

# When did Pewter start being used to Decorate Lace Bobbins?

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If you do not want to read all that this article discusses, the short answer is that "I do not know". If you want to read about some of my crazy notions and ideas, I have developed over the many years of Lace Bobbin research. Then read on.

*What I am setting out to say is this: Around the 1700s there was the beginning of influences that were the result reacting to the "mass- production" of the industrial revolution. This environment gave rise to freedom for innovation and inventive design to flourish at a craft level. I believe that the East Midland revolutionary design and decoration of bobbins came about as a result of skilled craftsmen embracing this artistic freedom along with good marketing. All the time they made sure their products worked as they were in constant touch with their customers as they went from Village to Village and Fair to Fair. Finally, it should be noted that this discussion focusses on the decoration of East Midland bobbins.*

## **Firstly, let's talk about Pewter.**

Pewter is an alloy composed primarily of tin with varying quantities of hardening agents such as antimony, bismuth, copper and lead. It was used in the ancient world by the Egyptians, Tin was alloyed with copper and bismuth and the resulting metal, although now much harder than pure tin, still possessed a low enough melting point to make it easy for casting.

Later, the ordinances of The Worshipful Company of Pewterers laid down the composition of the pewter alloy, originally in two grades of fine and lay metal. *Fine* was used for sadware plates, chargers, etc. and for spoons and ecclesiastical flagons whilst *lay* metal was used for hollow-ware pots and measures. Lay metal contained a higher proportion of lead which was used as a low-cost bulking agent and help durability.

This is interesting as bobbin makers who used high-quality pewter (fine), their pewter decorations have not survived well. Decorations using poor quality (lay) have lasted longer. (Springett pg 81,82)

In the 17th century, a new alloy already in use in Continental Europe gradually appeared in Britain. This contained antimony to strengthen the alloy which became known as 'Hard Metal' and was used for all manner of vessels and utensils. i.e. Pewter mugs in pubs. We doubt it was used for lace bobbin decoration. This was the 'golden age' of pewter making and many fine examples of pewter craft can still be seen.

### **Were these the Innovators?**

Christine and David Springett's Book *Success to the Lace Pillow* has to mark the beginning of intelligent study of lace bobbins. Their work on the genealogy and biography of the makers that they discovered and then showing us how to identify their bobbins was quite revolutionary. Occasionally I drop them a note of appreciation for their work. If I were not so lazy (and if I am honest, I am a person that does not enjoy genealogical research), it may be possible to get back earlier than the Springetts did. Certainly, there are a lot more makers than they definitively identified and we know too that lace-making in England commenced, probably in the late 1500s? However, for all of my research, I am more than happy to start with the Springett's work as (IMHO) their work covered the period of the very radical changes that occurred in bobbin design and decoration.

The Springetts earliest bobbin maker was Joseph Haskins who was born in 1779. Along with making lace bobbins, this maker was a bead maker, later describing himself as a lapidarist. Joseph Haskins was contemporary of other lace bobbin makers, most notable of whom was Jesse Compton. (1793). These two makers were excellent woodturners, artists and innovators. The indications are that they were both educated as opposed to the evidence of the poor spelling of many bobbin makers. I am proposing that of all the bobbin makers around that time these two were the most likely to be influenced by the reaction to the industrial revolution on the rural arts, possibly the lapidarist (Haskins) being the most exposed to current artistic trends of the time in which they were living.

## **A New Environment for Design**

One area of study that I enjoyed as I was preparing for entry to university was a Social and Economic History of England for 1700 to 1914. I found it fascinating and I am certain that it influenced my interest in Lace History and its tools which have occupied my mind since retirement. The lead-in to this course required a review of the Industrial Revolution in England. This was equally fascinating to learn how England developed manufacturing and mass production as well as inventiveness and entrepreneurship. For example, the invention of the "Spinning Jenny" which revolutionised the spinning industry in Britain was in 1760, which is around the time of our two earliest influential bobbin makers were born. They were both living and working at a time when England was bursting with innovation and entrepreneurship. Their craftsmanship and apparent education seems a good basis to assume they were thinking men and capable businessmen who wanted to take advantage of the "modern" age they were living in.

I offer briefly the innovation of spangling bobbins as an example. I have argued elsewhere in discussion papers that these men introduced spangles to East Midland bobbins (See web docs: WHEN DID EAST MIDLAND BOBBINS BECOME SPANGLED? [https://www2.cs.arizona.edu/patterns/weaving/webdocs/lb\\_2010\\_19.pdf](https://www2.cs.arizona.edu/patterns/weaving/webdocs/lb_2010_19.pdf)). I briefly offer the following illustrations as either proof or to stimulate your interest in the topic. (*sorry, this is not the place to argue the "spangling" issue*)



Haskins bobbins Unspangled



Haskins bobbin spangled

I think that what I am saying is that this was the golden age for design and innovation and these two artisans, in particular, appear to have led the way in the East Midlands towards new designs and increased desirability for lacemakers to enjoy having effective and elegant tools which no doubt, included pewter decoration.

I was recently sent a picture of a mix of lace bobbins which revived in me the vast changes that occurred to lace bobbins in the East Midlands over the following years. If you pause a while to absorb the designs of this random mix of bobbins, you will realize that this was the time for bobbin revolution.



*Pewter, wooden insets, hand-carved, Mother and Babe, inscriptions, oh yes, and a plain bobbin.*

### **Where did bobbin makers get their ideas from?**

The lace world in England over the many years of its existence had become very cosmopolitan. Regardless of what theory we subscribe to as to the origins of lace making in England, the fact is that England became home and working place for many continental lacemakers. They brought with them a variety of lace-making paraphernalia, most of which were relevant to the style of lace they made in Europe. Gradually these tools became integrated into English lace society, just like the names of lace started with the genres being identified by the name of the European country or city of origin, and then changed to the name of the English county that had adopted that style.

True, the English at that time lived in a small world many barely, if ever, left the area of their local village or the neighbouring village; but the fair-men were travellers, the migrant lacemakers themselves had to travel to find a place they liked to live and work and we must remember that by the 1800s there were people who travelled, say to London for lace business and brought back ideas and innovations which they shared locally.

Most of our migrant lace makers were from Northern Europe and amongst them were styles of bobbins that may well have been most attractive to our English woodturners. The prettiest of all these in the writer's opinion were those from Normandy.



*A selection of bobbins from Normandy*

At the beginning of this article, I indicated that I some "crazy" ideas about English bobbins, and it is possible that I got the idea that the English bobbin makers got their ideas from Normandy bobbins. I now hasten to add that,



after corresponding with some knowledgeable "Norman" lacemakers that idea has gone from my head, but I still hang on the thought that the English bobbin makers were "influenced" by what they saw. When we look at this selection above you can see many features that are similar or even identical to features of English bobbins (East Midland at least)

Firstly, there is the double neck, then aquafortis stained, a place at the tail of the bobbin for spangle to be fitted, various turned decoration combined with carving, the use of bone (and I am told ivory) and finally the use of pewter. If these pictured bobbins predate the timeline that Springetts created for us, then perhaps the English did copy them, but unless we are dealing with archaeological finds and subsequent dating, we are stuck with dating bobbins to a period just before and following 1800.

### **Functional features of pewter.**

The first is the issue of weight. Yes, the addition of pewter does as weight according to the amount used. Was this a feature designed to balance this with the increased weight of the thread? With regard to this issue I was told by one knowledgeable correspondent that; *I was told by a lady with some knowledge of old bobbins that the small wood bobbins, which she called 'cottager', were sometimes decorated with brass tacks, these she said were the type used when making the light shoes/slippers at the time of Jane Austin (1775-1817).*

There is one type of pewter decoration that has a second purpose. Wooden bobbins with a broad pewter band (approximately 2.5 cm) let into the shank upon which was often a name or other engraving.



*Tallies*

So far, we have as functional features, weight and identification (whatever) In genres of bobbins that do not have spangles attached then weight can be of functional value, but once we have a spangled bobbin, the spangles almost eliminate the value of the comparative weight of the decorative pewter to a bobbin.

The next functional value is really a perceived health benefit in that it was frequently thought that the hands of the Lacemaker would benefit from touching the pewter on the bobbin. I am sure that arthritis of the hand and fingers etc would have been a very real difficulty for Lacemaker that so suffered, but as to its medical value, modern medicine would look disapprovingly of its value. The protrusion is totally explained by the degradation process of pewter, not its deliberate inclusion into the decoration process.



*Bone leopard with protruding pewter spots*

### **The Commercial Value of Pewter.**

We must never forget that the bobbin makers were businessmen, they had to sell their products in order to make a living. Therefore, the more attractive, different, individual they make their bobbins the more they sell. They were selling mostly to ladies who spent a lot of hours at their pillows, the bobbins were their tools so why should they not have good tools and pretty tools? They were the consumers that the bobbins makers had to convince that their wares were worth buying and would bring them pleasure for very long hours and hard work.



Applying pewter to bobbins is somewhat time-consuming even if your moulds are sophisticated or perhaps, they just used brown paper; (which I have used and it works), but prepared moulds are easier and quicker. This extra time would add to their cost of manufacture. Lace makers "occasionally" were comparatively well paid, but for periods of history, their income was barely useful and rarely enriching; many times they worked for what was close to economic slavery. Their loved ones were working-class, probably mostly agricultural labourers whose income was also low. There was a very real income to be gained by bobbin makers as using bobbins for gifts and the silvery sparkle of pewter on a bobbin and the "flitting bobbins" image would have been an attractive present to buy at a fair, but for daily use plain bobbins would have been the order of the day.

Here follows a very brief review of the pewter decorations that bobbin makers used to attract sales.



*Wooden bobbin with loose pewter rings*



Butterfly



*Butterfly alternate wings*



*Leopard*



*Leptig (Springett name) mix of leopard spots and tiger stripes*



*Bounded spiral*



*Waisted (and belted) tiger*



### **Conclusion.**

As I have stated, I do not know when pewter first started to be used as decorations or as a function on bobbins. I have postulated it was, between 1750 and early 1800s. It could have been earlier especially if the European makers were using it before then. Other than identifying the bobbin maker via Springett, the real problem is that we have no way of dating an extant East Midland lace bobbin unless it was found (say excavated) with other objects that could be archeologically dated.

Thanks to the Diana Smith Bobbin Collection for illustrations

