

EAST MIDLAND SPANGLED BOBBINS.

SOME SPECULATIONS ON THEIR ORIGIN, A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT.

Brian Lemin. July 1998.

INTRODUCTION.

For some years now I have been researching the history of lace bobbins and during that time I have discovered quite a few imponderables. The one that causes the most difficulties and is the least likely to ever be answered with certainty is that of, "Why did England develop the thin bobbin (as opposed to the generic "Bulbous or Olive" continental type of bobbin) and how did these bobbins get their spangles?" These two components, i.e. the thin bobbin and the spangled bobbin together make up what we now know as the East Midland type of bobbin.

I have had most of my argument prepared for some time but it was a simple statement by an "Arachne" correspondent, (Panza R. 1998) that brought my thoughts into a coherent (?) whole. In essence what she said was,

"The English wanted to have bone bobbins so they had to be thin bobbins".

I am indebted to her for this enlightening remark, as it was the last thought that I needed to enable me to promote the discussion that follows.

The following is a brief review of various speculations of my own and others. Some of these speculations can clearly be challenged and to be quite frank I do not believe them myself, but they are included in the spirit of the techniques of "brainstorming" which simply put says, you do not reject any idea as it may spark off a train of thought that leads to discovery. They are collected here for further input and discussion from the readers.

IN THE BEGINNING?

Well, first thing first. Some of my argument (but not all by any means) depends upon the premise that the following references to "bones" being the first bobbins meant that they were literally unmodified animal bones as opposed to bobbins made from bone. Since writing this, I have been on the net and got some support for it but no real confirmation! I am told that the Scottish National Museum had an exhibit that includes bones being used for bobbins. Correspondents have told me that chicken bones were used. Others have seen modern demonstrations that have shown how this was quite plausible. Well that is not too helpful to my speculations, but here goes.

I come to this speculation from the fact that there are very few antique continental lace bobbins made from bone. For that matter the East Midland bone bobbins are mostly dated much later than the period of the beginning of the lace industry. Why should this be? I am thinking that, if they were made of just plain old animal bones that suited the job, then when the fashioned bone bobbins came on the scene, the original "bones" were thrown away being of little value. Similarly, perhaps bones found by archeologists were interpreted as being just bones as opposed to tools. (?)

Just one other snippet that has been shared with me by Bev Walker. (1998) She told me that

"In some Mediterranean cultures, in Norway and, as it happens, in native cultures in north western Canada, weaving was done with each warp wrapped around a stone, or in a bundle, so similar to individual threads in a lace textile being wound around their own bobbin."

From that which Bev has said I thought that it would have been a short step to using bones for lace from stones for weaving. (To be fair to Bev Walker, she then goes on to discount the theory as the result of a technical comparison of weaving and lace making, but I include the statement as a contribution to the discussion.)

THE LITERATURE.

Perhaps we should start with the issue of "bone lace" as far as it relates to lace bobbins. One of the earliest writers is Mrs. Bury Palliser (1911) Though her

comments refer mainly to the continent of Europe and some authorities question her accuracy in some areas I believe that they are germane to our discussion. (Please note that most of these references are in her footnotes.). On page 32 she makes a statement about bobbins being the vehicle upon which the thread is wound, and then says that they were "formerly bone". On page 74 she talks about Italian bobbins and uses the word "Ossi" (bones); this appears to have the date of 1600 as her original reference. (See reference to the names of bobbins in Contu below)

In regard to England specifically, on page 296 she discusses the difference between bone lace and bobbin lace that was explained to her by a Devonshire lace maker. Briefly, this lady said that bobbin lace was made with coarse thread and long bobbins because bobbins of ordinary size would not hold enough thread. On page 391 she quotes an article dated 1900 saying that the bobbins were made from bone or wood.

The point that I want to make from Mrs Pallisers comments are that early bone lace was probably made by utilising unmodified bones as bobbins, and secondly that there were different types of bobbins in use in England

A more recent and indeed scholarly writer is Yallop (1992). He quotes Thomas Fullers' book

"Worthies of England" which is an account of Fullers travels in England, in about 1630 - 1640. (approximately) This is the earliest reference that Yallop found on the subject and says, "Bone lace is named, because first made with bone (since wooden) bobbins. This is usual for such utensils, both in the Latin and English names gratefully to retain the memory of the first matter they were made of".

He then goes on to give an example of "cochleare" for spoons as cockleshells were first used as spoons. page 31,32. Yallop further reinforces Fullers statement as being authentic, by telling us that Fuller was a comparatively local vicar for about 7 years.

Before we go any further it has to be noted that there is no certainty that natural animal bones were used as bobbins. Indeed Gertrude Whiting (1972) page 144

says the,

We are told that the term bone-lace comes more probably from "fish-bone pins, trimmed to regular lengths, than from sheep's trotters used as bobbins; for a quantity of trotters on a pillow might prove very clumsy and heavy".

Unfortunately she does not give her source for that statement. From my reading on pins, I am inclined to doubt her explanation that bone pins were the origin of the term "bone lace". It is fairly certain that fish bones, thorns of various types and bone slivers were used as pins by lacemakers. Probably dependent on where they were living. i.e. fish bones if they lived near the coast, thorns if they lived in the country etc. Gertrude Whiting talks of bone slivers as pins. (page 136). I am inclined to think that there appears to be too much of a diversity of materials used for pins to give to the humble pin the honour of naming "bone-lace".

Perhaps the most useful reference to support the use of bones as lace bobbins is as follows: . (I am grateful to Vibeke Ervo for these notes via the Arachne email list.)

"Bodil Tornehave researched Free-Hand Lace, she wrote several articles and the book "Danske Frihaandskniplinger" (Danish Free-Hand Laces) published in 1987. This book shows seven very old lace bobbins unearthed during excavations in Copenhagen. The six are of wood but the oldest is an elegantly turned bone bobbin.

Bodil Tornehave wrote: "...the tool, the bobbin, is found in many "naturally grown" versions; [*I think this refers to "twigs" carved as bobbins, often just the neck is carved.* - Brian] mainly the old simple wooden bobbin, but also, for example, the foot bones of pigs or sheep. The foot bones were used as "lace bobbins" in Scotland until fairly recently." (Bodil Tornehave had seen such "bobbins" at the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh in 1958).

Near Cantu in Italy bobbins are still be called "ossi" i.e. bones.

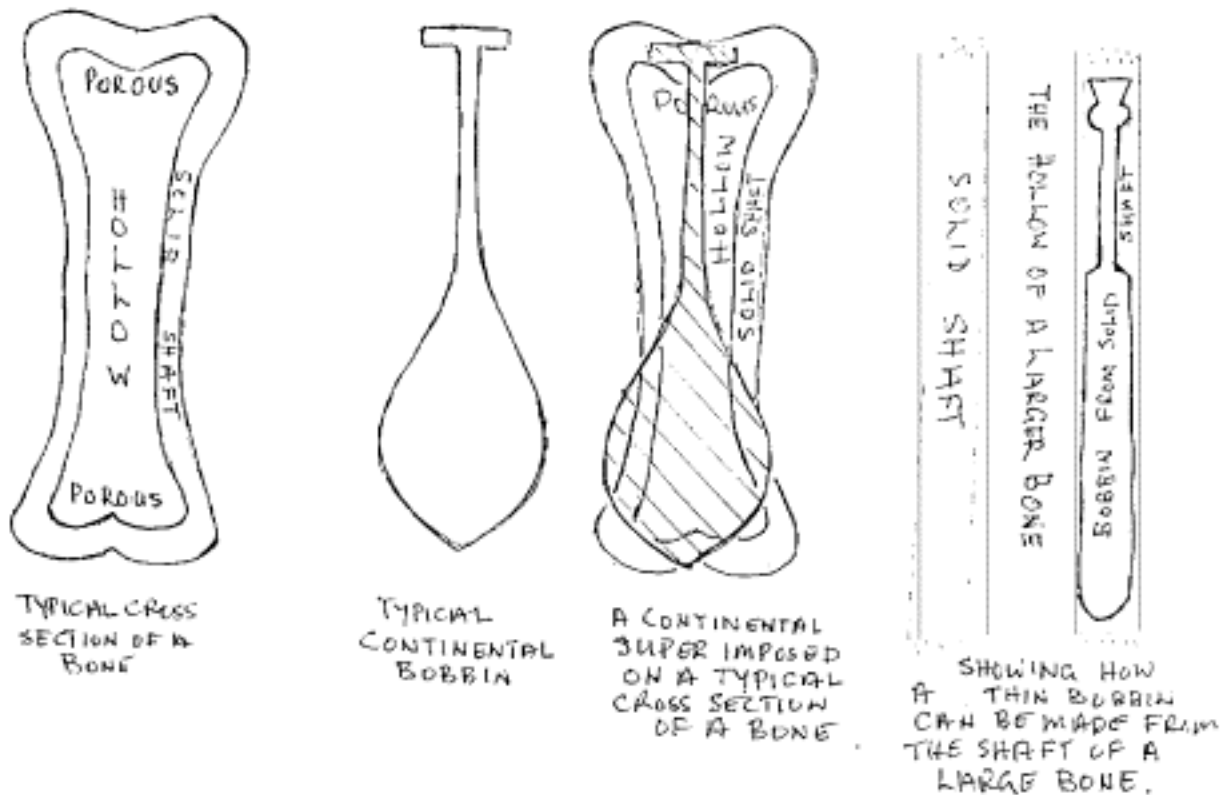
Ornamente (the German edition of the Dutch Handwerken Zonder Grenzen) June 1997 contained an article about the embroidery from Lefkara on Cyprus. The embroidery was earlier bordered by Free-Hand Lace. The article tells us that on Cyprus the bones of

lambs and rabbits feet were used as bobbins."

What can we speculate from the authorities quoted above?

1. Whilst it can be challenged, it is most probable that bones were originally used as "bobbins" and that they were later made from wood.
2. If we now use our imagination to visualise the kind of bones that could have been used we can "see" that the general shape of the bones would be two bulbous ends with a slimmer shaft connecting them. (Though Whitings "sheep's trotters" do not exactly fit that description!)
3. It is reasonable to assume that bobbin lace making started on the continent of Europe; so now let us imagine the generic shape of a continental bobbin and compare it to an, animal bone. (It should be noted that not all continental bobbins have the bulbous end, but all are much thicker and most have bulbous ends of some type.)

With a little imagination we can see how the wooden shape of the generic continental bobbin could have evolved from the use of animal bones. The top bulbous portion is reduced in size and the bottom bulbous portion is retained. The slim shaft connecting the two bulbous ends of the "bone" now has a "neck" instead of the top of the "bone". This allows the thread to be wound upon it. Is it possible that this is how the practical tool we now call a "continental" lace bobbin developed in Europe?



The above drawing shows the difficulty that an artisan would have in reproducing a practical shaped bobbin from bone if trying to retain as much of the "bone" shape as possible. There would not be enough solid bone to replicate it. So, instead they made the "bone shaped" bobbin of wood. However, the right hand drawing shows that it was entirely possible to make a thin bobbin "English" type bobbin from the shaft of a large bone.

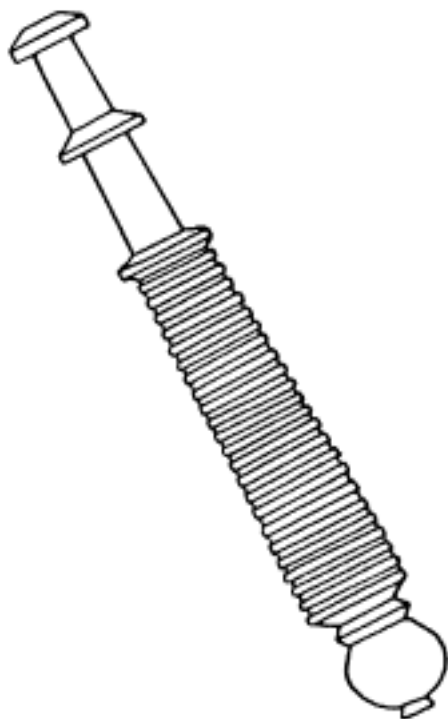
WHAT HAPPENED IN ENGLAND?

If we accept the predominant theory of lace being introduced to England from the continent if not from the Huguenots directly, it leads us to assume that the type of bobbin with which we began lace making, was a continental shape. Taking this viewpoint it is similarly reasonable to assume that the bobbins that were most

widely used were of the generic continental type, probably Flemish, in their particular shape. As a possible support of this approach we can look at the shapes of the South Bucks bobbins and see their Flemish derivation quite clearly. However this assumption does not help us towards answering the question at hand, i.e. why the development of the East Midlands bobbin that was so very different from the continental bobbins.

There is an alternative theory to the origins of the lace industry in England that we should consider. It is proposed by Yallop (1992).

Yallop, does not necessarily agree that the migration of Flemands or Huguenots to England were the origins of the English lace industry, and puts forward quite convincing arguments to support his view that the English lace industry was started by English traders who saw a profitable commercial venture in starting an English lace industry in opposition to the continental lace industry. If his view is correct then we should perhaps revise our view that England started with wooden Flemish-type bobbins as they could well have started with bones in the same manner



as the continental lace makers, or even more likely, it evolved from needle lace in a similar manner to the continent of Europe.

If we accept Yallop's theory then we are faced with the distinct possibility that the development of the shape and nature of lace bobbins in England was independent of the continental influence and developed in the same manner as the continental lace industry which is (in broad terms. See Santana Levy for a detailed history) via various forms of lace making techniques ending with needle lace and then bobbin lace.. If this is so, then perhaps we could make the following speculations.

1. The English, as did the Europeans, found that the use of unmodified animal bones for bobbins would have been rather inefficient, mainly because of the lack of a good neck upon which to wind the thread and lack of uniformity in size and weight.

2. The English decided that they would develop their "unmodified" bone bobbins into a more practical bone tool. i.e. give them a neck to take the thread and have a more uniform size and weight.

3. They found that they could not modify the original bone bobbins to include a neck because of the structure of the bones they were using.

4. They wanted to continue to have bone bobbins so the only type of bone bobbin they could produce had to be thinner.

To reinforce this speculation of the development in English lace bobbins, I must now refer you to Carole Morris' (1988) article, "England's Oldest Bobbin?" in which she describes an archaeological find in Gloucester (approximately dated late 1600 or early 1700). It is of a bone bobbin which, whilst shorter and fatter than the traditional East Midland bobbin, it is thinner than the generic continental bobbin and has a type of double neck, which could easily have been the starting point for the development of the now traditional double neck of the East Midland bobbin.

I have to say that 11mm diameter of this ancient bobbin is still a bit thicker than I would have expected, but if this was the start of an evolutionary process of

design, there is no reason why it should not have started as a thicker bobbin and developed into a thinner one. Carole Morris' also comments on the unusual thickness of this bobbin and this leads us to a further speculation that there was probably not enough bone of this thickness around, so they became thinner because of lack of thick bone.

SUMMARY SO FAR.

It is speculated that there is a distinct possibility that English lace bobbins had their own early evolutionary development. That instead of copying the early bone bobbins in wood, and thus retaining the remnants of the bone shape as the continental bobbins did, the English bobbin makers chose to retain bone as their choice of material, but to do this they had to be thinner bobbins. It is then but a short step to the bobbins being made out of wood when the lace industry took off and many more bobbins were required. Wood bobbins could be made easier, quicker and cheaper.

But what of the problem of the Flemish / South Bucks bobbins that reflect the continental style of bobbin? Whilst I am arguing that the English lace bobbins had their own, uninfluenced development, one can not deny that the lace making industry had its continental influence, and there is every chance that the English businessmen may well have brought over continental workers to teach, augment and develop the English lace makers skills. There were obviously different types of lace being made and different bobbins being used. (See Palliser above, where the Devon lace maker made a statement that different bobbins were used for bone lace, and the historical developments of lace making in England.)

Just as another observation, we see a great many bone English bobbins but very few antique continental bone bobbins.

England's Oldest Bobbin?

WHY AND WHEN WERE THEY SPANGLED?

The next imponderable that we must face is the issue of the spangled bobbins. Firstly let us look at the apparent function of spangles on a bobbin.

1. They look pretty. You may well say that prettiness is not a function and I would probably agree. But one correspondent said to me that, " *they*, (the bobbins) look pretty no matter what your lace turns out to be!" It is nice and it is valid, to have good-looking tools to work with.
2. They add weight.
3. They prevent the bobbin from spinning under the twist of the thread.
4. They prevent the bobbin from rolling on the pillow

With this in mind let us look at some of the speculations advanced for spangling. Unfortunately, as I am not a lace maker I can not expand much on some of these speculations and will rely to a large extent on your knowledge to judge the weight of the arguments in the following approaches to the issue.

1. *There was a change in the kind of lace made and a change in pillow style that required slimmer bobbins (to get more on the pillow)*

There is no doubt that fashions for lace changed from time to time and that different styles required different techniques. Santana Levy (1983) traces these developments both in the text and visually, very well indeed but does not comment on the lace techniques required to produce these fashionable changes. Perhaps the discussion on lace pillows later will add a little to this speculation? (See below)

From my viewpoint I do not place a great deal of strength in the argument. Mainly because the most complex of laces requiring some few hundreds of bobbins, were made for many years on the continent with un-spangled continental bobbins. Secondly, if my speculation is correct (above) that we had thin bobbins from a very early time, then we already had the ability to put a lot of bobbins on the pillow. Thirdly, whilst the bobbins are thinner, they do have spangles and the increased number of bobbins that you can get on a pillow of East Midlands over continental bobbins, is marginal.

2. The style of lace that they were making required more tension thus spangling.

This speculation has some validity if you consider that tension is a function of the bobbins' weight. This is not necessarily true. Most bobbin makers believe that the lace maker applies the tension, not the weight of the bobbin, though there may be some synergy in these two approaches.

3. Rolling causes thread breakage. The Flemish and South Bucks bobbins, were cylindrical and rolled. The East Midlands were slimmer, spangled, and did not roll.

To this we must add the following speculation.

4. The advent of the spinning Jenny and the tighter spin of the cotton caused the thread to unwind thus spangling stopped the unwinding.

In regard to 4 and 5 above, though for different reasons, it is speculated that the spangle was originally added to stop the bobbins rolling, and this would be beneficial for a number of reasons.

It is possible that with the introduction of new threads from the new mills last century that the thread began to untwist in use, so the spangle stopped this happening. The historical reasoning behind this assertion is that though the bobbins used by many lace makers were South Bucks bobbins and Flemish type bobbins were bulbous and heavier than an unspangled Midlands bobbin, history has showed us that many of these were spangled even though the weight of the spangle was not needed. If the weight was not needed then we are left with the fact that they were spangled to make the bobbin look pretty (very doubtful) or that they were spangled to stop them from rolling, a much more realistic proposition

But there is another reason that relates to the quality of thread the English lace maker's used.

5. Poor quality thread required the advantage of a spangled bobbin to reduce breakage of thread.

Santana Levey, makes a quote about thread on page 29, "thick and fluffy...will not wash fine" On page 49 A Scottish visitor to Valenciennes is quoted as saying, "the thread is of so exquisite fineness they can not make it in this country " (Scotland?)

When talking about threads in general she says on page 52, 53 that we did not seem to have the best conditions in England for good manufacture. On page 57 she talks about the English lace industry concentrating on the "low End" of the market (after having said that some very good lace was made in England). The difficulty with this speculation is that England imported large amounts of thread and therefore we can safely assume that a large part of our lace industry was made with good quality thread.

I am personally inclined to place a lot of weight on this latter group of speculations, i.e. that the bobbins were spangled to stop them from rolling on the pillow either to stop the thread from unravelling or to reduce the chance of thread breakage.

Finally we turn to the speculation regarding the lace pillows that were used.

6. That the method of English lace making required a "flat" pillow and thus required a more stable bobbin than the unspangled cylindrical bobbins.

It could be said that bobbins were a late comer to the making of lace, as the earliest laces appear to have been needle laces. So the placement and shape of the pillow as the approach towards the new "movement" of bobbins in the development of English bone lace could be a reason for spangling. The continental pillow method (those long cylinders kept in a wooden cradle so the cylinders were up and down and the bobbins hung down) seemed to use a pillow that was almost always held almost "vertically", so the pins would be kept in place with gravity and a few stabilising pins, whereas English lace is done horizontally and the bobbins tend to roll on the somewhat flatter pillow and thus need the spangles for stabilising the bobbins.

I believe that this speculation has *some* merit. i.e. the spangles reduced the rolling of the bobbins on the "flatter" English pillows. However some continental pillows are decidedly flat also. It is probably more to do with "rolling" in general

than the flatness of the pillow.

SUMMARY.

The English lace industry did not originate from the exodus of large numbers of Flemish lace makers from the persecutions of the Protestants in Europe to England, rather the lace industry was encouraged and developed by shrewd English business men seeing a potentially profitable product in Europe and wanting to exploit it for their own profitable enterprises in England. (See Yallop)

As such, the early lace industry in England developed with minimum outside influence, from a needle lace tradition to that of bobbin lace. The bobbins began as "bones" in the same manner as the continental lace industry, but instead of the bobbins evolving directly from bones to wooden replacements of bones, as in the case of continental bobbins, in England they first evolved as thinner bone bobbins, and thence to wood as the industry became more widespread and more bobbins were needed. (The wooden bobbins could be manufactured more easily and cheaply.)

Because of (1) Rolling of bobbins on the flatter pillows the English lace makers developed was a difficulty (2) the sometimes-poor quality of thread and (3) and later, the new tight twist of machine made thread, there was a need to prevent these thin bobbins from rolling. Thus they introduced spangles to the bobbins.

Quite clearly the above are *speculations*. As mentioned in the introduction they have been presented as a contribution to the debate on the development of the spangled East Midland bobbin. Who knows what the real answer is? The chances are that there is as much validity in the fact that the spangles made the bobbins look pretty as in any of the above speculations!

CONCLUSIONS.

Are there any? These have only been speculations presented to add to the debate on the origin of East Midland spangled bobbins.

This article has been written purely from the point of view of the development of

lace bobbins and to stimulate discussion. I believe that other experts in various aspects of lace history could make a critical contribution to this debate. I accept that they might contradict my speculations but together we could perhaps get just a little nearer to what "might" have occurred?

Your views and contributions would be appreciated.

References

Morris. Carole England's Oldest Bobbin? Lace. Number 49 January 1988
Carole makes a good case for the oldest bobbin. Line drawing of the bobbin.

Palliser. Mrs. Bury. 1805-1878. (1911 Ed.) History of Lace. 1984 reprint.
Dover. N.Y.

A most excellent early survey of lace history, much of it first hand. There appear to be a possibility of errors in some areas. Has interesting footnotes on lace bobbins.

Whiting, 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 bobbin illustrations.

Levey. Santana, 1983. Lace. A History. Victoria and Albert Museum London
This is a book without parallel in recording the history of lace (as opposed to the lace industry). It is extremely well researched and beautifully illustrated. It contains nothing about lace bobbins but is included here as it has to be one of the best lace history books available.

Ornamente (the German edition of the Dutch Handwerken Zonder Grenzen) June 1997

Tornehave, Bodil 1987. "Danske Frihaandskniplinger" (Danish Free-Hand

Laces)

Walker, Bev. 1998. Personal communication.

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 making industry in England. Whilst it does concentrate on the South Devon History, it is certainly not exclusive in its approach. He puts forward a contrary theory to the traditional approach that the Protestant refugees started the lace industry in England. He has challengers to his theory as to the origins of the lace industry in England, but as yet I have not had the opportunity of evaluating their arguments. Yallop has provided scholarly arguments for his theses, I would hope that his challengers would answer in an equally scholarly manner.

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