

ENGLANDS OLDEST DATED BOBBIN: as of September 2019

Brian Lemin

September 2019

Let it not be me who wades into the controversy of when lace in England began. I love the stories of fleeing lace makers from Europe's religious persecutions settling in different parts of England, I admire the scholarly work of H J Yallop, History of the Honiton Lace Industry. All in all, I am sure that each theory has had some impact on Lace Making in England.

What I can tell you is that in 1698 East Devon had 4,695 lacemakers (Yallop pg 246) That is getting pretty close to our 1662 trolley lace bobbin which has been discovered in Budleigh Salterton.

This style of Trolley Lace bobbin was used from Salisbury (Downton Lace area) right down the South Coast Counties to East Devon, but until now mostly found in East Devon.

There was a time when I was considering that the same group of people were making these bobbins for all users in this area, but now we are at the year 1662, I have had to disregard theory very quickly!

The bobbins in the picture below were the oldest I had found for many years, but no dates! So "Old" had to be their name(well one had 7 in it, so I always thought 17.. something.)



A few years ago a sharp-eyed friend of mine (Pompi Parry - lace teacher) spotted the date of 1693 on the bobbin pictured below. So now we had another "oldest" bobbin.



Courtesy Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum 1693

At this stage, I need to tell you that in overall terms, dated bobbins in England as a whole, are unreliable as they often mark a memorial or such occasions as birthdates etc. However, as yet we have no evidence of the dates on these trolly bobbins being anything other than dates of them being made. Of course I could be wrong, but until we find a lot more dated trolly bobbins and the initials that go with them, we have to stick with that date being "made". (*readers with trolly bobbins please send me pictures.. come to that any decorated Honiton or Downton bobbins.. please!*)

So now we come to the Budleigh Salterton bobbin. Let's have a look at it.

**M R 1662. Oldest dated bobbin
at 2019 v 2**



Courtesy Fairlynch Museum Budleigh Salterton.

Let us look at it overall first. Its condition is remarkably good.

It is a series of chip-carved double circles filled with black wax. The chip carving of those tiny triangles are the bread butter shape of decorators of

Honiton bobbins. They are easy to "chip" with a pocket (clasp) knife. Then the decorators added a deliberately carved arrowhead decoration coloured red. (perhaps a heart?... I doubt it?)

Within the circle, the arrows point to the centre of the circle, which comprise a poorly carved small circle with a "+" in it. All in all a very pleasant design, quite well carved overall and a delight to look at.

At the top of the shaft comes the label.

Firstly the initials. M R these are nicely carved and they are seraphed capitals. This tends to indicate they were carved by literate decorators. (Some East Midland bobbins were clearly decorated by illiterate people.)

What do these initials stand for? To be honest we do not know. It could be the maker or decorator of the bobbin or the lace makers initials. We need a lot more bobbins and genealogical experts with lots of time and patience to determine this unless a local historian bumps into and obscure reference to a decorators practice. I have not found any reference to makers techniques in the published literature but I do know two peoples names of Honiton bobbin makers in the say 1920s. (but that is all I know)

Then we come to the 1662 part of the inscription and I feel reasonably comfortable assigning that to the date of making/giving.

The real doozy about this bobbin (and it is what got me all excited) was the first thing I noticed when I first saw it is that the neck, (The narrow part that the thread is wound upon) is hand-carved, not turned by the turner.

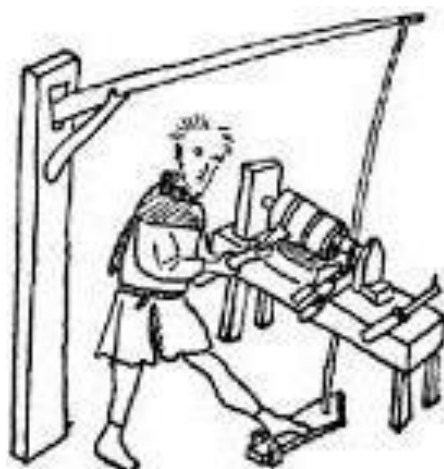
You may have noticed that I have kept the terms maker and decorator separate. Perhaps they were the same people? Perhaps they were different people, perhaps, when it comes to large amount of bobbins they were made by a group of people each doing their own special "chip" (should I have said "massed produced"?) These are the hearsay and the such like that we like to talk about when we really do not have a clue!. We have no proof of who and how they were decorated.

I do have a reasonable theory as to why the neck is hand-carved though; it is all about the type of lathe they were probably using at that time.

It was almost certainly a "Pole Lathe". Take a look at the diagram below. The rope is half wound around the lathe shaft, the foot pulls it down and makes the shaft turn, then the turner takes his foot off and the pole springs it up again and the shaft turns the other way!

It is inefficient in as much that the turner can only cut when his chisel blade faces opposite the direction of the turn. I have used one of these at

a show. It is very difficult AND when it comes to turning a narrow neck on the bobbin for the thread, the chance of it breaking is VERY high indeed, (It is bad enough on a modern lathe)



So I think the turner turned the bobbin as a form of cylinder, took the bobbin off the lathe and carved the neck. That is what I would have done anyway.

The publicity for this bobbin said "It was made just two years after the Restoration of King Charles II and four years before the Great Fire of London. That is pretty mind-blowing but what was happening to lace at that time?"

The lace of Devon was based on Belgium laces, the prevailing thought as to why that was is that those Belgium and Flemish lacemakers fleeing persecution had mainly settled in Devon and Somerset.

Sad to say that the lace that was being made by local makers at that time was probably a bit crude for the high-class ladies and gentlemen of society and they were buying their lace directly from Belgium costing the English coffers more money than the country could afford.

The English Parliament outlawed it in 1662 in an attempt to stop the massive flow of money being spent on foreign, rather than domestic, textiles.

I had better stop there or we come into the exciting history of smuggling lace. There are great stories there.

Lacemaking history is full and ups and downs and was, from time to time, very cruel to the women of the cottage industry of lace making. I mean there were some periods in history when they were in desperate conditions.

Conclusion:

I will not be holding my breath whilst waiting for an older bobbin to be found, but I am delighted that someone in Fairlynch Museum, Budleigh Salterton had a sharp eye.

Lacemakers ... bobbin collectors, keep your eyes open, you never know what you may have in your bobbin box.

You may read other articles I have written about the "oldest bobbin" theme or other lace bobbin topics at:

<https://www2.cs.arizona.edu/patterns/weaving/lace.html#webdocs>

You have to scroll to my name.. sorry.

or the Bobbin Dictionary at:

www.brianlemin.com