

ANTIQUENGLISH, HAND CARVED AND OR DECORATED, LACE BOBBINS.

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Introductory Notes: I have headed this article with a qualification of "English" and also "Antique". The tradition of carved lace bobbins from the Continent deserves an article of their own as they are, in my opinion, often more innovative and skillfully carved than many of the English bobbins. My problem is that my knowledge of Continental lace bobbins is meager and I feel I am unable to tell a worthwhile story about them.

This article is mainly designed for the collector of lace bobbins and an initial attempt to form a more detailed classification of these beautiful bobbins.

I need to remind readers that there is a lot of hand carving of various types in the inscriptions and decoration of East Midland bobbins and even more "artistic" hand decoration found on many East Devon/Downton bobbins. I do not intend to cover these genres in this article.

Just one other thing that I would like to raise with you as something of an issue. One of the most common chip carving symbol is a triangle. I have played at chip carving to help with my education (!) and the triangle is quite easy to perfect. My bother is that on some of the bobbins I have examined I suspect that the triangle (and some other symbols) may have been "punched" into the wood as opposed to carved into the wood. These triangles have rounded edges and are often quite deep as opposed to the truly chip carved symbol. I fashioned a nail into a triangle punch and it seemed to work quite well.

The truth is that I really do not know if they were punched or not.

A Brief History of Chip Carving.

Chip carving is the art of decorating wooden objects or even bone, though the term "scrimshaw" applies to the tradition of naval decoration of scenes on whale teeth, whale bones and carvable objects from other maritime mammals.

Chip Carving is accomplished by making angled cuts into wood which results in clean chips being removed from same. The chips are removed to form a pattern or shape of one kind or the other. The design could be a geometrical pattern, the shape of a person, an animal or just about anything the imagination can come up with. Great care and skill must be employed in making the angled cuts. There are examples of more artistic carving on a few bobbins that technically may not fall strictly into the term "Chip Carving."

Chip carving has been practiced in most countries over many centuries and examples can be found in each of them. Ceremonial tool handles and boat paddles have been found in the South Pacific Islands which were carved with repetitive deep cuts, likely

done with pieces of sea shells, bits of bone or even sharks teeth. Like carvings done today they must have taken many hours to complete.

The art of chip carving owes much to the northern countries of Europe, including England and Ireland. Churches in Northern Germany which were built in the 8th century have examples of these type carvings done in stone. India and Islamic countries also have a proud history of chip carving.

A researcher at University of St Andrews has stated that chip-carving small items, such as boxes, small trays, and so on, was a widespread and popular activity among ladies of leisure in the towns and cities of Central/Southern Scotland towards the end of the 19th Century, but this seems to have declined during the Edwardian era and doubtless largely died out during the First world War. (*Gleaned from the internet with thanks*)

AN ATTEMPT AT CLASSIFYING HAND CARVED LACE BOBBINS.

Material: Wood mostly, Bone occasionally, other materials rarely.

Utilitarian: Those bobbins that have no or virtually no decoration on them, they are carved in the shape of a lace bobbin from either a piece of wood (possibly a bone) or a "Twig".

DECORATIVELY CARVED BOBBINS:

There are two distinct divisions of these bobbins; firstly those which have been firstly offered to the lathe, then decorated or not offered to the lathe at any time in their production. I am proposing that we call these two types by the following names:

Turned and Carved, and **Hand Carved**. I think these two categories are descriptive enough to stand alone.

There are two other categories that stand out; both are within the Hand Carved category. They are either basically **Cylindrical** (perhaps some might like to use the word "round" but it not really accurate) or **Square**. You may find examples of both of these types that have both of the styles on one bobbin.

We can apply to many Hand Carved lace bobbins the terms we use for our traditional turned lace bobbins.

There is "*Church Window*" bobbins which are characterized by empty cages or elongated spaces within the shaft of the bobbin and are visible without unscrewing anything etc.

Next would be the "*Lantern*" bobbin. This has the same cages or spaces in the shaft of the bobbin but they contain other objects such as carved balls, lead shot, ball bearings, seeds and other such things.

The next differs from the above examples because these same spaces may contain a small bobbin or even a small bobbin within a small bobbin. These we call variations on the "*Mother and Babe*" category.

I am suggesting that we use these traditional collectors' names for these decorations that manifest themselves within the genre of hand carved bobbins. This would include such terms as "*South Bucks*", "*East Midland*" etc. to indicate a geographical style when obvious.

Also if there is an "*inscription*" on the bobbin we would mention this as we normally do.

Finally we have what could turn out to be a fairly extensive “Other” category; and why not when the imagination of the carving public is let loose! ☺

I think I would like to create a category of “Artistic Carving” this would include those bobbins that have animals, people, scenes etc carved on them (as opposed to chip carving) “Geometrical carving” whilst it could complement artistic carving, is covered in the technique of chip carving automatically. In the confines of this article I will not be addressing the East Devon and Downton genres.

As sort of PS to this section I need offer some guidelines as to how to decide if a bobbin has been turned, then carved. The easiest and most definite of all methods is to see if there is a small indentation in the centre “end” of the tail and/or the head. This indicates that the bobbin has been held in or centered into a lathe. The other method is far less definite, but just to examine the cylindrical portions of the bobbin and estimate how cylindrical they are and then form your own opinion. On one controversial case I did resort to Photoshop, to carefully section the bobbin, reverse one half and test the mirror image (as it were) for accuracy.

THE GALLERY.

In creating this gallery I will endeavor to give examples of the “Collectors Tree” of these amazing bobbins.

Utilitarian:

Description: Wood Pocket knife/hand carved
Very basic ‘twig’.



I am suggesting that this was not offered up to the lathe and is totally hand carved. The bend in the bobbin is usually because it was made from “green” wood and can be seen on many bobbins that have been clearly turned and not hand carved.

Description: Bone Pocket knife
Rare bone hand carved bobbin.



This may well have been offered to the lathe, but when I recall seeing the original, I decided against that technique. It is a poor piece of bone, very fatty towards the tail and was probably too thin to do anything with it other than to flatten it and drill it.

There are numerous examples of utilitarian hand carved bobbins in Continental bobbin collections. I have a large one from Russia and a very nice one from Porto Rica.

Turned and Carved

This is probably the largest group of hand carved bobbins. As I looked at my photo collection I decided that there may well be a blurring of what may be called "Hand Carving" applied to a bobbin that has already been turned, and to be frank I am not quite sure where to draw the line between the two. For example, one of my favourite bobbins that I make has a spiral groove running the length of the bobbin shaft. It is hand carved, by sawing, and filing, but I would not call it a hand carved bobbin. It raised the question of do we refine our definition by requiring a knife to be obviously used?

Let me show you what I mean and you can discuss it with me on the Arachne forum.

A lovely wide spiral. It would have started as a turned bobbin, then the maker would have carved in this wide spiral groove. Most effective



© Luton Museum

I am ready to call this and it's like a Hand Carved bobbin, but it is undoubtedly a grey area.

This next appears to me to have been offered to the lathe, and also is an example of the possibility of the triangles being punched rather than chipped with a knife. I could well be wrong about that, but there are many readers of this article who will know that I was challenged by a friend to write it because she said that "I knew nothing about hand carved bobbins". As the article goes on I think she may well have proved her point! ☹



The triangles of chip carved bobbins are used elegantly and you can pick out 3 or 4 design elements in this bobbin all using the triangles.

Hand Carved

I would call this the cylindrical hand carved bobbin.

A chip carved bobbin, made by a clasp knife/ jack knife, of the kind most men carried with them at that time. It is extremely well executed; accurate, symmetric and gives a good overall appearance.



This one however would be of the "square" type.

Hand carved with a "clasp knife" which most men carried in those days. Jack Knife, Pen knife, folding knife are other names I know for it. The term for this style of carving is "chip carved". It is a nice bobbin.



I am pretty sure neither of these has been offered to the lathe. You would be surprised how cylindrical a hand carver can get his or her creation.

Description: Wood Pocket knife/hand carved
1. Sweetheart bead on spangle



Many examples of these can be found.

In some ways I have given you examples of all the main genres of hand carving, but now we should move on to hand carving of bobbins that fit into our traditional framework of bobbin collecting.

Here follows some examples of these bobbins all of which owe most of their beauty and origination to hand carving of some type.

I want to start with what I consider to be "my" most amazing example of hand carving in lace bobbins.

L 79. This is the bobbin i wish I had made. So delicate. Five open lantern chambers. This is the supreme example of lantern or Church Window bobbins. Here is an insert of a real "Church Window" lantern. Now where did our carvers get their insiration from? If you do not have Gertrude Whitings book. Old time tools and toys of Needlework. Get it and "feel" what you are reading about!



© Luton Museum

I just need to tell you about some of the difficulties we have in bobbin nomenclature. It gets very confusing and someone should get it all down on paper and publish it (me!! But I do not think my dictionary will ever be finished!!) To simplify it I will say: The bobbin above is a "Lantern" as it has many chambers and is empty. If it had just one long window in it almost the length of the shaft (Like a tall church window) and was empty, it would be called a "Church Window" bobbin. You know about Mother and Babes etc. so I will stop there for time being. (I will not further complicate the issue by mentioning the description "Pepper pot" for lantern bobbins!!!)

The bobbin below is a "Lantern bobbin" then we go on to qualify it by saying "containing small balls or seeds." To put it another way, if it is not a "church window" or one of the variations of a "mother and babe", then it is a lantern bobbin. Who says? Well, that is another story but the person who catalogued the Baker, Huetson, Wright collection and I; both came to this conclusion independently. We have only in the past year met each other on the net and have a goodly correspondence on such matters. She has a great collection of all things lace (and other stuff too) and is busy putting it in a format where she will be able to share it with the lace community. I have not asked her, but I suspect there will be some cost involved.

This hand carved lantern bobbin is remarkable for the fact that the contents of the two chambers are virtually in tact. There are three balls in the bottom chamber and two in the one above.



Description: Possibly hand carved by the same unnamed maker.
Wood Spring coil
3 tigers with balls



These may well have been offered to the lathe. The spring insert whilst rather uncommon, can be found in a few collections.

Hand whittled, two tiered pepper pot bobbin with balls inside the cages. Nicely done



© S. Gunningham

So far we have looked at mainly East Midland styles, but the South Bucks bobbins offer an interesting variety of carving and design.

VI 118. A carved lantern containing balls or seeds. The shank is inscribed "Willam Clark Sheep (?) The rest i cant make out. I thought it might have been "shop" but sheep it seems to be. It has a brass pin in the neck. This can be seen often. I am guessing that the end of a broken pin, or the part of a pin that



was not used for the shackle of a spangle was pressed into the end of the neck.

© Luton museum

This great example of hand carving also involves an inscription. It was long time ago I took this picture and sadly I hardly knew what I was photographing and its uniqueness at that time. My eyes were just being opened to the history and fascination of the antique English lace bobbin.

Notice it is a South Bucks shape, but has a double neck. I do not have any proof yet but I am beginning to suspect it comes from Huntingdonshire; I am thinking that "double necked South Bucks bobbin is from Huntingdonshire"... I am alone at the moment with this research conclusion as my long suffering associate does not agree with me. Oh well, you win some and you lose some!

Description: Wood Hand carved
Two bobbins obviously from the same source - purchase together.
(1) Pocket knife chip carved initials A + C, sprays of flowers, two straight cavities, top one containing a



wooden ball.

(2) Pocket knife with chip carved initials and date - V, T H NOV XXV 1868 with sprays of flowers, 4 spiral cut out sections forming a hollow, remaining areas decorated with chip carved patterns.

These are truly beautiful examples; a variety of chip carvings including flowers and inscriptions.

OS97

I am not at all sure if this has been totally hand carved. Possibly so. A double lantern with small balls inside. Chip carved but with two loose rings. Spangled. An extremely nice example.



This bobbin above is truly amazing and the seller felt certain it had not been offered to the lathe. I tend to agree but all have of it is this picture.

The bobbin below, whilst not a beautiful bobbin is none-the-less nice to have in your collection.

A roughly carved bobbin with a mother and babe chamber. It is short and squat, and not an object of beauty at all.



Description: Wood Mother & single babe
Hand carved with chip carved decoration



I had thought that I did have more hand carved MiB types, and I do, but I do not have the copyright permission to use them! So... if you have examples of these and you are happy for me to use the picture of them in any articles I might write... please send them to me.

Now we come to the "artistic" grouping that I was indecisive about. Just look at a few of them. They are both beautiful and fascinating.

V1 119 A beautifully turned then carved bobbin. This carving is professional compared to the chip carving more often seen on bobbins.



The following bobbin I have discussed on Weavers Under the heading of The Country Bobbin



It is tastefully decorated with a fish and an animal.



The Shepherd's Bobbin
T.7_1944
Fitzwilliam Museum
Cambridge

© Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge

Here is another that has a distinct naïve artistic touch. It is said by those that know more than me that this has not been offered up to the lathe.

Conclusion:

If this article was written to justify my lack of knowledge about Hand Carved lace bobbins, I suspect it has failed. If however it serves to open discussion on this important genre of lace bobbins, I hope it will have succeeded and I invite you to send me images of your hand carved bobbins that I might be able to use in future articles, or enter discussion on what I have written either directly or on the Arachne "Lace" thread.

My thanks to the many collectors and sellers who have given me permission to use their images. The gifts from my "older" benefactors have got all mixed up and I cannot correctly ID them. I ask their kind indulgence (as I frequently do!!)

I have always left out my special thanks to Diana Smith as previously I thought that was her wishes, but now I know better and my thanks to her are due again. © We are researcher colleagues and she keeps me on the straight and narrow, but we do not always agree, but we learn well from each other! (or is it that I learn from her?)

AN INDULGENCE PLEASE:

I need to include one picture of a Northern France bobbin that is turned then chip carved. I have this niggly in the back of my mind that we owe a lot of our English bobbin development and design to this area of France. So my indulgence is to attach the picture to the article. Than k you.



A bobbin from Bayeaux.