

## **Napoleonic Prisoners of War and Lace bobbins**

Brian Lemin May 2020

I start this article by referencing the two articles that I have read recently. My object was to see if I can find a reference to the PoWs actually making Lace Bobbins. In the first referenced article I find that this quote from a famous author. This is the closest I have so far managed to get. I need to say that I have written to him to see if he can help with this quest of mine.

In the second article, I read about the integration of these PoWs into English society, but find no reference to their making of Lace bobbins. They were imprisoned or settled in places that we would call the East Midland lace towns in the late 1700s or early 1800s. From the map and other tables, it is reasonable to think that they did indeed have that presence.

<https://englishhistoryauthors.blogspot.com/2013/06/lonely-lives-and-deaths-french.html> Wednesday, June 26, 2013

### **Lonely Lives and Deaths – French Napoleonic Prisoners of War in Britain**

by **Antoine Vanner**

Here is a quote on the entry to “prison”.

...Formalities complete, the prisoner was assigned to a “parole town”. One such was the Alresford, one of no less than eleven such towns in Hampshire and one which still contains sad memorials to these men. The Transport Board had an agent in each town – in Alresford’s case a solicitor called John Dunn – who arranged for billeting the prisoner on a suitable local family.

... The Transport Board’s daily allowance seems to have been on the meagre side and many of the prisoners supplemented their incomes by giving lessons in French, fencing or drawing. Others seem to have made for sale tobacco boxes, sets of dominoes **and bobbins used in making**

**lace.** Some may have built model ships of the type made from bone and rigged with human hair which is associated with French prisoners – one occasionally appears at auction houses. Whether to supplement their diet or to satisfy French gastronomic taste, prisoners were frequently seen gathering snails, much to the amazement of the locals.

The next article is found as follows, and the map records the parole towns.

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/0363/2c0f9cb5ac7a1a54569263e6973f5f693fe7.pdf>

## Anglo-French Encounters: The Integration of French Prisoners of War and Émigrés into British Society 1789-1815

Map 2.2 - Parole towns opening duration



Sources: TNA: PRO ADM 103/549-56, 561, 563-8, 570, 580-5, 587-8, 590-2, 594-6, 598-9, 601-2, 604-14

**At this stage, I will reproduce a section of My article written with Diana Smith about the “Nelson” bobbin, as this opinion quoted remains my belief.**

**Lemin,**

Brian. and Smith, D.A *Most Unusual Lace Bobbin from a Surprising Source*, 18 pages. Posted May 3, 2014. [FIRST PAGE](#). File size 1,000KB  
[PDF](#)

Brian Lemin with Diana Smith. April 2014

### **Were they bobbin makers?**

Since starting this little bit of research I have become convinced that they must have made lace bobbins. I have a few references that I would like to share with you. The first is the most persuasive and appears to be from a well-researched document (Others I have found quote comparatively recent newspapers etc.). This reference tells clearly of the success of the Napoleonic PoWs at lace making, it is talking about lace making being started by the PoWs.

*PORTCHESTER 177*

*The brilliant idea of starting this belonged to a French soldier prisoner who had been born and bred in a lace-making country and had been accustomed to see all the women working at it. He recalled the process by memory, took pupils, and in less than a year there were 3,000 prisoners in Portchester making lace, and among these were 'capitalists' who employed each as many as from fifty to sixty workmen. So beautiful was this lace, and so large was it bought by the surrounding families, that the English lace-makers protested, its manufacture within the prison was forbidden, and it is said that the work of suppression was carried out most brutally, the machines being broken and all lace in stock or process of manufacture destroyed.*

You might notice that the article talks about the “machines” being destroyed. Most of you will know that machine lace was not invented until 1808 and did not come into general manufacture until about 1860. Our rates are about 1800 to 1816. What was destroyed were the pillows and presumably the bobbins.

It certainly appears that these men were good lacemakers. There is no doubt they were excellent craft artisans who made many ornamental and useful articles to sell to the population to supplement their income. It seems very reasonable that they would also make lace bobbins to sell.

What follows is a bit gory, but give insight into the condition of the prisoners and some of their “lace” activities.

It is taken from a story about fugitive PoWs.

*..... This was seen from the shore, a fleet of boats set off in pursuit, and, after a smart chase one account says of fifteen miles the fugitives were captured, although it was thought that they would have escaped had they known how to manage a sailing boat. They were taken on board H.M.S. Centaur, searched, and upon them were found three knives and a large sum of money. They*

*were taken then to jail ashore. One of the prisoners was found to have thirty crown pieces concealed about him and confessed that having saved up this money, which he had made by the sale of lace, toys, and other manufactures, he had bought a suit of decent clothes, and, mixing with visitors to the depot, thus disguised had got off. In the meanwhile, the body of Brothers had been recovered, placed first in one of the casemates of Point Battery, and then taken amidst an enormous crowd to his house in Surrey Street, Landport.*

I think they did make lace bobbins. I have stated this on the reasonable suppositions that

A. They made lace on a large scale; B. they organized large groups of lacemakers; C. That they were skilled artisans capable of making many arts and crafts and domestic tools which they sold for income...they were clearly in a position to make lace bobbins and indeed the pillows that went with the making of lace.

For the same reasons, I believe they were more than capable of making the rudimentary lathes that would turn lace bobbins. Even the established English lace bobbin makers of that time had little more than rudimentary lathes to use.

I stand to be challenged as always (you never learn unless your ideas are challenged!) but, having established that they could and almost certainly did make lace bobbins, let us look at what some experienced lace bobbin collectors consider that at least few of their bobbins within their collection are suitably different to warrant a "left of field" identification.

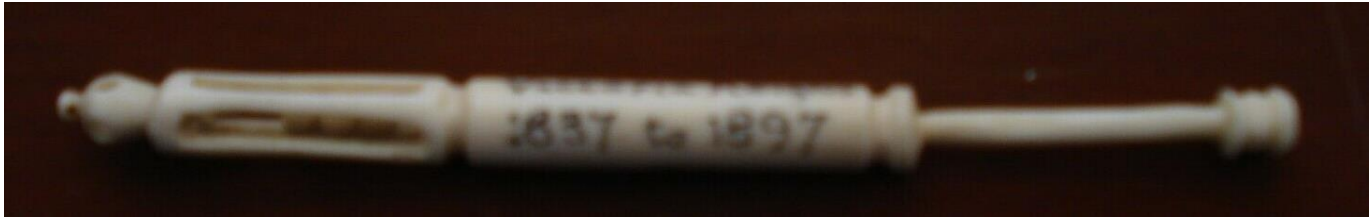
We tend to think that the Springetts book identified all the bobbin makers and also placed certain designs and features to these bobbin makers. Their work was and is, invaluable to bobbin collectors, but as with all research it has been built upon since its publication, and whilst no one seems to want to publish another book on lace bobbins, if they did and they chose to, there are possibly about 6 other bobbin makers that can be identified. We would need to give them numbers as did the Springetts but if you have a collection of any number, you will find that there are little groups of your bobbins that you can separate as being all by the same maker but not from one of Springett's groups." Having said that few have been presented to me as being possible of PoW origin.

### **The Current Bobbin under discussion.**

The following bobbin has recently been up for sale on eBay. ( <https://www.ebay.co.uk/itm/254607849251> )

Diana Smith is the owner and curator of the Diana Smith Collection (lace bobbins) and for many years I have been a collaborator and recipient of her generous permission to use photos of bobbins from her collection, I have learned over the years that she has an "eagle eye" for unusual bobbins. Needless to say that it was she who alerted me to this bobbin.

Let us take a look at it. The seller has taken a very poor quality photograph of it for our purposes, but OK for sale purposes!



The above is the original pictures in the advertisement. The seller has kindly sent me two better pictures. [ thank you very much] See below.

### **Description of the bobbin.**

It is a turned bovine bone bobbin. It looks as though the bone used was reasonably fresh as it is shown as being quite curved.

The tail has a pierced (drilled) teardrop shape with a rather small bobtail that looks to have been drilled for a spangle.

Above that are a nicely carved Mother and Babe complete with a babe that looks complete with three separate bone balls. The MiB is separated from the rest of the shank with a shallow groove.

The upper part of the shank is where the inscription is placed. It is hard to decide on the picture of what technique is used. At a simple level, it is just nib and ink, the alternative is that it is pyrographed into the bone. One special thing is that it is in lower case script (like ordinary writing on paper) this is unusual for our traditional EastMidland bobbin makers. As far as I can see in the pictures available the capitals are un-seraphed.

There is a small collar created by a groove.

The neck is quite long, but there is surprisingly a "tripel" neck which is probably never seen in an East Midland bobbin

The seller quotes the text as below. This is hard to compare with the pictures of the bobbin supplied but as bobbins are cylindrical it is very possible that we have not seen all the text.

BOBBIN AS VICTORIA 1837 TO 1897  
SIXTY YEARS  
HAPPY JUBILEE

The reader can now look at the first proposed Napoleonic bobbin that Diana and I have examined.

### **The Nelson Bobbin.**



Details Below. A B C.



A



B



C

The bobbin under discussion in this article is what we are calling:

**The Victoria bobbin.**







### **Comparison of the two bobbins.**

Firstly we should view both the bobbins overall as lace bobbins.

If we saw those two bobbins on a table side by side, I would suggest that they look as though they "could" have been made by the same maker.

#### *Similarities*

Somewhat decorated tail

Very well executed Mother in Babe design

Contrasting black ink text and embellishments.

#### *Differences*

The design of which should be a double neck... (Victoria) is "triple"!

The text of this Victoria bobbin is in lower case script as opposed to small capitals of the Nelson bobbin.

#### *Text comparisons.*

We have only 4 letters that are capitals in the original Victoria bobbin. They are V R H J.

There is an "R" in Nelson A, above. The Nelson "R" bears no resemblance to the Victoria "R."

Lower case caps used in the Nelson bobbin and lower case script used in the Victoria bobbin are not comparable.

There is one other observation that we should make and that is the "7" in 1837. The tradition of French script is to have the tail of the Numeral 7 being crossed with a horizontal dash -.

We note that not all PoWs were French, none the less many continental countries follow this tradition with their numeral "7".

## **Discussion**

It has been shown elsewhere that the Napoleonic PoWs did make lace in some camps. They made it so well that they were forced to stop making it because they were too great competition for the local lacemakers. It seems more than reasonable that there were lace bobbin makers in the camps that supplied the lace makers in those camps with bobbins. After all the PoW lace makers were only making lace to get money, they would hardly have the money to buy their bobbins.

A general question arises as to what style of lace bobbins these PoWs would use and have their fellow prisoners make?

The two bobbins we have looked at over the recent past are sophisticated Mother in Babe creations, only introduced to England by a new breed of bobbin makers who were only born around the time of their first imprisonment or later. (As recorded by Springett. Success to the Lace Pillow.) Up until that period English lacemakers were using Continental style lace bobbins most of which were traditional design according to the style of lace they were making.

If this logic is correct, the bobbins made by PoWs for the lace their fellow prisoners were making would have been traditional as it is doubtful that a sophisticated new style of spangled bobbin would have been familiar to the PoW lace makers, also it is very possible that they were not aware of the changes in bobbin style that England was undergoing.

We must then turn our minds to the integrated French Prisoners (see above article.) Of course, these ex Pows lived in England for many years and would be well aware of the lace activities of that time and could well have turned their skills to bobbin making of the most modern design. We must, therefore, ask ourselves the question is this Victoria bobbin made by an ex-Napoleonic Pow?

Whilst accepting overall similarities between the bobbin in a general sense, the triple neck seems to indicate more than a degree of ignorance about bobbins. Having said that we must accept the creative skill in the MIB design on the bobbin reflects the quality of work for which the PoWs were known.

It is a small matter that could easily be challenged by i.e. that of the lack of the continental style for the numeral 7.

## **Conclusions**

Firstly let us review the Nelson bobbin. We accepted the possibility of it being made by French PoWs but questioned why we had not seen this

style in more plentiful numbers. Our more recent research reviewed the dates of the possible changes in bobbin style of decoration. making and spangling. This raises a further question now about the Nelson bobbin, but we still must take into account the integrated Napoleonic Pows into England and their creative abilities.

When we look at the Victoria bobbin the script decoration gives me an uneasy feeling that it looks if it is done by a quite modern hand, be it executed in ink or pyrography. Further to that, to allow a triple neck through to lacemakers is a very questionable decision by the maker as it can very easily be corrected.

In the absence of more examples in this modern time era that we could place in a Napoleonic PoW genre of bobbins, we are left to allow our thinking that both the Victoria and Nelson bobbins could have been made by the PoWs; if so probably by the integrated PoWs that settle in England after their general release.

There is the general possibility of these two bobbins being made and or decorated by the same person, but that would be hard to demonstrate to any high degree of certainty.

Finally, seeing a second, similar style of the bobbin to the Nelson bobbin coming on the market raises the question of there being the possibility of a person trying to create a Napoleonic PoW genre of the bobbin, or that there is or was a person dabbling in their way to create a bobbin that might deceive a buyer or collector.

We must accept the possibility of these bobbins being Napoleonic PoW creations. The Nelson bobbin is more believable as being PoW in origin than the Victoria bobbin. We still need more discoveries of that type of bobbin and perhaps some scholarly discoveries before a positive decision on either bobbin can be made.

