

# The Theological Virtues as depicted on East Devon Lace Bobbins

This paper is a contribution to the East Devon and Downton lace bobbin project.

April 20 2020.

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As a onetime Ethicist (Nursing) I was not looking forward to writing this short paper on the Virtue Bobbins of east Devon. It reminded me of all those essays, and philosophical arguments I went through in academia many (many) years ago. I will try and keep it simple, but the more I read about the virtues in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the more fascinating it became.

Of course, our key subjects are the lace makers of East Devon and from my other studies and dates on bobbins, it is reasonable to presume period from say the mid-1700s to the early 1900s. Not that this time period covers that of the making of Devon lace, but the majority of bobbins we see would fall into this period.

Sometimes our thinking about the lace makers of these times is coloured by the existence of lace schools for the young girls (occasionally boys) and our modern views on such things as child labour which was certainly the norm at that time. The lace industry was populated by a cross range of, mostly ladies of all ages each trying to earn some extra money for their household or maintain their own "widow" life existence. Times were hard, and lace-making, for the most part, was an occupation that had its highs and its lows.

For the first half of the 19th century, the rural and urban poor had much in common: unsanitary and overcrowded housing, low wages, poor diet, insecure employment and the dreaded effects of sickness and old age.

It was an era of rapidly accelerating scientific discovery and invention, with significant developments in the fields of mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, electricity, and metallurgy that laid the groundwork for the technological advances of the 20th century. However, the mainly rural, fishing and agricultural society of East Devon experienced a minimal education, the girls married young and had their children early in their married life.

Society at this time was quite religious, and it was a faith of a strict nature that not only required church on Sunday but a strict code of morals especially for young ladies. It could be argued that along with

Christian faith it was very rules-based. Perhaps this is a good lead into the issue of the teaching of Virtues.

### **The Virtues.**

The theological Virtues espoused at that time were:

FAITH. The virtue by which we believe in God and in all He has revealed to us

HOPE. The virtue by which we trust God will fulfil His promises and look forward to eternal life.

CHARITY. The Virtue by which we love God above all things and our neighbour as ourselves.

These would have been a perfectly acceptable code of belief and action in society at that time. It is quite easy to glean from the literature several other virtues listed, all of which are indeed very worthy. For this paper, I will add only one other of relevance and indeed practical value, that of PEACE. I mention this, not only as it appears as a virtue on the bobbins, but also because, as a county of long shorelines, many of the lace makers family's chose to serve in the Navy, and all through that period, wars were not very far away and many sons choose seafaring as their job.

### **Sources of Decorated Lace bobbins.**

Those who may have read some of my studies will know that when we compare the knowledge that we have about the many makers of East Midland bobbins, we know next to nothing about the makers or decorators of East Devon bobbins. However, as I continue with this East Devon, Downton project I am beginning to form ideas and possibilities, though I hasten to add no proof of a few sources. As this is a developing project, I plan to build bits of knowledge as I go along and will inevitably repeat myself. Currently, my thinking and reading (often between the lines) leads me to think the following as to the bobbin's sources available to lacemakers in and around Devon. (This excludes handmade bobbins)

1. They could be bought from lace shops and the Lace men.
2. I am beginning to realize too that could well have been local bobbin makers/ decorators that could offer their bobbins for sale. My thinking about this is that though I have only examined what I would call a few bobbin collections from a single lace-maker. In these collections, I am seeing that the Lacemaker used mostly bobbins decorated by one carver, possibly two. I have a long way to go before I will pontificate on this observation!
3. The traditional wisdom from those who know better than me is that the shops employed the decorators, or perhaps individuals or

groups of decorators. It is possible that when there were groups that worked together each person had their specialty and that bobbins would be passed from one to the other as a type of "mass production" line.

4. As I see more bobbins it becomes more evident that as we go along, we may be able to identify the styles of specific decorators, though it is doubtful that we will ever know their names.
5. Just as in the East Midlands lacemakers will have a choice of buying bobbins available from the shops or lace men or being able to order a particular style, subject, message etc. to suit themselves as the buyer.

When we come to the Virtue bobbin buyer, I suspect the bobbin was ordered, not necessarily by the Lacemaker but possibly as a gift from a family member who perhaps wants the virtue on the bobbin to become part of the user's personality.

### **The Virtue decorations**

There appears to be enough of this genre of the bobbin to be found not to require us to call them rare, but they require the collector to look for them as on occasions the actual representation of the virtue can be hidden in the fullness of the whole bobbin decoration.

They comprise a carving of a lady in a crinoline dress, facing the observer, hair carved in different modes and nearly always the name of the virtue carved above figure.

The bobbin may or may not be initialled and or dated.

Occasionally there are some other features that I will point out as we look at the examples I offer.

### **The Virtue figures.**



In my efforts to try and date the dresses these bobbin carvers chose to use I came across a few of many historical depictions of ladies as "virtues". I include them for your interest.

Firstly, I am showing you a sample of the single figures of the three main virtues and the Peace virtue (see above)



Faith

Hope

Charity

Peace

In trying to date these dresses I came to the rough conclusion that dresses of this type could well have been worn in the first half of the 1700s. [Perhaps one of you experts (SRA members etc.) would be kind enough to help me: I am on the Arachne list]

You will notice that they are waisted dresses, I would guess that they used ornate fabrics. Two of the figures indicate breasts, but the other two do not. "Hope" has a very ornate top and "Peace" quite a low-cut top. I

must end these few brief and uneducated observations by bringing to your notice that Peace has a plant pot with plant in it on her head!

As I now look at these figures, I suspect that Faith and Charity have a few features which could lead an observer to conclude that they were decorated by the same person? I looked at the carved printing, the outer edges of the skirt and the lowest decorated band.

Finally, I would point out that Peace is carved on what is recognized as a "pale wood bobbin". There are quite a few of these pale wood bobbins, variously decorated. I have briefly written of them in Webdocs.

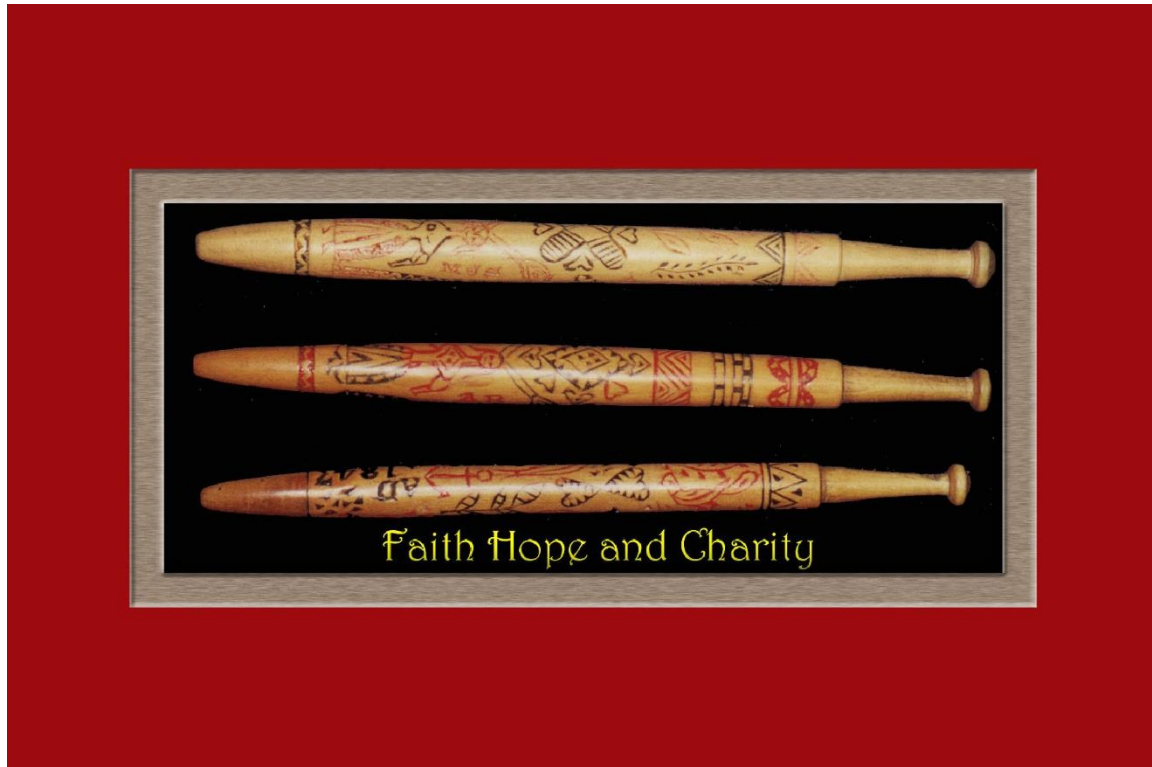
The next set of pictures includes other depictions/views of the lady virtues.



I am puzzled by one feature of the first two bobbins from the left. They both have the lady with "tennis bat" like decorations coming from their heads! I am not at all sure if there is meant to be any significance in this carving?

Hairstyle appears to belong or held in little tufts.

The Hope bobbin on the far right is expanded to show the full glory of the creation, including tippetts off the sleeves (I remember them from my brass rubbing days!) This bobbin also has a clear maritime connection with the inclusion of anchors in the design. Also, it is the only bobbin that is dated. 1847.

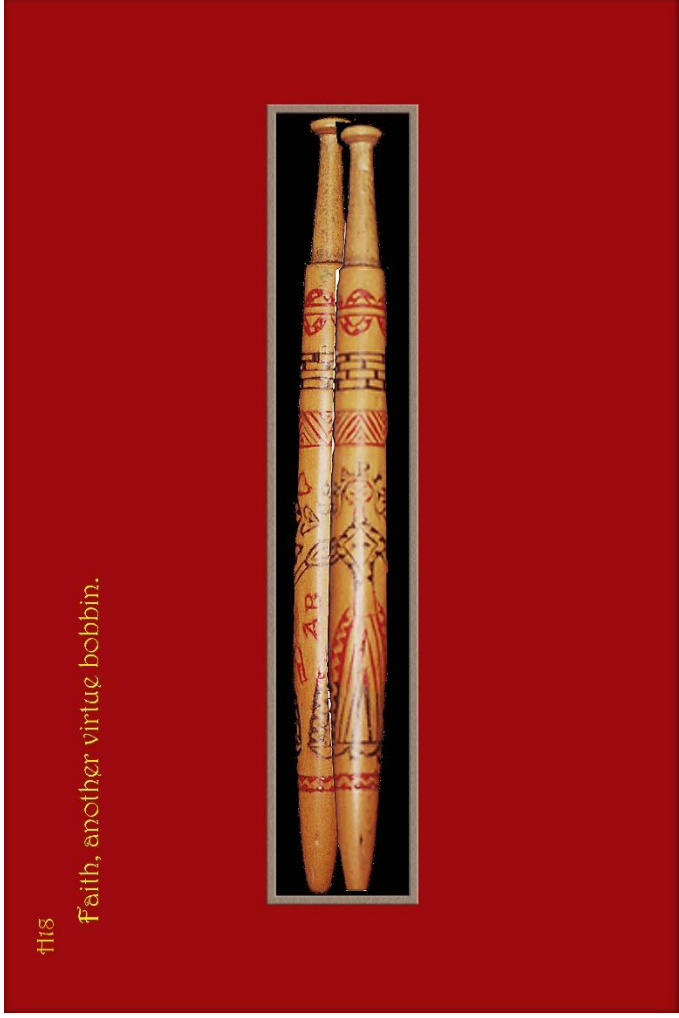


### **Conclusion.**

I find this genre of East Devon bobbins quite fascinating and as always, I would like to see more of them, thus my frequent appeal for pictures of your Virtue bobbins. I hope this short insight into another genre of East Devon bobbins has whetted your appetite to look at them with critical interest and perhaps start a collection?

Brian

Below are some pictures of the Virtue bobbins, many are repeats but may be of interest to you.



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Faith, another virtutæ bobbin.



**FAITH**



**PEACE**