

# NAIVE DECORATIONS ON EAST DEVON BOBBINS

Brian Lemin May 2014

## Introduction:

In general terms the East Devon bobbins that are decorated could well be categorised as having complex designs. The designs tend to fill the shank of the bobbin and whilst the colours are mainly only red and black, they are eye catching and require your attention to detail when you examine them. However there is one genre that challenges this generalisation of bobbin decoration which, for the want of a better name I have chosen to call naïve decoration.

Wikipedia defines naïve art as follows:

***Naïve art** is a classification of art that is often characterized by a childlike simplicity in its subject matter and technique. While many naïve artists appear, from their works, to have little or no formal art training, this is often not true. The words "naïve" and "primitive" are regarded as pejoratives and are, therefore, avoided by many.*

In our examination, I would not consider the decoration in a pejorative sense, rather these bobbins are different and to my mind very enjoyable and entertaining. They also raise questions as to who the artists may be; but more about that a little later. Firstly, I think we should look at an example of one of these bobbins.

*I need to say that whilst I am a wood turner and practice an "art craft", I am artistically uneducated and do not present the following from an academically knowledgeable position. Ideas and educated criticism will be invaluable for me to receive. I also need to acknowledge the spelling mistakes on some of the captions on the cards I have used for illustration!*

## The Decorators Art.

We mainly talk of the decorator's art as applied to these East Devon bobbins as being "chip carved" with a unique triangle shape as being the main component of the design. It is thought that these triangular cuts or indents are filled with either black or red wax. I need to add that by no means are all bobbins decorated in this manner, just what we might call the typical bobbin decoration.



*This shows a wide variety of simple decorations*

The large majority of East Devon bobbins are indeed plain, presumably because they would have to be cheaper and the lace-maker often needs a lot of bobbins on their pillow. What is unusual is the appearance of these simple decoration styles amongst the plethora complex designs.

As to who decorates the bobbins we do not really know. Early research seems to be revealing that there are various styles that seem to be associated with a particular "person". There has been some thinking that the shops that sold these bobbins each employed one or more decorators. Possibly even they employed a group of decorators. As yet no publication seems to have been found to which we can refer for a definitive answer to these questions.

Those who have discussed this with me have not felt that the bobbin turner was the decorator. It is complicated. As yet I have only been able to identify one distinct bobbin maker that has a different head on his bobbins and distinctive decorating style. That really proves nothing.

One thing that seems from a common-sense view that the primitive bobbins we are discussing were not decorated by the "establishment" of bobbins decorators.

Before I move on with this discussion I must mention that it would appear that there is evidence that the decorators of East Devon bobbins were more than likely to be illiterate or poorly educated as the spelling in bobbins inscribed with words are as bad as those decorated similarly to those of the East Midland bobbins.

### **Who could have decorated these bobbins?**

There is one quaint tradition relating to the provision of plain bobbins in the area. It would appear that the boyfriend of lace maker would need to prove his love by giving his sweetheart a number of bobbins on St Valentine's Day. The more bobbins he gave the more he showed his love. So, once a year the young men had to buy or make the bobbins to give to his loved one. I have to say that I have seen very few bobbins from this area that I thought could be handmade, having said that the bobbins are very plain and as carving wood was a very prevalent pastime by young and old men, they were very skilled carvers, so I might well have missed the well-made hand carved bobbins.

Could the young men have carved a simple picture on a plain bobbin to impress his lady friend? Very possible. Simple drawing, simple letters, childlike because drawing on a bobbin is difficult. Simple letters because the makers were ill-educated? I could go along with those suggestions.

Then there is the situation that bobbins would be laying around the house and children of that family could well have passed a rainy Sunday afternoon cutting their simple drawings on the spare bobbins. It would keep them quiet whilst Mum was working on her pillow.

We are fairly sure that the seamen had skills of drawing on bobbins adapted from the skills of scrimshaw. We think the seamen are the engravers of some very excellent and complex drawings of boats on bobbins. Just a few of these do not show those advanced skills and I have included in this genre. The illustration below does show a rudimentary sailing boat but the lettering seems well executed.

H29

Is it a "boat" depicted? I think so, the flag on the top seems to indicate this. It is surrounded by bold foliage and equally bold printing, though not such good print quality as on many bobbins.



I am inclined to reject the sailor carver from this genre.

The end result is one I have often said in my articles... I just do not really know the answer.

### **A gallery of Primitive decorated bobbins.**

I am doing this in two galleries, firstly those that include an article of somewhat primitive art within an otherwise traditionally decorated bobbin, and secondly those I think are primitive within the whole of their concept.

### **Part 1. Primitive inclusions**

H18

Faith, another virtue bobbin.



†1121 This is an “anchor” bobbin. The stylized design shows it could be one of the earliest designs of anchors found on bobbins. There were many patented designs and I am guessing that this could be early 1800s. There is also a lovely “sun flower” design. It also has a diamond, a diabalo, triangles and some foliage. The initials JC and LC could well be a gift from husband to wife, as they both appear to have the same surname.



†1129 Here is a closer look at the 1769 bobbin. The face of the sun is such fun. The initial only seems to be “F”. The initials are thought to be of the giver and the receiver of the bobbin, or variations on that theme.



†1181 Can you see the head of a turkey to left on the top bobbin? I have called the “shield like” designs either zulu shields or beetles. They are just a whim of my imagination. This bobbin decorator uses the tail area more than others, you notice it especially on some of the ship bobbins. I think you will see the turkey better on another picture in this collection



t160

I call this the "lobster" (crayfish or whatever you call them locally)  
It could just be a fish of some type. There is another primitive  
depiction of fish that is similar but lacks the "claws" at the head.



## Part 2. "Total" primitive designs

t100

The bobbin that never fails to bring a smile to my face is the primitive  
bobbin picture of the cat. Is it not really lovely?



There is an obverse of this showing its tail and protruding ears. I do not have the  
picture to show you. Sorry.

t153

This primitive has lot going for it as the lettering is very good lower case  
lettering. I find it attractive.



Very nice lower case script.

†151

A primitive with elements of trying to copy the diamond with cross hatch and a divided square. Spirals and dots are evident. I suspect that primitives are pen knife (clasp knife) cut.



†183

Another primitive bobbin depicting the fish. I have it in the back of my mind some small similarity of the "fish" secret sign for Christians, but again it is just my imagination.



†194

I put this in the "primitive" category, but it could well be a design feature of a distinct bobbin maker. I have not set you to identify makers as there is some evidence that bobbins went to a specialist "decorator/s. I tend to favour that explanation as an overview. But then there are the primitive groups that use non of the traditional decorations, though in this we can see the foliage motive (bottom) and intittlas on the collar.



†151

A primitive spiral but coloured with black sealing wax. Tail included in decoration. I have noticed that there is a rather dark black that one decorator uses and this is the person who decorates most of the tail.



†152

A set of primitive bobbins including the delightful cat. It has been said that the sailors carved bobbins at sea. I can well believe this for the primitive bobbins.



†15

Primitive foliage, filled with red wax.





Red Lines

H82

I like to think of this as a human type of "spirit man". His heart is in the right place and the enveloping foliage offers him an ethereal dimension. Clearly dated 1870 with BH and T (?) as the initials. Yes, this bobbin is very likeable..



## Conclusion:

I tend to repeat myself but articles like this, which are basically descriptive, are just an excuse to show you part of the wide variety of decorations on the East Devon bobbins. The fact that these bobbins have hardly been studied does perhaps create a genre for erstwhile collectors. However the study of these bobbins and their decoration is so far behind the knowledge of those bobbins from the East Midlands that I am sure it will be a long time before "they" catch up.

Meanwhile, enjoy the art work, and love the lace.