scrimshaw he saw on things like domino sets and some boxes known to be made by Napoleonic PoWs.

Well, he knows more than I do in that quarter, so again my skepticism was not proven in that direction.

Next came a series of questions on lathe turning. He stated that it was not lathe turned in the advertisement, so I asked a few pertinent questions about the signs of a lathe turned object and the Nelson bobbin. To be honest, close examination of the images shows a few

telltale signs of "carving marks", and less than good symmetry. He answered those questions most satisfactorily in my judgment.

Let's us take a look at some of the detailed pictures of the bobbin.





You can see the carving marks on these pictures quite clearly. I thought one of them was an "eye patch" picture but then realized it was not his face being shown. The dates are right. I just think that this is an amazing bobbin, right up there with the best of our East Midland and East Devon makers and decorators.

### **Conclusion**

So what more can I say?



That it is a hand carved, Mother and Babe bobbin, from bone, with the babe depicting Admiral Nelson. It fits with the PoWs arts and crafts activities in style and execution. They were intimately involved in lace making and I see no reason at all not to believe that they made lace bobbins also.

If I am to commit myself unequivocally that it is a Napoleonic PoW lace bobbin, I hold back slightly for three reasons:

1. It is the only one that has emerged in the history of documentation of East Midland Lace bobbins. I would have thought that at least a few more of this type would have emerged. ( Note, this same argument can be applied to the following two reservations) Also the bone is not age discoloured, but white.
2. There is a tradition of hand carved East Midland bobbins, though mostly in wood, why not in bone especially as it is a MiB type bobbin. So I am suggesting that a person other than a Napoleonic PoW could have made it.
3. Clearly our naval folk had the scrimshaw and indeed "bobbin" making skill, albeit in East Devon bobbins; but they were sailors and had girlfriends all over the country. Could a sailor have made it for his "East Midland" girl friend? Of course there were many Naval Napoleonic PoWs.

So should I commit? No expert does that, they are all full of caveats! So this is my order of things:

1. A bobbins carved by a Naval Napoleonic PoW
2. A British naval bobbin carving
3. A bobbin carved in the general tradition of hand carved bobbins in England.

Dear Raeder, do you happen to be the person who bought it? Drop me a note if you did! Tell me what you think. Thanks

Brian

Cooranbong. Australia April 2014.

I need to make an editorial note here that some may have heard me say before; since my retirement from working life, during which I wrote more than few "academic" articles, I resolved never to go back to that discipline again. Sure, my articles may not fare well if peer reviewed and I take all sorts liberties and chat on about feelings rather than proofs. In summary I hate academic writing I do this writing for interest and fun, not for academic process or to further my now defunct career.

Just to tell you that I can write more formally, I have written a text book (now well out of print,) and I did my Masters in Ethics by research and thesis. Those were the days!



This is a reconstruction drawing of what it would have been like for the Napoleonic prisoners of war who were crowded into Keep. The conditions must have been appalling. The castle had been used as prison since 1665. In 1760 it is recorded that there were 3,200 prisoners kept at the castle. In 1794 13 new timber houses were built within the castles walls, each to hold 500 prisoners, with 1,000 more to be kept in the keep.

**HERE ARE A FEW NET REFERENCES I HAVE READ OR USED.**  
*(Please note there is some repetition)*

<http://englishhistoryauthors.blogspot.com.au/2013/06/lonely-lives-and-deaths-french.html>

## **Lonely Lives and Deaths – French Napoleonic Prisoners of War in Britain**

by **Antoine Vanner**

The Transport Board's daily allowance seems to have been on the meagre side and many of the prisoners supplemented their incomes by giving lessons in French, fencing or drawing. Others seem to have made for sale tobacco boxes, sets of dominoes and bobbins used in making lace. Some may have built model ships of the type made from bone and rigged with human hair which are associated with French prisoners – one occasionally appears at auction houses. Whether to supplement their diet, or to satisfy French gastronomic taste, prisoners were frequently seen gathering snails, much to the amazement of the locals.

[http://www.alresford.org/displayed/displayed\\_16-5.php](http://www.alresford.org/displayed/displayed_16-5.php)

## **NAPOLEONIC PRISONERS OF WAR IN ALRESFORD**

**By**  
**Peter Hoggarth**

These models did not originate in Alresford but were made elsewhere, probably at Portchester from where most models came. However some model ships were undoubtedly made in Alresford, where the local Frenchmen were sufficiently skilled to make tobacco boxes, sets of dominoes and bobbins for use in the making of lace. Other Alresford relics of the period include an ornamental brass ring with 'Calais' on one side and a drawing of a ship on the other, and a French gold coin found in an attic in Broad Street.

[https://www.google.com.au/search?q=napoleonic+prisoners+lace&client=firefox-a&hs=R7O&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&channel=sb&source=Inms&sa=X&ei=UgNSU7TxGoPDkwXG4oGgAw&ved=0CAUQ\\_AUoAA&biw=1920&bih=861&dpr=1#channel=sb&q=napoleonic+prisoners+lace&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&start=40](https://www.google.com.au/search?q=napoleonic+prisoners+lace&client=firefox-a&hs=R7O&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&channel=sb&source=Inms&sa=X&ei=UgNSU7TxGoPDkwXG4oGgAw&ved=0CAUQ_AUoAA&biw=1920&bih=861&dpr=1#channel=sb&q=napoleonic+prisoners+lace&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&start=40)

### **Needlework and related crafts**

The museum has a variety of objects including:

- needlework tools and accessories;
- samplers;
- Berlin woolwork pictures;
- tapestries;
- lace, lace-making tools and accessories;
- tatting;
- knitting items;
- sewing machines (table-top and treadle);
- beadwork and quilting.

[http://archive.org/stream/prisonersofwarin00abeluoft/prisonersofwarin00abeluoft\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/prisonersofwarin00abeluoft/prisonersofwarin00abeluoft_djvu.txt)

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threatened, but he persisted and tried to signal the shipping. Whereupon they attacked him, stabbed him in sixteen places, threw his body overboard, and set their course seaward. This was seen from the shore, a fleet of boats set off in pursuit, and, after a smart chase one account says of fifteen miles the fugitives were captured, although it was thought that they would have escaped had they known how to manage a sailing boat. They were taken on board H.M.S. Centaur, searched, and upon them were found three knives and a large sum of money. They were taken then to jail ashore. One of the prisoners was found to have thirty crown pieces concealed about him, and confessed that having saved up this money, which he had made by the sale of lace, toys, and other manufactures, he had bought a suit of decent clothes, and, mixing with visitors to the depot, thus disguised had got off. In the meanwhile the body of Brothers had been recovered, placed first in one of the casemates of Point Battery, and then taken amidst an enormous crowd to his house in Surrey Street, Landport.

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## **Machine Lace and the Decline of Hand-made Lace**

The industrial revolution in Britain brought with it a profound change in lacemaking. The first machine lace was made towards the end of the eighteenth century, but it was not until 1809 that John Heathcoat was able to produce a wide net fabric that did not unravel when cut. This net became the basis for new laces such as Carrickmacross and Tambour (now classified as decorated nets), fabrics which were ideal for the light-

weight dresses of the day. Entrepreneurs made constant improvements to the machines, first producing patterned nets, then increasingly complex designs, until by 1870 virtually every type of hand-made lace had its machine-made copy.