

## **Snippets about East Devon bobbins from history.**

Brian Lemin April 2020 during Convid19 lockdown because I was bored!

I need to say that these snippets are the result of boredom during the lockdown. I went through a lot of my pdf articles I have downloaded. The result is that I must warn you they are not accurate because of scanning mistakes etc.

AS the result of this exercise, I "personally" have discovered a bobbin maker in Beer and other little tidbits that I shall almost certainly forget!!

I offer them for what they are worth, but what I really do recommend is that some of these old books have lots of local history in them and are worth reading. Many you can download for free as they are that old.

Just an apology for Palliser. She gets a bad name in the current academic world for inaccuracies and no peer review stuff. I just find that she makes interesting reading and gives a lot of background information. For my purposes I am not worried if she is on occasions inaccurate, I enjoy reading her book.

Here are the snippets!! 😞

### *The Connoisseur*

Several specimens which come under the notice of collectors emanate from the Midland and home counties, and are more elaborate than those of the West country. : Mrs Head, writing in THE CONNOISSEUR (vol. x., page 15S), observes that" the custom of ornamenting bobbins does not appear ever to have been general in the West of England, and when any the decoration is found, it is confined to simple incised patterns, coloured red, blue, or black, or a curious tortoiseshell-like mottling produced by some brown Slain. Old decorated Devonshire bobbins . . . are exceedingly difficult to obtain." She adds that they if are always made of wood, and are perfectly plain and smooth in outline."

Mrs Head

specimens are shown at the left hand of the lower row

in No. ii., are always made of wood, and are perfectly plain and smooth in outline, and very light of weight. The custom of ornamenting bobbins does not appear ever to have been general in the 'West of England, and when any decoration is found, it is confined to simple incised patterns, coloured red, blue or black, or a curious tortoiseshell-like mottling produced by some brown stain. Old decorated Devonshire bobbins, it maybe added are exceedingly difficult to obtain, and it is to be feared that only one of the four illustrated here can lay claim to even a modest degree of decoration

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### Palliser

Sherborne declined and gradually died out. The points of Lyme Regis rivalled, in the eighteenth century, those of Honiton and Blandford, and when the trade of the last-named town passed away, Lyme and Honiton laces held their own, side by side, in the London market. The fabric of Lyme Regis, for a period, came more before the public eye, for that old, deserted, and half-forgotten mercantile city, in the eighteenth century, once more raised its head as a fashionable watering-place. Prizes were awarded by the Anti-Gallican Society to Miss Mary Channon, of Lyme Regis, and her fellow-townswoman, Miss Mary Ben, for ruffles of needlepoint and bone lace. The reputation of the fabric, too, of Lyme Regis reached even the court; and when Queen Charlotte first set foot on English ground. she wore a head and lappets of Dorset manufacture. Some years later a splendid lace dress was made for her Majesty by the workers of Lyme, which, says the annalist of our southern coast, 'gave great satisfaction at court. The makers of this -costly product, however, received but fourpence a day for their work.

The laces of Lyme, like all good articles, were expensive. A narrow piece set (light plain round an old woman's cap would cost four' guineas nor was five guineas a yard considered an exorbitant price.

It was a favourite custom at Lyme for lovers to have their initials entwined and worked together on a piece of ornamental lace.

The making of and wearing beautiful clothes, but no mention of English lace by name seems to occur in the inventories and accounts, and the earliest mention of Honiton lace is by Westcote, who, writing about 1620 speaks of bone lace much in the request"

being made at Honiton and Bradninch, and again referring to Honiton. " Here," says he, "is made an abundance of bone lace, a pretty toile now greatly in the request;

There have been traditions that Rodge was a valet who accompanied his master abroad, and there learning the fine Flemish stitches, taught Devonshire women on his return home, and was enabled to make a comfortable competence by their work, bequeathing a sum of money to the poor of Honiton: but it is more probable that he was all ordinary dealer. Westcote,' who wrote about the year 1620, when noticing bone lace, docs did not speak of it as new manufacture; the trend had already taken root and flourished, for, including the above-mentioned the three earliest bone lace makers of the seventeenth century on record all at their decease bequeathed sums of money for the benefit of their indigent townspeople, viz., Mrs Minifie,' before mentioned, who died in 1617, and Thomas Humphrey, of Honiton, laceman, who willed in the year 1658 £20 towards the purchase of certain tenements, a notice of which benefaction is recorded on a painted board above the gallery of the old parish church.

By this time English lace had advanced in public estimation. In the year 1660 a royal ordinance of France provided that a mark should be affixed to thread lace imported from England as well as on that of Flanders; and we have already told elsewhere how the Earl of Essex procures, through his countess, bone lace to a considerable amount as a present to Queen Anne.

Speaking of bone lace writes Fuller in his *thesis*:  
"Much of this is made in and about Honiton, and weekly returned to London. . . .

Great distress., too, is said to have existed among the Honiton lace-makers after the two great fires of 1753 and 1767. The second was of so devastating a character that the town had to be rebuilt. Shaw declares, writing at the end of the eighteenth century: "For its present condition Honiton is ill indebted to that dreadful fire which reduced three parts of it to ashes.

It was from the introduction of these separate sprigs that Honiton lace was able to compete with Brussels. The pattern in Fig. 153 is sewn on the plain

pillow ground," which was very beautiful and regular, but very expensive. **It** was made of the finest thread procured from Antwerp, the market price of which, in 1790, was £70' per pound, "worse than these, however, was the introduction of the machine net, the first factory being set up at Tiverton in 1815. Lysons writes shortly afterwards in 1822:" The manufactory of lace has much declined, although the lace still retains its superiority. Some years ago, at. which time it was much patronised by the Royal family, the manufacturers of Honiton employed 2,400 hands in the town and the neighbouring villages, but they do not now employ above 300." For twenty years the lace trade suffered the greatest depression and the Honiton lace-workers, forsaking the designs of their forefathers, introduced 11 lost hideous sets of pattern, designed, as they said, "out of their heads." "Turkey tails," "frying pans," "bullocks' hearts," and the most senseless sprigs line borderings took the place of the graceful compositions of the old school. Not a leaf, not a flower was copied from nature. Anxious to introduce a purer taste., Queen Adelaide, to whom a petition had been sent on behalf of the distressed lace-makers, gave the order for a dress to be made of Honiton sprigs," and decided that the flowers should all be copied from nature. The order was executed by Mrs Davey, of Honiton. The skirt was encircled with a wreath of elegantly designed the initial of each flower forming the name of her Majesty. ""

*Gimp.* The *pattern* which rests on the ground or is held together by brides. The work should not, however, be confounded with the material gimp, which was formerly called *guipure*. In Honiton and the Midlands, the word denotes the coarse glazed thread used to raise certain edges of the design

Lace now seems to be called indifferently *purle*, or *bone-work*, the two first-mentioned terms occurring most frequently. The origin of this last appellation is generally stated to have been derived from the custom of using sheep's trotters previous to the invention of wooden bobbins. Fuller so explains it, and the various dictionaries have followed the theory. The Devonshire lace-makers, on the other hand, deriving their knowledge from tradition; , declare that when lace-making Was first introduced into the,"

county, pins," 80 indispensable to their art, being then sold at a price far beyond their means, the lace-makers, mostly the wives of fishermen living along the coast adopted the bones of fish, which, pared and cut into regular lengths, fully answered as a substitute. This explanation would seem more probable than that of employing sheep's trotters for bobbins, which, as from 300 to 400 are often used at one time on a pillow must have been both heavy and cumbersome. Even at the present-day pins made from chicken bones continue to be employed in Spain, and bone pins are still used in Portugal. "

23 The larger pins had heads put to them with seeds locally called Hariffe or goose-grass; the seeds, when fingered, became hard and polished.

The Bobbins are usually made of bone, wood or ivory. English bobbins are of bone or wood, and especially in the counties of Bedford, Bucks, and Huntingdon, these on a lace pillow formed a homely record of their owner's life. The names of her family, dates and records, births and marriages and mottoes were carved, burnt, or stained on the bobbin, while events of the general interest was often commemorated by the addition of a new bobbin. The *spangles, jingles* (or *gingles*) fastened to the end of the bobbin has a certain interest; a waistcoat button and a few coral beads brought from overseas, a family relic in the shape of an old copper seal, or an ancient and battered coin—such things as these were often attached to the ring of brass wire passed through a hole in the bobbin. The inscriptions on the bobbins are sometimes burned and afterwards stained, and sometimes "pegged" or traced in tiny leaden studs, and consist of such mottoes as "Love me Truly" (*sic*), "Buy the Ring," "Osborne for Ever," .. Queen Caroline," "Let no false Lover win my heart," "To me, my dear, you may come near" "Lovely Betty" "Dear Mother," and so forth.—R: E. Head.

Moody Devon pillow lace and how to make it

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ONLY a stone's throw from  
 , the room where the children  
 have their lace lessons  
 to-day stood the old lace  
 school of Beer, where their  
 grandmothers were .. learned" at a fee of one  
 penny a week. Next door to the school lived  
 a "twisty and deformed" man, who eked

out a scanty livelihood by making and decorating  
bobbins.

Who could have had the heart to reject the lover who carved on a ringed  
bobbin with a reckless expenditure of labour the words:

**"The ring is round and hath no end,  
So is my love for you, my friend."**

But it was a poor-spirited swain who wrote:

**"You may go out And walk about  
'When I a.m quite forgot."**

The fisher lads would take their sweethearts'  
bobbins to sea, carving them with ships, mermaids, fishes, and posies.  
The indentations were filled up with red and black  
wax and a broken piece of glass was used to file down any unevenness.  
Many of the posies are quite devoid of rhyme:-

**"I pray God protect the sailor still  
From rocks and sands and every ill,"**

maybe considered as belonging to the more  
ambitious attempts.

Most of the bobbins have hearts entwined,  
giving the initials of the lovers and the date of  
the year. On St. Valentine's Day it was no  
the uncommon thing for a little packet of half  
a dozen decorated bobbins to be thrown in  
through the cottage door, and a man would  
have been remiss indeed who had not carved  
a new set ready for his bride.

An old Branscombe worker uses bobbins  
decorated by all the sentences of the Lord's  
Prayer and one very fine example has on it ten  
ships and thirty-three fishes. The bobbins at  
Beer has always been especially decorative,  
though now no one attempts the carving.  
Branscombe preferred a severer style of rings  
in black and red, and all the plain bobbins  
were either burnt with *aqua fortis* (" Agnes  
Forty," as it is generally called in the villages,  
no doubt under the impression that the said  
Agnes invented the method) or boiled in blackberry  
juice. The name .. bobbin" is never  
used by the Devonshire workers themselves,  
who only talk of "lace-sticks." It is the  
custom with careful workers to scrub the  
bobbins always before starting a new pattern,  
and the yellow soap, combined with a hearty

polishing brings a soft yellow sheen on to the wood which no superficial means can surpass. Spindle-wood is specially used and is only to be cut in perfection at one time of the year if the bobbins are to be a good colour. In the old days, when trolly lace required a heavier bobbin, one carved from the small bone of a chicken's wing was used and in an earlier period, again, some of the smaller bones from a pig's foot, upon which the thread was wound as on a reel. Pear-wood is sometimes found among the bobbins, but the many dark woods used by the Buckinghamshire workers are quite unknown in the West. The bobbins have played an important part in the life of the lace worker, and are bound up with some of the dearest events of their lives.

*The Bobbins.*-For this lace these are very Light. The heads should be chosen as small as possible, and the length should not exceed four inches. It is of very little use attempting to produce good work with the heavier bobbins used for Torchon, Italian, or Buckingham. The body of a Honiton bobbin is little thicker than the head, and the end is rounded to a point for convenience in taking sewing. The favourite wood used in the West Country is spindle wood, but pear and sycamore are met with among some old specimens. It is

the custom with the country people to give the bobbins a good scrubbing with coarse yellow soap and water before filling them for a new piece of work. and this serves a double purpose in keeping the thread and hands beautifully clean, while the bobbins by degrees take the polished surface that may be seen on the well-scoured deal tables of a farm house. Three dozen bobbins are the smallest number necessary for an outfit, since, although only fifteen couples may be needed for the work, it saves trouble to have some ready wound to take the place of the empty ones.

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In Buckinghamshire, where this net is



made in perfection, the women use heavy bobbins, often weighted with beads. Here and there one may still meet with an old Devon trolley bobbin, often as heavy as the Buckinghamshire, and generally three times the size of the Honiton bobbin. The net requires a certain amount of pulling to bring it into shape and the little modern bobbins do not help the lace-maker much in this respect. The filling in, or netgrounding of a pattern, was formerly the work of a special hand who very probably used different bobbins than those of the sprig maker. Since the netgrounding is the highest form the Devon lace can take, it is to be hoped the work will become more general as the demand for better work increases.

POINT D' ANGLE TERRE NET.

This net is identical with Old Brussels

Romance of lace Mary Jones

Before pegs and bobbins were used for making lace, the lace-worker manipulated the thread on her fingers. Sometimes she had to call in the assistance of three or four others to have a sufficient number of pegs to complete her work. A Harleian MS. dating from the time of Henry IV of England ('421-1471) shows that small instruments were also employed for making 'Lace Bascon'.

JAMES RODGE James Rodge is reputed to have been one of the prime promoters of the Devon lace industry at this period. A tombstone in Honiton Church testifies:

'Here lieth ye Body of James Rodge of Honiton in ye County of Devonshire, Bone-lace seller, who hath given unto the poor of Honiton Parish, the benefit of them forever, who deceased ye 27 July A. D. 1617. Remember the Poore.'

Such was the reputation of Devon lace in 1660 that France issued a royal ordinance requiring that it should bear a special mark signifying its origin on being imported.



Wright

### **Devonshire bobbins have only' the one long neck**

(2) Trollies. **In** Bucks, a trolly is " bobbin used for gimp, but in Devonshire, it means,;' a bobbin used in it" making *of a* special kind of lace, "Devonshire Trolly," which we shall speak of in Chapter IS, Section 60. As this is what we may call a "Finish as you go" lace, the bobbins have blunt ends, there being no necessity for a point. None of the Devon bobbins have spangles. The bobbins of Downton (Wiltshire) resemble the Devon bobbins in being pointed and without spangles, and differ from them in being shorter and fatter. (See Plate 22.)

As regards the inscriptions on the Devonshire bobbins, some savour of the sea and others are religious, as might be expected of persons saturated, as were so many of the Devonshire people,

Several of the inscriptions have a small heart at the beginning and the end. One has a large heart with the words, "Forget me not," within it. Most have fishes, ships or seaweed painted on them. On St. Valentine's Day a boy would go to his sweetheart's door and throw in a packet of lace sticks of his carving. If he did not throw in the whole set of 24 (the number ordinarily used on a Devonshire pillow) he was considered a laggard in love.