

# THE LACE BOBBINS OF EAST DEVON

Brian Lemin



East Devon Bobbins lying on a lace making pillow.

I need to explain that I rescued this from near oblivion, in fact it has become a series of JPEGs for each page, which accounts for each page looking a bit different. When will I learn to take greater care of my "stuff"? It started as a booklet in Publisher, but I could not get it to open!



# THE LACE BOBBINS OF EAST DEVON.

By Brian Lemin (May 2002)

Second draft 16 June (Version 2)

File name bklyjune162ndvers.doc

## INTRODUCTION

There is a very long tradition of lace making in Honiton (pronounced *Huniton* in the local accent) and the area of East Devon surrounding it. Evidence from various sources indicates that lace was made in England from around 1560 and there is no reason to think that the lace industry of England at that time did not include lace made in Honiton and the surrounding East Devon villages. The first written record of the industry in Devon, appears on a tombstone in the Honiton churchyard. It records that a certain James Rodge, was a "bone lace seller". The date of his death is recorded as July 17th 1617.

How lace making came to England and to East Devon is the subject of some controversy and even myth. John Yallop is one of very few modern lace historians who have attempted to locate original sources of written material, and who has done academic research to substantiate and or deny the various theories of the introduction of lace making into England. Briefly his findings are that the theory of lace making being started by the Flemish refugees coming to England as the result of various persecutions on the continent can not be proved. He proposes a more likely scenario of astute English businessmen starting and developing the industry, possibly with the help of some continental lace makers. You can read more about Yallop's work in this area in his book, *The History of the Honiton Lace Industry*, University of Exeter press 1992.

The East Devon lacemaking area is the source of seven identifiable varieties of lace: Branscombe point, Exeter lace, Trolley, Honiton lace, Devonian, Colyton Chromatic and Kerswell lace. The term Honiton lace has become a generic term for these laces, but it is a far from accurate name for such a variety of laces. From a personal viewpoint I believe that as long as the user of such a term is aware there are many varieties of lace made in the East Devon area; it is a reasonable shorthand term. However scholars or lace practitioners should be much more specific and accurate in the terms that they use when talking about the East Devon laces. The story of how that generic term came to be applied is that the lace was collected in Honiton from the outlying lace making villages via the lace dealers (lacemen). They then packed them into boxes and sent them to the dealers in London via the stage coach which terminated in Honiton for many years. The story is that the dealers would ask their employees "have the Honiton boxes arrived yet?" Referring to the boxes of lace sent from Honiton. Thus the generic term "Honiton Lace." This story which is so very plausible, has not yet been verified by researchers.



## A BRIEF HISTORY OF HONITON LACE

As already mentioned, it is believed that lace was being made in this area from about the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is well established that the industry of weaving was already being practised in the area, in particular the weaving of “points” which were braids or laces used for tying garments. This form of weaving was a very close approximation to that of bobbin lace, but it is a weave and not a lace. For proof that lace was being made in England in the mid 1500s we need to go to the “Book of Rates” which was used by the customs officers, this first occurred in 1562 and frequently thereafter. From this we can conclude that in that year the production of bobbin lace was important enough for the State to collect excise on it; and from that we can reasonably assume that it was being made for some years before it became a taxable item.

We do not know just what types of lace were made in East Devon in the early years of the development of the lace industry in the area but recent scholarship is leaning more towards the origin of the lace in this area being Venice and thus the type of lace making in the area would naturally be free lace. This puts the Honiton style of lace in that same school as Brussels, Milan and of course Venice.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century the lace industry was the subject of various protectionist legislation forbidding the import of lace from the continent. These acts were generally less than effective but were indeed the source of many tales about smugglers bringing lace into England. No specific evidence exists that the coastal lace making villages of East Devon were involved in such illicit trade but the romantics among you readers could reasonably expect that these villages would have had some knowledge as to what was going on. One of the favourite methods of lace smuggling was in the coffins of persons alleged to have died in Europe and in the coffin that “doubtfully” contained a body they secreted much lace. This method became known to authorities and so all coffins were opened on entry to England. The return of the body of Bishop Atterbury who died in France in 1732 was the means of bringing into England, contraband lace to the value of £6,000.

The financial success of the lace industry in England as a whole fluctuated with the rise and fall of lace as a fashionable accessory or necessity. There were times when it was very financially rewarding especially for the East Devon laces. For example the following is a price comparison between the East Midland lace making areas and those of East Devon. In 1697 Buckinghamshire lace was 30 shillings per yard and the East Devon laces were valued up to £6 per yard.

For the lace makers these rises in financial success had comparatively little effect on their income. Whilst the value of their lace on the market did reflect their level of remuneration to some effect most of them were employed under what is known as the “truck” system. The truck system was that the workers were paid in goods rather than money. Some lace



*Lace manufacturers used lace tokens to pay their workers. Those illustrated above could only be exchanged for goods in the dealers shop.*

dealers used a mixture of both of these methods. Undoubtedly the workers were severely disadvantaged by this method as they were at the mercy of the dealers to value the lace they made at an honest price and also to value the goods that they received at a level which was fair to the worker. Unfortunately for the lace makers there were few dealers whose business activities favoured the lace makers. This system of payment became illegal in 1779 but quietly continued to at least the year 1900.

Lace makers learned their skill from their mothers at home (which included boys in some cases). From around 1638 there were apprenticeships being offered. The most used form of learning lace was the lace schools. In about 1818 there were some 26 schools for lace making having 393 pupils in them. The children were supposedly taught to read at these schools as well as their lace making skills, but this was more honoured in the breach than in practice, as investigations as to the abilities of these pupils showed an appalling lack in reading skills. The parents paid for their tuition and in some cases the lace teacher also kept the lace that the children made. The school conditions were often cramped, but parents clearly thought it worthwhile paying the fees as in the good times, those that were not paid by the truck system earned more than a farm labourer. Even after they finished their lace school learning, the teacher had an overseeing role of the young person who was by then working for an employer. For this work the teacher was also paid a fee but this fee also included teaching the child to read. The schools died out as the result of an Education Act in 1870 which required standards that all but a very few lace schools could adopt. However in the Local Authority did run such schools in Devon after 1903, possibly in an attempt to keep the industry alive.

It was the invention of a lace making machine (probably more accurately called a net making machine) in 1809 by John Heathcoat that marked the beginning of a slow but steady decline in the lace making industry in England as a whole, though the Honiton lace makers did manage to continue some lace making work by the appliqué of hand made lace on machine made net. There was a slight revival in the industry around the 1840s, but by 1900 the industry was all but dead.

One of the boosts to the industry was the commission of Her Majesty Queen Victoria for the making of her wedding dress. It would appear that this commission was given in 1838, before her official engagement to Prince Albert. This leaves little doubt that the commission was given with a view to give Royal patronage to an ailing industry. Though the dress is officially labelled as being made from Honiton lace, this commission was in fact executed in Beer and involved some 150 lace makers and by all accounts it was a very beautiful dress. A further boost to the industry was the great exhibition of 1851 at which medals were awarded to some East Devon lace dealers as evidenced by the subsequent advertisements by some local shops.

Some commercial lace making activities did continue in the area until the onset of the Second World War; however the craft of lace making is continued today as a flourishing hobby for many.



BY SPECIAL APPOINTMENT.

Honiton Lace Manufacturer to Her Majesty.



PRIZE MEDAL  
OF THE  
GREAT  
EXHIBITION,  
1851.



PRIZE MEDAL OF THE ROYAL CORNWALL SOCIETY, 1852.  
FIRST-CLASS MEDAL



OF THE  
"EXPOSITION UNIVERSELLE"  
AT PARIS, 1855.



**C. É. TREADWIN,**

27, Cathedral Yard, Exeter,

Solicits the attention of Ladies to her STOCK of HONITON LACE, containing an assortment of

**BRIDAL AND BONNET VEILS,  
Flounces, Chemisettes, Sleeves,  
HANDKERCHIEFS, &c.,**

And ventures to assert that for elegance of design, excellence of quality, and moderation of price, her goods are unsurpassed by any.



*A variety of East Devon lace bobbins. From top to bottom: Branscombe rigged; decorated bobbin with bricks and diamonds; a trolly bobbin for the gimp thread; a simple bobbin or stick.*

## THE BOBBINS

The bobbins used in the laces made in East Devon differed from those used in most of the other lace making areas of England by the fact that they could not have any complex turned (as shaped by the turner in the lathe) decoration of them, neither could they have a pretty ring of beads (spangles) attached to them. To some collectors, this restriction has given them a reputation of being “less pretty” or “less desirable” than their East Midland counterpart. The reason for this difference is that the style of laces made in the area requires that the bobbins be used for “sewing’s”, that is that the bobbin must be able to be passed through loops of thread from time to time in the making process. Any such decoration that is anything but smooth would be a great impediment to this process; thus there can be no spangles and no turned decoration that is not smooth or can be smoothed by a further process i.e. filling with sealing wax in the case of many East Devon bobbin decorations.

For all of these restrictions the designs that can be found on East Devon bobbins are collectively, finely executed, colourful interesting and even records of history. They are attractive and very collectable.

Decorated bobbins are a minority of the bobbins used by the lacemakers. The plain undecorated bobbins were often referred to by the lace makers as “sticks”. Another unverifiable story is that the phrase, “I haven’t a stick to my name”, refers to a bobbin maker that has fallen on hard times and does not have enough bobbins to undertake the lace she had to make. There are two types of bobbins used in making these laces; the standard bobbins that are thin and pointed (though not too pointed) and trolly (or possibly gimp) bobbins that are fatter and somewhat more blunt. The bobbins are mostly turned in a lathe but there are many examples of whittled bobbins that can be found. These whittled bobbins are the source of a romantic custom that I will share with you later.



## THE STANDARD BOBBIN

The standard bobbin is a plain turned bobbin approximately 90mm long and 7 mm diameter. It has a somewhat blunt point, a short neck and a single button turned knob type as a head. These make up the vast majority of East Devon lace bobbins and they are totally undecorated. 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 or other dark woods



*A Trolly bobbin. These are thicker and shorter than the standard bobbin and are used to carry the thicker “gimp” thread which forms an outline to many designs.*

## THE TROLLY

This is the second type of lace bobbin used in the East Devon laces. The trolly differs from the standard bobbin by being fatter, frequently shorter and less pointed. A collector could be deceived into thinking that there are more than just the standard and trolly bobbins as there are in existence standard bobbin that do indeed clearly manifest a different shape from the normally cylindrical and pointed bobbin. Those bobbins that are shaped somewhat differently still fall into the standard bobbin class. The trolly has a specific use in these laces, that of carrying the gimp thread (thicker larger thread used for outlining the design) and as such it is marginally longer but distinctly thicker. A trolly bobbin is different enough to be easily distinguished on a pillow of standard bobbins. It is thought that some of the sealing wax blobs on the head of a bobbin were not just used for the repair of a broken head but sometime used to distinguish a standard bobbin from the rest on the pillow when that bobbin was being used to carry the gimp



*A bobbin stained with nitric acid (Aqua Fortis) A very common decoration*

## BOBBIN DECORATION

The vast majority of East Devon bobbins are plain and completely undecorated. Those that are decorated, range from extremely nicely engraved and coloured decoration to crude cuts, possibly with a shard of glass or pocket knife. The colours are mainly black or red coloured sealing wax that is applied so that it fills the carvings in the bobbin. In shallow cuts a simple colour of red or black is applied. There is one other decoration that is frequently seen and that is the staining of the bobbin by aqua fortis (nitric acid).

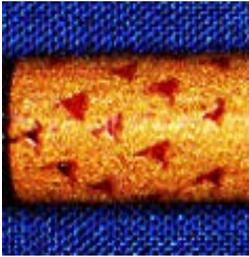


*A Branscombe riggled bobbin. It has turned circumferential rings filled with red or black sealing wax to keep it smooth.*

The only exception to the turners decoration is that of circumferential rings and the rather rare examples of turned decoration on an East Devon bobbin.

The vast majority of designs on East Devon bobbins are achieved by a myriad of small triangular cuts into the shaft of the bobbin. Some are tall with a narrow base, others are somewhat like an equilateral triangle, and indeed we should mention that there are all variations of a triangle represented. Some have used the description of the process of cutting the triangular decoration as being “chip carved”, others have thought that are embossed onto the bobbin. After close observation and much experimentation I have come to the conclusion that these triangles are not embossed on to the bobbin by a tool, such as a triangular shaped point to a nail and tapping the triangular design into the wood; rather they are cut with a sharp implement, often two lines are cut into a > shape and the triangle thus formed is then cut out.

Others it would appear are cut with a deft turn of the blade that allows the blade to leave the wood at the point of the triangle. The most likely implement for this task was the commonly available clasp knife, the Jack Knife of the sailor's trade or even the humble pen knife. I can accept that shards of glass could have been used as they can be very sharp, but I feel that some accuracy would be sacrificed for using glass as a tool. The decorators not only used cuts in the wood but also scratched designs. For these a pin or needle or some other sharp pointed tool could have been used. More about this and the relationship between the art of scrimshaw and East Devon bobbin decoration can be read in a later chapter.



*The picture above shows the extension of line cuts used in the production of the triangles which are the basic building block for most bobbin decoration.*

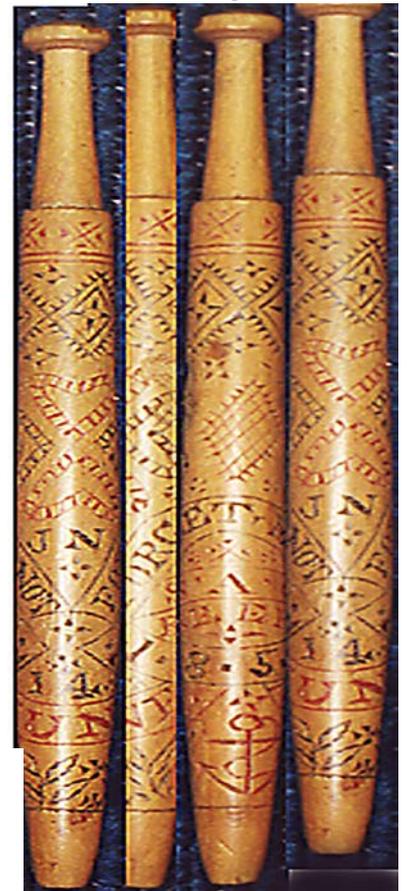
The most common bobbin decoration is that of staining the bobbin with aqua fortis (nitric acid). These are usually randomly applied to the bobbin, but occasionally it appears to have been applied with a stylus effect a design on the bobbin known colloquially as resulting stains from this brown blotch. It has been reported that the stain has a green colour when



freshly done, though of some sort in order to bin. Aquafortis was "Agnes Forty" and the acid were a mottled reported that the stain freshly done, though

with my experiments I have could hardly call the resulting stain as green. What can be found on a very few bobbins is a decided green stain. This is assumed to be as the result of the application of copper sulphate to the bobbin, possibly not as a deliberate application but as the result of some impurity on the aqua fortis. We are not sure about this, but it could be conjectured that a known green stain would have been used more frequently on bobbins for a pleasant decorative effect.

Some collectors have shared with me their conviction that bobbin decoration was a special craft done by a group of specialists; some have even suggested that they were decorated in a factory. I personally doubt this except to say that I do believe that the best decorated bobbins were done by persons who were almost certainly not the wood turner and who had a reputation for good bobbin decoration. By best decorated I mean those that have beautiful classical lettering and well executed designs. See also the section on ships where I discuss further the decoration of bobbins.



It is exceedingly difficult to identify a bobbin from a particular lace making village. It has been reported that some collectors have this skill (Whiting). Whilst the names of some villages and towns do appear occasionally on a bobbin, this is no proof that they were made in the said town. Similarly there is a genre of bobbin that is called the Branscombe Rigged bobbin, Branscombe being the name of a lace making coastal village. This name could have come about by the lace makers in this area preferring this style of decoration or possibly that this style of

*The design on this bobbin is very complex and artistic. As well as the basic triangles it has scrolls, lettering, anchor, leaves, a date, and of course the name of the seaside town of BEER, which is in red lettering just above the date.*



*Branscombe "riggled" bobbins.*

#### Circumferential rings

These are turned on the lathe and then filled with coloured sealing wax. Bobbins with this decoration are referred to as Branscombe riggled. (Branscombe being a coastal lace making town.) The rings appear to be arranged in groups of various numbers up to eleven rings in a group. The total number of rings on a bobbin has been noted as being up to 39, though 20 to 30 is about the average. The colours are almost always red and black as mentioned above, there is no evidence that these were made in Branscombe; they could have been or it could be that they were the fashion in Branscombe.



#### Painted bobbins

Of particular interest and example of good craftsmanship are black bobbins that appear to be painted with red paint, though on close inspection this might not be so. The lettering and designs are exceptionally good on the examples that I have seen. I am unaware as to the blackness of the bobbins whether they be made of ebony (doubtful), darkened by nitric acid (quite possible) or painted black. I am beginning to suspect that the latter is the case as I have an example of bobbins with black necks and heads. The other painted bobbins that I have seen have what I would describe as fern leaves painted on them.



#### Turned decoration

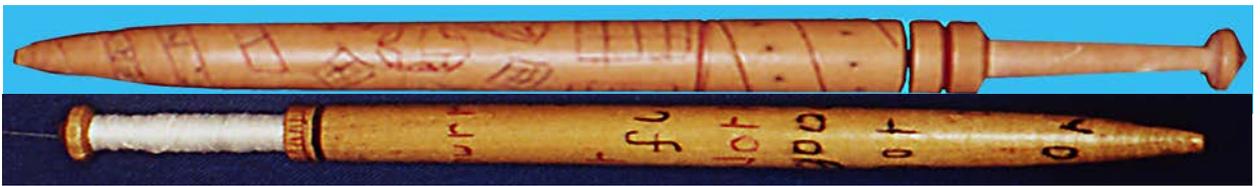
There are a few examples of turned decoration on this genre of bobbins. They appear to be quite rare



*A hand whittled bobbin.*

#### Hand carved bobbins

Most certainly you can find bobbins that have not been turned on a lathe, though I have to say that the examples I have seen have been very well carved. Lacemakers were not well paid and a maker who perhaps wanted more bobbins in a hurry would have had her husband or boy friend carve a number for her. There is one quaint tradition that us recorded. It would appear that on Valentines days the boys would carve a number of bobbins for his lace making sweetheart. It is said that there ardour was judged by the number of bobbins offered as a gift and that less than a dozen was considered rather poor!



#### Naive bobbins

Some delightful carvings that have these naïve, or primitive characteristics of art decorating them. The most famous of which is the drawing of the front and then rear view of a cat. You can also find some random doodles, a long snake and child like lettering. Some designs might be classified as being executed in a crude manner in comparison to the artistic approach of most of the bobbin decorators.



#### Bone bobbins

Despite the historical name for the lace in this area (and indeed the whole of England too) being bone lace there is not a preponderance of bone bobbins. I have examples of them but I am unsure as to their age. It is suspected that the bone bobbins would have been too heavy for the styles of lace made in this area. Certainly none of the bone bobbins that I have seen are decorated in any manner like

*A unique bobbin in the shape of a washing bat.*



#### Unique bobbins

There are strange bobbins that you can come across in every genre of lace bobbins. The strangest I have met of a bobbin in the shape of a cricket bat. I was happy to accord to this bobbin the name cricket bat until I was reading in a book of social history of the various items found in a laundry in Victorian times. There I found a description and an illustration of a laundry bat which was used to beat the linen with. It is remarkably like the bobbin illustrated and therefore I am inclined to be-



*A beautifully drawn picture of the sailing ship, Vioktoria.*

## SHIPS

Under this heading I want to take the opportunity to discuss the issue of bobbin decoration in a wider context. It has long been held that sailors were an important source of decorators of some east Devon lace bobbins. This is an assumption that I can happily go along with though I can not prove their involvement. A number of nautical devices and images can be found on the lace bobbins of this lace making area and whilst many of them are well executed they would still fall into the category of being one of the handicrafts that sailors undertook on board ship.



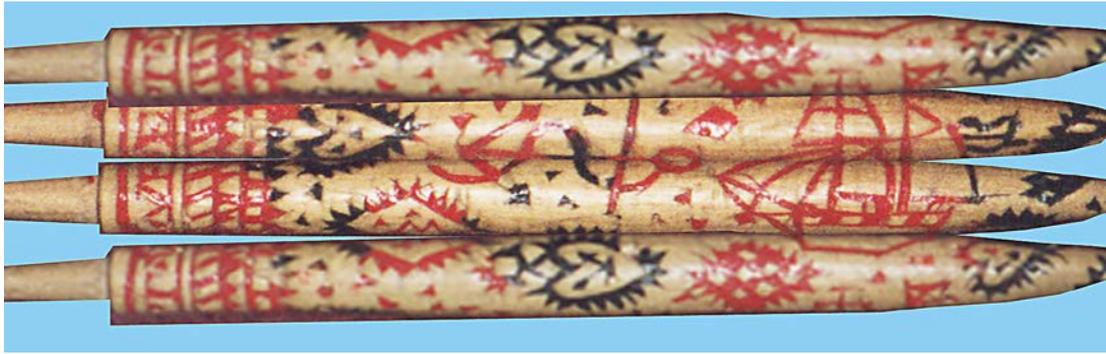
*A whaling ship, complete with whale*

## Sailors Handicrafts

My own grandfather, a tin smith by trade, was an artificer on board the naval vessels in the late 1800s and early 1900s. I mention this only as he was to all accounts a very good knitter. I was told of the wonderful sweaters (Fair Isle mentioned particularly) and socks that he knitted and it was quite a feature that his children looked forward to when he came ashore. What had Daddy knitted for them?

Knitting was only one of many crafts that they enjoyed in their off duty times that they enjoyed. Vessels of the Victorian era were largely over manned as they had to have hands available for the busy times when they were actually engaged in warfare. In between times there was little to do, thus resulting in the naval tradition of folk art.

Ships in bottles immediately come to mind as one of the most amazing and accomplished arts. Often they had learned the skills from others and developed a kit of tools that they used for this special work, but mostly the sailors came aboard willing to make use of what was available to them. Model makers of ships (not necessarily in bottles) were quite popular, often making them with a pocket knife and a shard of glass as a scraper. None the less, those that have survived often show enormous attention to detail. Probably each of the specialist sailors had his say in the accuracy required for the portion of the ship being crafted, such as the riggers, tackle makers, gunners etc.



*Simple but shapely line drawing of a ship. On this occasion the anchor is facing towards the*

### Bobbin Decoration

If we take scrimshaw as our starting point then we have to accept that the needle as an engraving tool is not appropriate for wood. A case could be made for the red hot needle being used as in pyrography, but as yet I have not found any evidence that this was a technique used. I still look for evidence of pyrography as it is a technique that would lend itself to the decoration that they were undertaking. More probably a sailor's jack knife/pen knife was the implement used. Shards of glass do not lend themselves to such fine lines and decoration but they are good "sandpaper" and it is reasonable to expect that they were used as such. The colouring was of coloured sealing wax for the deeper etching and plain colour for the more shallow cuts. I doubt that the sailors actually made the bobbins that I have seen with nautical decoration, though again there is little doubt that they would have made many of the hand whittled bobbins that are in evidence.

### The designs

Anchors are probably the most frequent and readily recognized nautical designs. They are all remarkably similar though some of the designs show a little differentiation. Fishes are also another frequent design. I have taken the liberty of calling one such fish a whale as it does not include the usually fins and is comparatively larger than most of the fish depicted. Mermaids come in all sorts of shapes. They all have some sort of human upper trunk, but their "tail" takes many different forms. Some are clearly close to the traditional mermaids tails; others have long straggly designs in some variety. Moving away from mermaids, I have seen one particularly catching design, that of a sailor and his girl having a celebratory drink. I like that one!

We then come to the ships. Most of those depicted are not named, but the *Asp*, the *Favourite*, *Victoria* and the *Alma* are illustrated by name. Many of the non named ships are shown in sufficient detail to be able to identify their rig. There are barques, brigs and a brigantine. There is also a fishing boat with the trawl net clearly depicted and then my own identification (?) of a whale and a whaler.

I suppose that the question most on my mind is whether or not the nautical bobbins were decorated by the sailors. The facts of the matter is that we do not really know, but there would appear to be reasonable evidence to link sailors handicraft or folk art activities, particularly that of the art of scrimshaw, to make an educated guess that they were involved in this decoration. What is probably more believable is that retired sailors did those nautical decorations. They had the time, the inclination, possibly the direct link of a wife or daughter that he lived with was a lace maker, and he enjoyed the praise he would have got for his efforts.

In the absence of real evidence I am an unrepentant romantic and I would like to think that the sailors were involved, particularly the retired Jack Tars.



*A quite elementary drawing of a ship and anchor*

## Scrimshaw

In particular the art, which is appropriate to this discussion, is that of "scrimshaw". This required that the tooth of a whale or a walrus tusk first be softened by soaking in brine and then engraved with a sharp needle. These engraved lines would then be rubbed with a mixture of soot and black ink so that they would stand out boldly against the white (which ages to a cream) background.

This form of folk art is probably the closest to that of decorating East Devon bobbins. The lines, shading, objects and indeed to some extent the subjects of scrimshaw are all found on lace bobbins. The scrimshaw subjects are those of whaling, ships, and female figures; home comings and farewells. Bobbin subjects are shells, fish, mermaids, ships, nautical objects and indeed home comings and celebrations.

One aspect of the sailor's folk art is that they treated them with scant respect once they came home. It was a therapeutic occupation for them which paled into insignificance once the reality of home, girlfriends and family were experienced first hand. What is important in terms of our discussion is that it would appear that it was when the sailors retired that they continued their hobbies. Perhaps they sat on the front step, even with lace maker beside them. It was then that they took pride in their accomplishments and they added to this the security that they never had at sea. Just one related comment that I would like to make under this heading is that I have seen an illustration of a brass sailor's tobacco or snuff box that is decorated with a ship dated around 1860. The lines on the soft metal are very reminiscent of lace bobbin decoration techniques are the border designs.

One can not deny the influence of the sailor's craft of scrimshaw in the decoration of these bobbins but I believe that the decoration of the bobbins used in the East Devon area of English lace making is essentially follows the folk art tradition. Some primitive decoration could well have been done by sailors at sea for their wife or girlfriend, or indeed the shepherd as he tended his flocks. There are also the bobbins that while following the folk art tradition, are very well executed and I suspect that these were decorated by people who specialised in bobbin decoration.



*A simple line drawing of a ship with an accompanying heart*



*A rather nice trolly bobbin with various designs upon it and an inscription*



*A variety of hearty designs including a pair of initials inside a heart, and a Forget Me Not inscription.*

### Hearts

These are common, and whilst most of them comprise a combination of the small triangles, there are many that are carved lines, and even some of these are embellished with the triangles. Hearts can be found in singles, pairs with their points together; two or three hearts inside each other and hearts within hearts and of course with initials associated with them...



*A very nice all brick design*

### Bricks

These are another common form of decoration. The bricks can be found combined into a typical brick wall, like a chequered black and white finish flag. Single bricks and piles of brick in various configurations.



*Various line patterns used as bands around the bobbin*

### Lines

These are the medium for many of the decorations which I will describe later, but in their simplest form they are made to form decorations such as asterisks, squares, V's in various directions, crosses and the range of simple line decorations and cross hatchings.

*Bold diamonds and could that be a turkey?*



### Diamonds

These are made from the carved triangles and also straight lines. They can be filled with cross hatchings or open or embellished in many other ways.



*A rather lovely display of pot plant and garden flowers. I love the faces in the flowers and the drooping bluebell*

### Foliage, flowers and trees

These can be found on many bobbins. There is a wide range of foliage and flowers using lines and triangles. The triangles mostly indicate the leaves of the foliage. The other group use mainly lines outlining the shapes as the shape and complete the design with cross-hatching, triangles and even bricks. There are many examples when the lines are just like pencil drawing lines.



*Some other examples of trees flowers and foliage*



*Perhaps the most artistic drawing on any bobbin that I have seen*



*I love this pair of turtle doves. With the sun shining it makes an envious scene*

### Birds

These can be found in many varieties. Some knowledgeable ornithologists like to make guesses as to what bird it might represent, but for the most part the decorator just carved a nondescript bird. Most are quite primitive in their representation but some are depicted in quite good detail. I seem to think that I have seen turkeys, doves and the West Country choughs as well as some very nondescript birds.



*A variety of designs which includes a bird and a fish, also initials*

### Fish

These appear frequently on the nautical decorated bobbins. They come in all shapes and sizes mostly outlined in carved lines. I think I recognise a lobster and even a whale.



*A quite elementary drawing of a ship and anchor*

### Scrimshaw

In particular the art, which is appropriate to this discussion, is that of "scrimshaw". This required that the tooth of a whale or a walrus tusk first be softened by soaking in brine and then engraved with a sharp needle. These engraved lines would then be rubbed with a mixture of soot and black ink so that they would stand out boldly against the white (which ages to a cream) background.

This form of folk art is probably the closest to that of decorating East Devon bobbins. The lines, shading, objects and indeed to some extent the subjects of scrimshaw are all found on lace bobbins. The scrimshaw subjects are those of whaling, ships, and female figures; home comings and farewells. Bobbin subjects are shells, fish, mermaids, ships, nautical objects and indeed home comings and celebrations.

One aspect of the sailor's folk art is that they treated them with scant respect once they came home. It was a therapeutic occupation for them which paled into insignificance once the reality of home, girlfriends and family were experienced first hand. What is important in terms of our discussion is that it would appear that it was when the sailors retired that they continued their hobbies. Perhaps they sat on the front step, even with lace maker beside them. It was then that they took pride in their accomplishments and they added to this the security that they never had at sea. Just one related comment that I would like to make under this heading is that I have seen an illustration of a brass sailor's tobacco or snuff box that is decorated with a ship dated around 1860. The lines on the soft metal are very reminiscent of lace bobbin decoration techniques are the border designs.

One can not deny the influence of the sailor's craft of scrimshaw in the decoration of these bobbins but I believe that the decoration of the bobbins used in the East Devon area of English lace making is essentially follows the folk art tradition. Some primitive decoration could well have been done by sailors at sea for their wife or girlfriend, or indeed the shepherd as he tended his flocks. There are also the bobbins that while following the folk art tradition, are very well executed and I suspect that these were decorated by people who specialised in bobbin decoration.



*A simple line drawing of a ship with an accompanying heart*



*The childlike front and back view of a cat*

### Other living creatures

There are cats, snakes and even some nondescript objects that appear to have eyes and thus could probably be animals of some kind. As there are two distinct communities that made lace, those on the or near the coast and those that were inland, it is surprising that no farm animals have been depicted on the bobbins.

### Artefacts



The card suits of hearts, spades, diamonds and clubs can be found as are the frequent appearance of anchors. Houses and windows are also



### Vehicles

I have one example of a vehicle. I thought at first it could have been Stevenson's Rocket, but no I think it is some form of steam vehicle.



*This probably one of my most amazing finds. At first I thought I may have been a railway engine, after the style of Stephens Rocket. But I then looked at the date, 1870; and have come to the conclusion that it is a steam vehicle of some sort*

### Mermaids

These can be found on the nautical bobbins. They do not al have the traditional fishes tail, but they are human faces and bodies and have a variety of lower "limbs".

*Whilst not a typical "mermaid" I have chosen to use this whimsical picture of a "shell" face from the deep with a long coiling tail*





*The figures of the Victorian preoccupation of the virtues, especially as applied to women. Here*

### Humans

These range from "stick" people to detailed representations of the virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity. A little child is recorded, and indeed a "male" child is noted too! Perhaps my favourite is one of the illustrations I have used, that of a sailor and a lady





## CONCLUSION

I hope that introduction to the tools of the lace makers in the villages of East Devon will have inspired you to look at them as works of art. Some find little interest in them compared to the pretty beads and the turners craft displayed on the bobbins of the counties of the East Midlands. The bobbins of East Devon are art works from a noble line of traditional folk art. In them can be seen the influences of the sailors art of scrimshaw, naive art, skilled calligraphy and an eye for detail. History and experiences are recorded in pictures and in words; celebrations, an appreciation of the virtues in life, pictures of ships that a loved one may have served in, the birth of a child, the wisdom from the Bible and personal observations.



*A small picture of the ASP with birds and flowers*



*A ship on a 1838 dated bobbin. It seems to have a lot of sail and many gun hatches.*

## APPENDIX.

### Some notes on the sloop ASP

This ship is recorded quite a few times on East Devon bobbins and I thought that readers might be interested in a passage from the book *Persuasion* by Jane Austin. We do not know that that it refers to the ship that is depicted on the bobbins, but she does show some nautical knowledge and indeed in that book her characters visit Lyme, now Lyme Regis which was one of the early lace making villages of the East Devon area.



*Quite a small depiction of the ASP*

### The Asp

**Persuasion.** Jane Austin. Wordsworth Classics 1996. p 46,47.

Anne suppressed a little smile, and listened kindly, while Mrs Musgrove relieved her heart a little more; and for a few minutes, therefore, could not keep pace with the conversation of others.- When she could let her attention take its natural course again, she found the Miss Musgroves fetching the navy list (their own Navy list, the first that had ever been at Uppercross); and sitting down together to pour over it, with the professed view of finding out the ships which Captain Wentworth had commanded.

“Your first was the *Asp*, I remember; we will look for the *Asp*”

“You will not find her there. - Quite worn out and broken up. I was the last man who commanded her. - Hardly fit for service then. - Reported fit for home service for a year or two-so I was sent off to the West Indies”. The girls looked in amazement.

“The admiralty,” he continued, “entertain themselves now and then, with sending a few hundred men to sea, in a ship not fit to be employed. But they have a great many to provide for; and among the thousands that just may well go to the bottom as not, it is impossible for them to distinguish the very set who may be least missed.”

“Phoo phoo,” cried the admiral, “what stuff these young fellows talk! Never was a better sloop than the *Asp* in her day. - For an old built sloop, you would not see her equal. Lucky fellow to get her! - He knows there must have been twenty better men than himself applying for her at the same time. Lucky fellow to get anything so soon, with no more interest than his.”

“I felt my luck admiral, I assure you;” replied Captain Wentworth, seriously. “I was well satisfied with my appointment as you can desire. It was a great object with me, at the time, to be at sea - a very great object. I wanted to be doing something.”

“To be sure you did. - What should a young fellow, like you, do ashore for half a year together? - If a man has not a wife, he soon wants to be afloat again.”

“From a South Wales Tourist brochure.

But, Captain Wentworth,” cried Louisa, “how vexed you must have been when you came to the *Asp*, to see what an old thing they had given you.”

“I knew pretty well what she was, before that day,” said he, smiling. “I had no more discoveries to make than you as to the fashion and strength of any old pelisse, which you had seen lent about among half your acquaintance, ever since you could remember, and which, at last, on some very wet day, is lent to yourself. – Ah! She was a dear old *Asp* to me. She did all that I wanted. I knew she would – I knew that we should either go to the bottom together, or that she would be the making of me; I never had two days of foul weather all the time I was at sea in her; and after taking privateers enough to be very entertaining, I had the good luck, in my passage home the next autumn, to fall in with the French frigate I wanted – I brought her into Plymouth; and there was another instance of luck. We had not been six hours in the Sound, when a gale came on, which lasted four days and four nights, and which would have done for poor old *Asp*, in half the time; or touch with the great nation not having much improved our condition. Four and twenty hours later, and I should have been a gallant Captain Wentworth, in a small paragraph in a small corner of the newspapers; and being lost in only a sloop, nobody would have thought about me.

Here is another snippet I have found!

Pembroke Docks are reputedly haunted by a ghost ship, **The Asp**.

Visitors are advised to "Watch out for the ship, haunted by the ghost of a young girl who had her throat slit - her killer was never found".

From a South Wales Tourist brochure



*A more modern ship that combined steam with sail.*



*Probably the oldest bobbins in known collections. Accurate dating is not feasible though they certainly date into the 17th century. They are trolly bobbins*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

All photographs have been taken by Brian Lemin from the  
collections of:

The Honiton Lace Shop

The Honiton Lace Museum

Jean Barrat

Dianne Smith

Pat Perryman

Shirley Povey

Lorna Whitely

Heather ?

Brian Lemin

Composite photographs were created by Brian Lemin