

# **An Early effort to devise terms to describe genres of East Devon Lace Bobbin Decorations (v1)**

Brian Lemin Nov 2019

*This is a contribution to the East Devon and Downton bobbin project*

References:

H J Yallops in The History of the Honiton Lace Industry. 1992 Exeter University Press.

## **Decorating Methods:**

These bobbins are almost all created by chip carving. This is done usually with a pocket knife/pen knife/ Jackknife/ clasp knife, or by any of many common names. They are the type of knife that most men of that time carried in their pockets and used as a utility tool for a wide variety of purposes. They mostly use triangles as these are so easy to create within the chip carving style of carving.

The chips are filled with red or black sealing wax.

Straight and curved lines can be used, often imitating the lines a pencil would use on a drawing.

Staining is frequent and they used aquafortis which is Nitric Acid. Sometimes green staining is used.

Brush/pen/quill is occasionally found but rare.

## **Decorating styles.**

The book referenced above is not a lace or a bobbin book, but briefly describes bobbins under the heading of "The Lacemakers at Play". He approaches this by dividing the decorating styles that he identified into 10 types. Each of these 10 groups I have started to subdivide into identifiable and describable names. The following is my interpretation.

Yallop's main categories are as follows:

### **a. Circumferential rings.**

This grouping is usually ascribed to the bobbins of Branscombe. These rings are created on the lathe. The common name for these has become Branscombe Wriggled. Whilst it is reasonable to give

these bobbins this name, we have no proof that they did not make or decorate bobbins in the general manner of Honiton bobbins. The rings are red and black almost without exception and appear to be grouped randomly with rings totaling as many as 32. They are grouped together in groups of a single ring to about 11 rings, then a space and further group incised as the pattern requires. I plan to call these plain circumferential rings or Branscombe bobbins.

Plain Circumferential rings can occur regularly on bobbins that are not Branscombe in design, particularly when they act as a border to delineate dates and initials or indeed divide a bobbin into a section, as the design requires.

Decorated Circumferential rings are also found in designs and these lines around the bobbin can have the triangle in various positions, small slashes other decorations. They can be smooth wavy or angular wavy. The key feature is that they are joined circles around the circumference.

### **Usage:**

If the bobbin is typically a Branscombe bobbin the I suggest that this description is sufficient. No need to use the word "Plain"-etc.

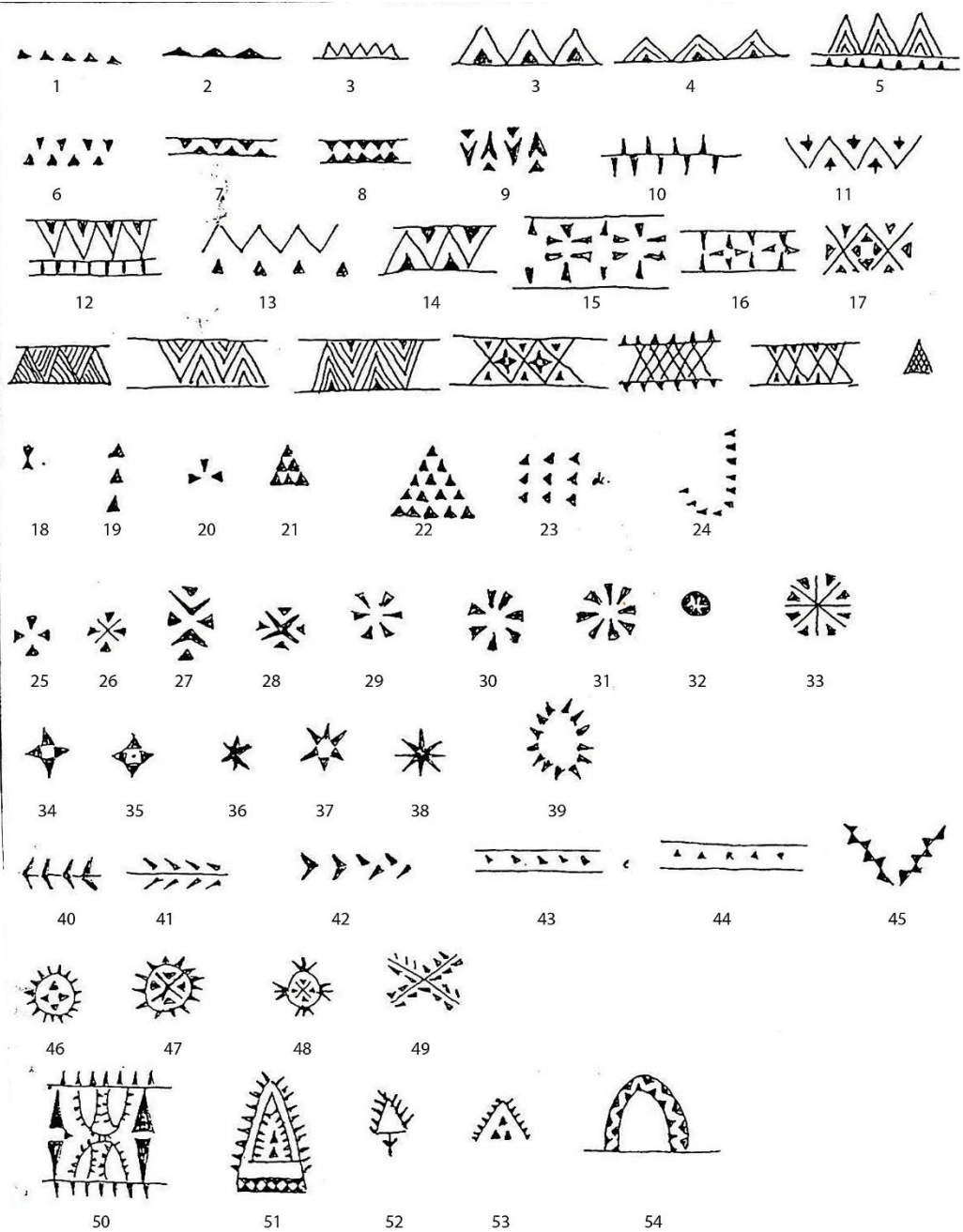
Plain circumferential rings for those that appear on typically decorated Honiton bobbins. They may be further described as a border, (to dates etc.) or dividing (i.e. a section of the design)

Decorated circumferential rings may be described as above but they type of decoration described (i.e. triangle, angular slashes, etc.)

### **b. Abstract Patterns.**

These would comprise the majority of the decorations on Honiton bobbins. Mostly they used triangle chips. These can be used singularly or as a group or component of a more complex design or object. The decorators were most inventive and over the total designs, you can see anything a decorator imagined, sometimes you are greatly surprised, but mostly there appears to be a vague library of designs they offer.

It is almost impossible to create sufficient and descriptive names for their creations.



## Triangles

### Usage.

I am proposing we use the everyday terms like circle, arch, oval, triangle, line, border (wide or narrow) etc. Then if need be, we add a description to suit the design we are looking at. *i.e. a narrow border of inverted, line drawn triangles. OR... a circle of outward-facing chip triangles. OR... a line of triangles, apex upwards.*

I cannot think there is any purpose in devising names for what amounts to be 50 or 60 recurring abstract components.

### c. Depictions of natural or man-made objects

*Foliage and Flowers.* These abound on bobbin from the simplest twig-like form to elaborate leaves. In this group, there are again so many examples that to create a name for each group is probably pointless. I am proising to use group names for those designs that "look like" what they are depicting in a simple but "artistic" manner. i.e. a leaf that is a like a pointed oval attached to a stem, or a flower that is at the apex of a stem and is figured vaguely like a flower.

Flowers. Creations that look like a flower even though it may be childlike. It is at the top of the stem and looks as though it is meant to be a flower head, even if it takes a bit of imagination.

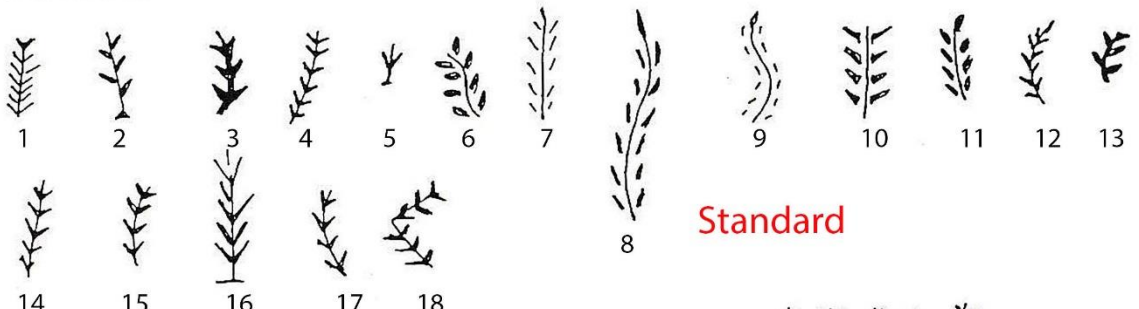
I need to add a further component of flowers. Is it planted in something? A pot (small, large, deep, wide) PLEASE NOTE standard foliage can also be planted in the pot of some kind and should be noted.

Foliage. This occurs so frequently and in so many forms. There does however appear to be two groups that are definable. I am calling the two groups:

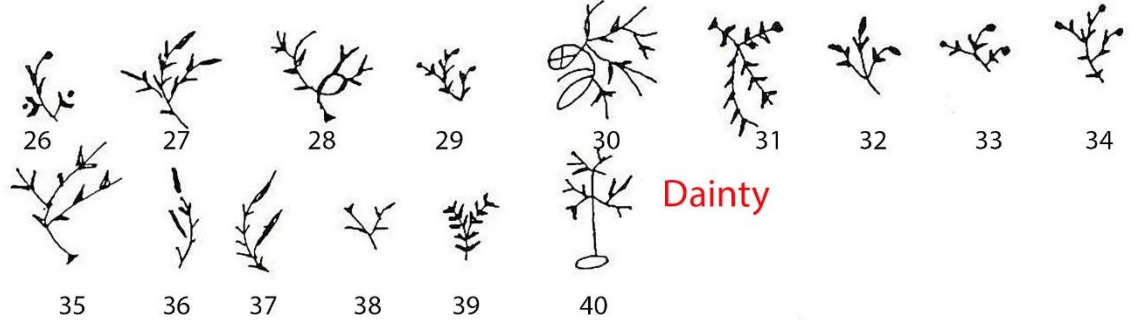
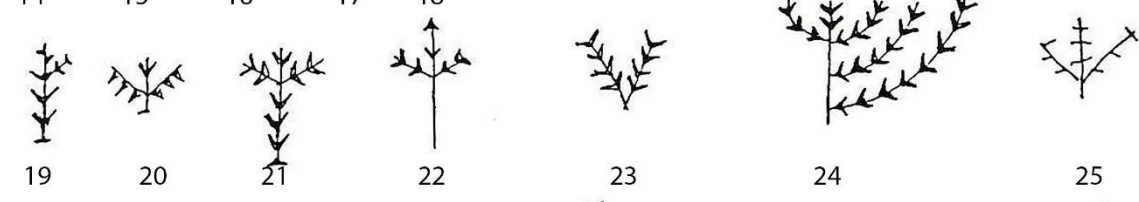
"*standard foliage*" to which you can add a further description like three branches on a stem, or three branches each side of a stem or single stem.

OR

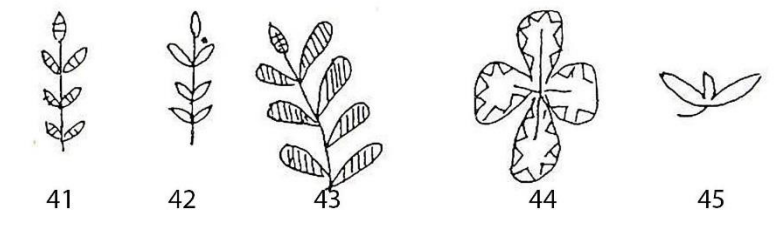
"*Dainty*" *Foliage.* The foliage is lightly carved and usually has a more complex design. Often, I find this coloured red. It can be further described as simple or complex "dainty foliage"



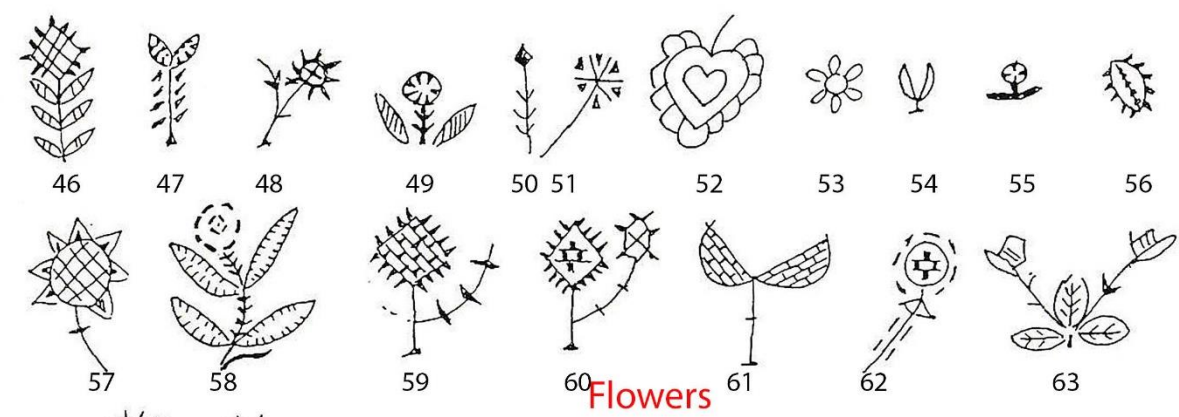
**Standard**



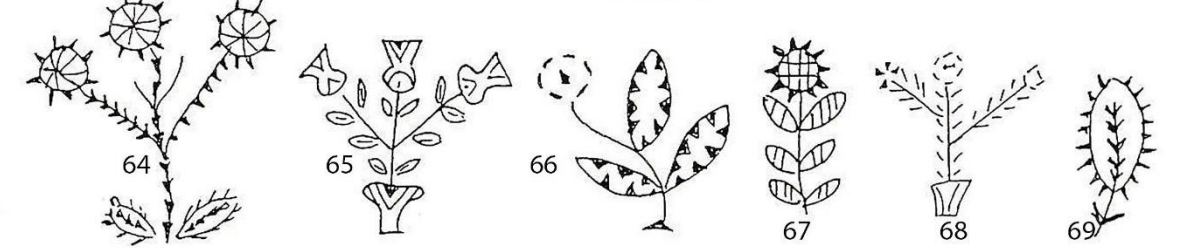
**Dainty**



**Leaves**



**Flowers**



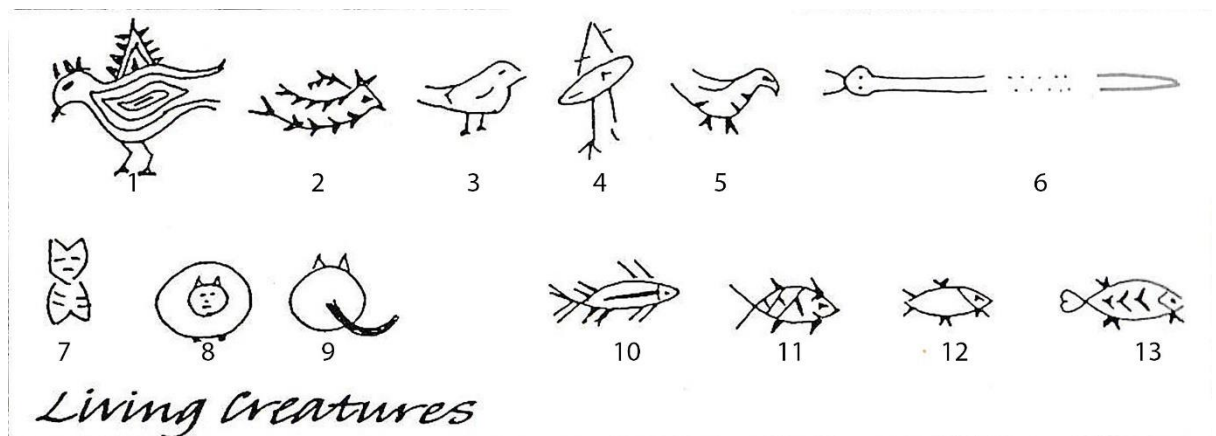
*Foliage and flowers*

## Living Creatures

There are a number of these depicted. Birds, fish, whale, cats, snake, occasionally I "think" I see what could be one of the seafoods, a crab? A shrimp? A lobster?

Please note there has not been reported that farm animal has been represented, nor a dog! I have briefly discussed the reason for this elsewhere as I find it hard to fathom that in a mixed fishing and agricultural society the agrarian activities are not recorded! It could be that the decorators were from the fishing communities? It could be that the foliage we see represents corn and maize? If this is so then the decorators did come agricultural communities. Frankly, I do not know!

In terms of usage then I suggest we use the name of the living creature as depicted, as childlike the picture might be.



## Human Artifacts

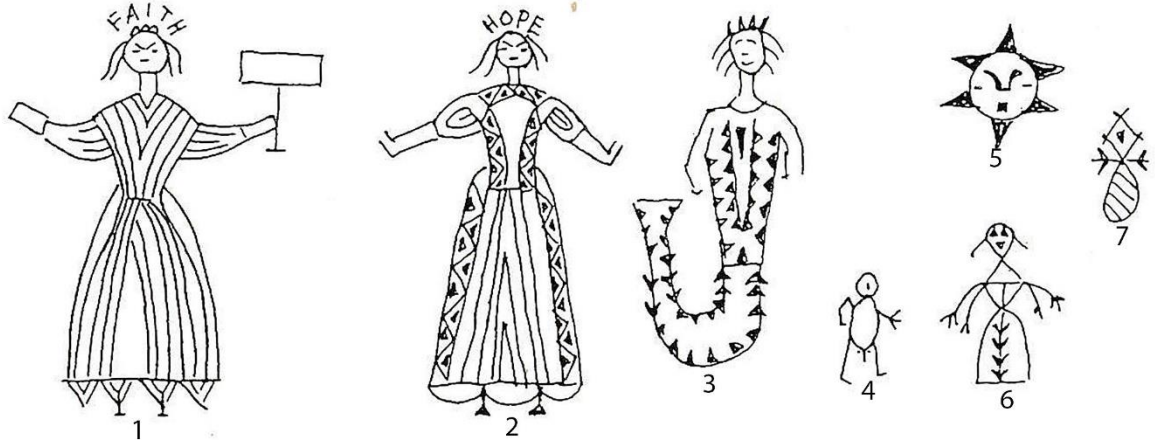
These can be recognized from time to time and we should just name them for what they are. However, ships are dealt with later as a special genre.



### d. **Human Figures.**

These do not occur very often and can be challenging how to describe them. They are sometimes clearly identifiable as meaning to be human. A Sailor and his wife, the three virtuous ladies (Faith Hope and Charity. possibly Peace). I see a "bottle man"! and

possibly a ghost. I will be taking out of this genre the "primitive" group of drawings and giving them a section of their own. Like a child with three arms either side! A most interesting group.



*Humans and others*

#### **e. Words, Initials, Dates.**

Initials are frequently found and are thought to be the initials of the owner if there are two sets of initials, they are thought to be the recipient and the donor. As we do not know the names of bobbin makers/ decorators, the above description of the initials is most probable. Some have thought the maker's initials might be there, but if that were so we would see a large preponderance of a group of similar initials and this is not found.

Dates. The earliest dates on a general style of Honiton bobbin has been found to be 1704. On trolley bobbins, the oldest as of writing this is 1662. Most dates found are in the 1800s.

Both dates and initials are usually found at the top of the shaft and often bordered by plain lines single or double.

I am drawing a distinction between words and inscriptions. Words can be found randomly as appropriate to the design. i.e. words would be the name of a ship, the occasional name of a person, or a location.

Inscriptions are however groups of words that can be classified under many headings., i.e. religious, patriotism, observations. The list can go on and on. My classification would be:

Straight Inscriptions. The words are parallel to the sides of the bobbin



Spiral inscriptions. These curve helically around the shaft of the bobbins. In almost all cases words can be shortened and or split between lines with no hyphen.

These can be differentiated by ascertaining:

1. Is it written from top to bottom or bottom to top?

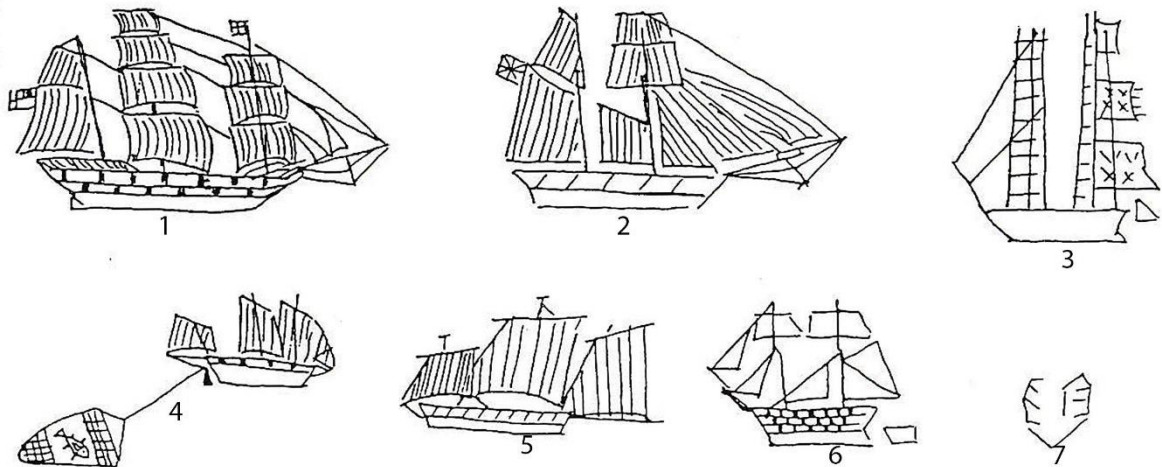
Occasionally I find one that is so awkward to read because of the way/ direction it is written, that I do not know how to describe it! Sorry.

I would suggest that if we ever collected enough inscription bobbin that we use Wrights categories that he uses in *The Romance of the Lace Pillow*.

These next categories are developed from my own collecting experience. They may also fit into Yallops approach should the user so desire.

f. Ships.

This is a self-explanatory category but users might distinguish between types of ships, almost certainly differentiate between steam and sail.



*Ships*

g. Nautical

This includes all nautical themes. mermaids, anchors, fishing nets. If the user wants it can include fish and I think that is what I will do.

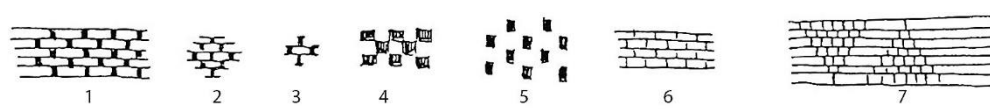
h. Naive

Primitive, crude depictions, childlike.



## Bricks

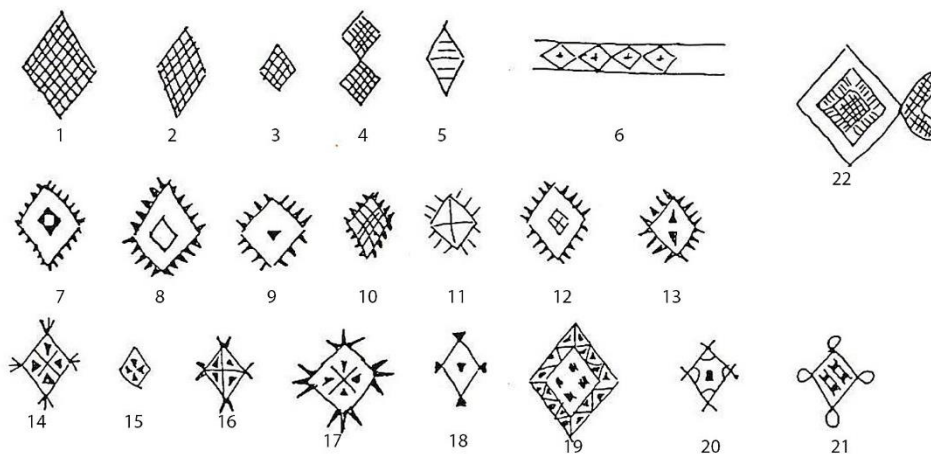
These are laid in various configurations.



*Bricks*

## Diamonds

Of various styles



*Diamonds*

i. Miscellaneous  
Self-explanatory

j. Special  
Items in your collection that are "special" to you in personal ways

### **Conclusion.**

This is a first effort and is open to any suggestion's others may offer. Please note I have not included Downton's in this classification. When I have enough to evaluate, I will include them. Please note. For this, I have Used Yallops illustrations attributed broadly. In later versions, more explicit examples will be offered.