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EAST DEVON BOBBINS.

By BRIAN LEMIN. December 2001.

Not Yet completed

Introduction.

Did you notice that I called these "East Devon" bobbins and not "Honiton" bobbins? (By the way Honiton is pronounced *Huniton*). I am afraid that indicates that I am trying to skirt around a somewhat modern controversy amongst lace makers in that area. It would appear that the term "Honiton" lace has lost its generic application to all laces made in the East Devon area and has taken on something of a dominating term where those who are not very knowledgeable seem to think that the town of Honiton is the only place that made lace in the area and that the types of lace that they made are the only ones of note.

I do not want to buy into this argument, mainly because I am in no way an expert on lace and could not comment on the various claims of the many lace making towns in East Devon, but what I will argue is the the established conventions of the descriptions of lace making areas in England.

There is obviously a convention that we name English lace bobbins after a particular area of England, i.e., the East Midlands, South Bucks, etc. Having said that I must immediately concede that that there are exceptions to this convention by calling the Dorsetshire and Wiltshire bobbins by their town name of Downton. None-the-less I am happy to go along with the geographical convention for this article if only to remain good friends with those lace makers that were so kind to me in that area during my recent visit to them. If the truth be known there would only be very few individuals that would feel it important to argue their case to any depth.

I think we should recognise that there were many villages in this area of Devon (and the towns that are now in the modern counties of.....) who made lace for most of 500 years. In the year 1698 a memorandum on the situation of lace makers in this area listed 26 villages who comprised 5339 lace makers between them. (Look at the map a little later on in the article) and this list of villages would not have necessarily been all inclusive.

I suppose I also ought to raise the issue of "Devon" as opposed to "Devonshire". As I was born and raised in

Plymouth in the county of "Devon" I suppose that I should be very knowledgeable about this subject, but I am afraid that I am not! All I know is that as the result of long study and indeed arguments by the historians, the result is that "probably Devon is more correct than Devonshire".

As the final paragraph of this introduction I need to express a personal regret that I actually lived in the lace making areas of East Devon for four years of my life (I started my professional education in that area) and knew nothing about the lace history of the area I lived in until a mere ten years ago. I was going to say what a waste of time but I was much more interested in "other" things (!) as many young men are when they first leave home! Mind you I had an extraordinary knowledge of the pubs and villages of that area, but that is another story. :)

The Geography

East Devon is situated in South West England and has as its capital, the city of Exeter. If you have a look at your map and look for Sidmouth, Sidbury, Branscombe, Beer, Seaton, Axmouth, Lyme Regis (Lyme of fame from the Jane Austin novel of "Persuasion"). and Charmouth you will notice a lovely line of coastal villages. Most of them have pebble beaches, high cliffs and steep narrow roads down to the villages.

The inland towns are very numerous, but they are bounded by Upottery in the north, Ottery St Mary in the West (I lived between Ottery St Mary and Sidmouth, right in the heart of beautiful countryside) and Axminster in the east.

Honiton is in the middle as it were, and has bestowed its name upon the lace only because it was for many years the terminus of the stage coach route from London and was as result of this advantage a significant centre of trade in that area.

Insert Map

The Bobbins.

To take a simple view of these bobbins one could say that there are just two types of bobbins. They have single heads, they are thin and have no spangles and are "pointed". Those used for the Honiton styles of lace have a distinct point, but those used for "trolley" lace (not to be confused with the trolley bobbins of the East Midlands) were clearly more blunt than the Honiton lace style bobbins.

The only two Devonshire bobbin makers that I have seen in print are those named by Whiting, and presumably date from the turn of the century, they are Mr Miller and Mr Goode from Beer. (Whiting p 222)

During my recent study tour which I made for the express purpose of learning more about East Devon bobbins I learnt that there are those bobbins which are somewhat fatter and longer, but they still are not that different to warrant a special description for them, but more about them later. Meanwhile look at the following generic types of East Devon bobbins.



Typical East Devon Bobbins
(Smaller than actual)

The simplicity of these bobbins must end at this point because it is the decoration of these bobbins that is most

fascinating . Whilst the East Midland bobbins is beautifully decorated, most of its decoration is achieved by the turning skill of the bobbins maker. This is not the case for the East Devon bobbin. The bobbins are smooth. They have no turned decoration at all except for circumferential rings, and even these were filled with sealing wax.

The reason for their smoothness is that the styles of lace that they made required the operation known as "sewings" where the bobbin must pass through many loops of thread without catching.

They were mostly made from spindle wood, holly, sycamore, fruitwoods or olive. As such they are mainly lighter in colour, but they are occasionally made of mahogany, and I do believe that I just might have an ebony one.

Their Decoration .

Agnes Forty!

The favourite, or at least the most common decoration of Devonshire bobbins is the staining of them with Aqua Fortis, which is nitric acid and which is colloquially known as "Agnes Forty". The appearance of this stain is that of "faint" (by now) blotches of brow. It is reported that a fresh stain is green in colour, but I personally have experimented with this and whilst I might possibly call the colour I have achieved, a dark bottle green, I am pushing it a little. There is no doubt that the stain lightness to a light brown and possibly a greenish tendency, but all I can say is that I have not achieved a green, but I might well be doing it wrong. However, below is an antique East Devon bobbins with a distinct green blotch on it. I have seen the original and would doubt very much that it is anything other than original.



Stained with Aqua fortis, including the green effect

Sometimes the Agnes Forty must have been applied with a pointed stick of metal nib of some sort as the decoration looks as if it has been "drawn" on as opposed to dabbed on and the decoration is a little more artistic in these cases.

I think that this is an appropriate juncture to mention the colour "green" on East Midland bobbins. Other than the description of green used to describe the nitric acid stain I have never read of, or seen green used in any of the East Devon bobbins. That is until my recent trip to the UK where I was shown and had the privilege to photograph such a bobbin. I reproduce it below.



Unusual green decoration on an East Midlands bobbin.

Circumferential rings .

As I have mentioned above, this is the only turned decoration on the East Devon bobbins. They are traditionally named "Branscombe rigged" bobbins. That they originated from a maker in Branscombe is probably without a doubt, but that they were all made in Branscombe can not be proven or denied.

What we can say is that the lace makers of Branscombe preferred to use bobbins decorated in this manner

The decoration is simple in that they comprise a varied number of grooves around the bobbin, both narrow and broad, and have no other colours other than red and black. The rings are usually in groups that vary in numbers of rings and their positioning on the shaft. The red and black colours are achieved by filling the grooves with coloured sealing wax. Analysis of the patterns has not really shown any distinct pattern occurrences. The most rings recorded are 39. Mostly there are between twenty-five and thirty-two and there appears to be a distinct lack of groupings of four rings. The colours too do not appear in a preponderance of either colour. (See Yallop p 194)



Branscombe Rigged, Circumferential Rings.

Wright says that the Branscombe bobbins were darker because they were "burnt with Aqua Fortis". (p176) (Notice he says burnt not stained) He refers us to a picture. Neither his picture or historical collections would appear to substantiate this statement in general, but there might be particular cases where this is correct. I have also "burnt" a bobbin with aqua fortis, and it comes out real black, not dark.

Beer Bobbins.

Wright (p 176) statement that the Beer bobbins are "highly decorative" could imply that the decorated East Devon bobbins came only from Beer, or at least those that had the nautical decoration on them. Again, I have not been able to find and proof or denial that decorated East Devon bobbins only came from Beer. I would have thought that there would be some record of that if it were so. (There is still an awful lot of research to be done on lace bobbins.. I will have to "up sticks" and spend the rest of my life touring the East Midlands and Devon and see what I can discover!! J) BTW did you know that Huetsen did most of his research and collecting on a bicycle touring around the East Midlands?! But getting back to the subject, it could be that the nautical designs originated in Beer? We just don't know. I must say it would be nice to be able to show that this was correct. It seems reasonable that nautical styles of decoration came from the coastal "seafaring" villages and those bearing the agricultural designs came from the country villages.

A most unusual find that I made was an East Midland bobbin that had a type of scroll that bore the name "Beer". Through the magic of the computer I have been able to join the images of a number of views of the bobbin together which will show on a "flat" plane the whole of the bobbin. You will be able to see the name "BEER" quite clearly (I hope!)



The name "BEER" inscribed on a bobbin.

(Curtesy, The Lace Shop. Honiton)

Just in case you are tempted like myself to think that this bobbin was decorated in Beer, I need to tell you that I have also seen Sidmouth and Exmouth on bobbins. I have to say that these towns named on bobbins are probably a start for research into the styles of decoration, printing etc. that could well lead to some interesting speculations.

At this stage of East Midland bobbin research, we can not say that Beer had its own style of decoration. It is speculated that bobbins associated with Beer would probably those with nautical decoration. The reader should also understand that there are a number of coastal lace making villages that would also be more "at home" with nautical decorations.

Abstract patterns.

Perhaps I should preface this with the method of decoration that is employed in decorating East Devon bobbins. It would appear that they used sharp shards of glass to cut and or scratch the "engravings" on the bobbins, and filled them with wax. (See Whiting p 222). She also tells us that the sailors smoothed the bobbins with the glass, but up to now I have seen very few whittled East Devon bobbins. That is not to say that the sailors did not take some pre turned bobbins to sea with them to decorate. In my personal experiments with shards of glass I can confirm that they can be used to "cut or scratch" bobbin decorations and also to smooth them, and later in this article I shall offer examples of those that I think might have been made in this way.

I have tried also different means of decorating bobbins with triangles. The easiest for me was to make a triangular "punch" from a nail and tap the indentation of the shape into the bobbin. This does not look too authentic. I did not make a good job of cutting the triangle with a knife, but I think the skill could be developed with practice. Other designs like the bricks. the "engraving" of shapes and figures are more easy to reproduce with a sharp knife and possibly a shard of glass.

Now let us take a look at the patterns. They are many and varied (See Yallop p 196 and following) The triangle forms the basis for many designs. Theses are small nicks in the cylinder of the shaft. The triangles are woven into all sorts of designs, like hearts, stars, borders circles and so on.



Triangles in the shape of a circle and a triangle.

Leaving the triangles, there is another frequent design, that of the brick wall which speaks for itself, and variations on this is a checker board and even loose bricks in a pattern.

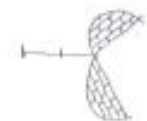


Various forms of brick decoration.

Then there are a multitude of lines and diamonds in all sorts of abstract designs.

Foliage and Flora.

Some of the leaves in these designs employ the triangle or variations on it, but mostly these are what I would term "line drawings" There are flowers, and twigs or branches with leaves on them. One pair of leaves I have noticed is filled in with a "brick wall" design!



Living creatures.

These include birds and fish, and nice little cats, like you used to draw in primary school!





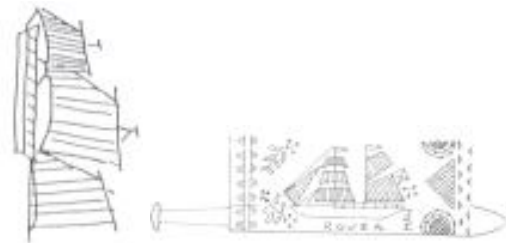
Human Artefacts.

Anchors, houses, windows and the card symbols for hearts, spades, diamonds and clubs.



Ships.

Being of seafaring stock, I love these. a Varsity of rigged sailing ships of the old style. Quite nicely drawn too.



Humans and others.

There are some stick people included but there are some nicely "clothed" people too.; and Yallop illustrates a mermaid!



Initials.

Yallop tells us that initials are usually at the top of the shank and are usually those of the owner. If there are two pairs of initials he thinks it could be those of the giver as well as the recipient.

Dates

The earliest date found is 1705 and the latest 1900.



Words

The Devonshire bobbin does not have the same variety as the East Midland word bobbins, but it is famous for its multi lined inscription that is read helically around the bobbin and has to be read from the last line upwards.

As with the east Midland inscribers, there appears to be a lot of mistakes, which points to possibly illiterate persons inscribing these bobbins.

The other themes noted are religious, personal observations, couplets and good wishes.

Conclusion.

There is very little written about Devonshire Lace Bobbins, which makes it a v fruitful area of research for those of you who have the time, inclination and geographical location that would enable you to follow up your special areas o f interest.

Do not dismiss them as plain old "sticks". You may have noticed that I have refrained from calling these bobbins "sticks" as dispute the published naming of these bobbins as sticks, the Honiton folks say that this is not correct. They never called them sticks. You will know how I like to fanaticise a bit, here is one. I think that those who made and made the East Midland bobbins, felt that their bobbins were so superior to the Devonshire bobbins and referred to them "sticks" in comparison to their beautiful bobbins! J

Just one other thing that I discovered about Devonshire bobbins when writing and article about the lace "holidays". The Devonshire boys had a custom of giving their lace making girlfriends, hand made bobbins as a Valentines gifts. And, "stingy indeed, or very lukewarm, was the youth who gave a packet of less than a dozen." (Whiting p 224)

How many bobbins did your partner give you on the last Valentines Day?

THE BIG QUESTION.

Here is a photograph of a black Honiton bobbin. It is dated and intitaled. I have not been aboe to find out anything about this bobbin. Can you help please?



References

Bellerby, Denys. 1976 Lace Making Bobbins. Lace. (The Magazine and Newsletter of the Lace Guild. [UK]) Number 9 "Lace bobbins" Issue number 10. April 1978. Honiton bobbins including some very nice line drawings of decorations.

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Whitley, Gertrude. Old-Time Tools and Toys of Needlework. Dover Publications Inc. New York. Reprint 1971. Originally published in 1928 under the title, Tools and Toys of Stitchery.

Rather flowery prose used, but a most informative chapter intitled Beautiful Bobbins. Quite good illustrations. Has some interesting glass bobbins.

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Wright, Thomas The Romance of the Lace Pillow. H.H.Armsrtong. Olney 1919. Reprinted Ruth Bean Carlton 1982.

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Quite the best book for those interested in the historical aspect of bobbins. Not strong on illustrations and when they do appear they are poor photographs, but the text is invaluable as a record of original source material.

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

Certainly the most scholarly text available on the history of the lace industry. Concentrates on the Honiton industry but covers the whole of England. He puts forward a contrary theory to the origins of the lace history in England. Tends to discount the Protestant refugee theory and offers the "astute English businessman" theory.

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