

## ENGLAND'S OLDEST LACE BOBBIN. *Do we really know?*

Brian Lemin Jan 2011 **Updated March 2020**

### **Preamble.**

*I have been collecting photographs of lace bobbins now for at least 20 years and over that time I have been helped by a large number of people. They have been individuals who have shared their often large collections with me and those who have passed on just a picture of one bobbin. The Arachne community has been the source of many contributions to my photographic collection. The Luton Museum gave me full access to their secondary bobbin collection and limited access to their main display and the All Hallows Museum in Honiton, who support me in every possible way they can.*

*For this project, I am pleased to be able to say that I have been bountifully helped by the **Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge and the Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum**, and in the latter case, by my proxy Pompey Parry. More recently the **Fairlynch Museum, Budleigh Salterton** have offered me excellent hospitality*

*This does not diminish in any manner my thanks firstly to my small cohort of fellow bobbin researchers (who are modest to a fault) and all those who have shared their bobbins with me in the past. If I were better organised I think the list of names would fill a whole page at least. Thank you all.*

### **INTRODUCTION.**

This article takes the opportunity of updating my investigating bobbins that may be the oldest known English lace bobbin and to look at the wider issues in the dating of lace bobbins. As to your conclusion, I leave it to you to decide after you have read the article.

I should mention that this article gives readers the first opportunity to see photographs of two very special bobbins in our history. I have presented them in the best way I know to have a look at a bobbin in a flat plane as opposed to the circumferential view we normally have.

### **HOW OLD IS A LACE BOBBIN?**

If we try to get to the start of lace-making we go back a very long time. Wright talks about ancient Egypt and even the words of the Biblical prophet Ezekiel. Various other authors take us on a meandering trip through the ages and Europe until possibly we get to England in about the 16th century. For this article, I would like to leave it at that as all I am attempting to do is to ascertain how old we could expect the oldest bobbin to be.

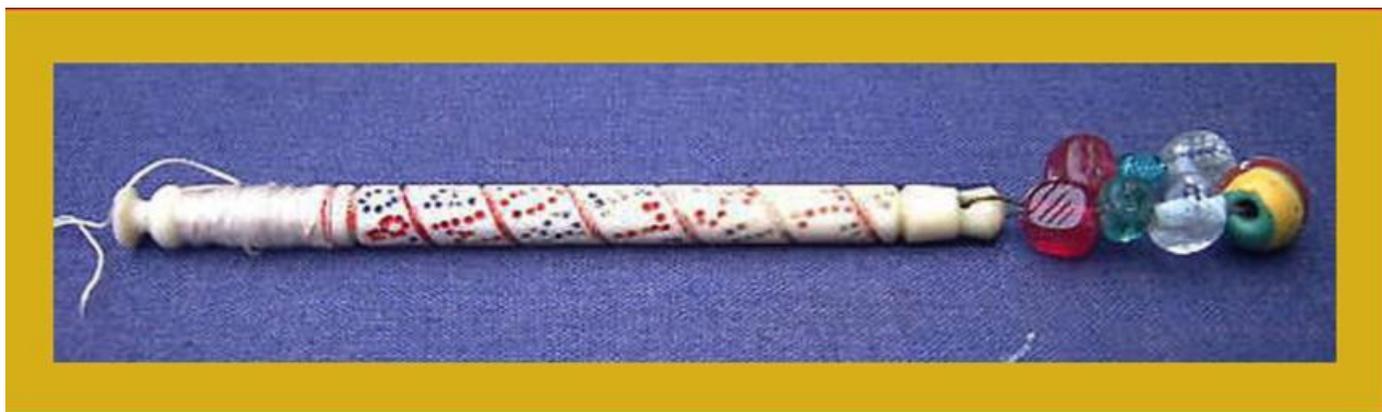
The anthropologists have a fairly well-accredited method of dating finds and whilst I am not expert in their techniques I am quite comfortable when they say where they found a bobbin and the surrounding environment and documented history indicates that "such and such" would be an approximate or close date. If however there is a lace bobbin dated XXXX with no archeological association, then I become more sceptical. Having said that, I must admit to believing dated carving on bobbins for the final part of this article. More later.

For now, let me give you an example from one of my favourite lace bobbin makers.

The illustration below is pretty clearly a bobbin made by James Compton and we know that he was born in 1824. The inscription reads: WILLIAM. M. SHEPHERD. BORN MAY 17 1802.

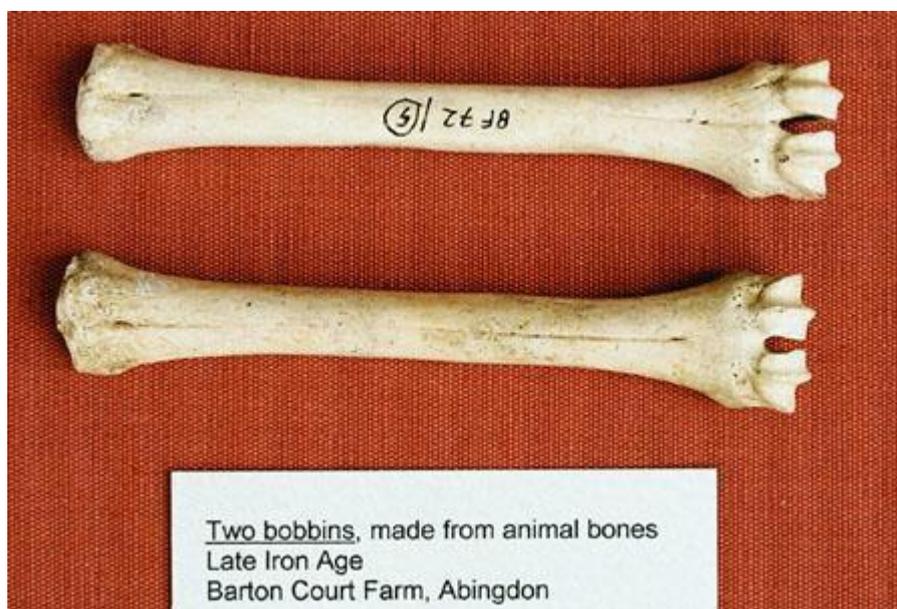
Without us happening to know the date of the maker's birth we could well assume that the bobbin was made in or about 1802. A trap we should be aware of.

WILLIAM. M. SHEPHERD. BORN MAY 17 1802.



### THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL OLDEST.

The following “bobbins” I found on the internet from the Oxford Museum Service



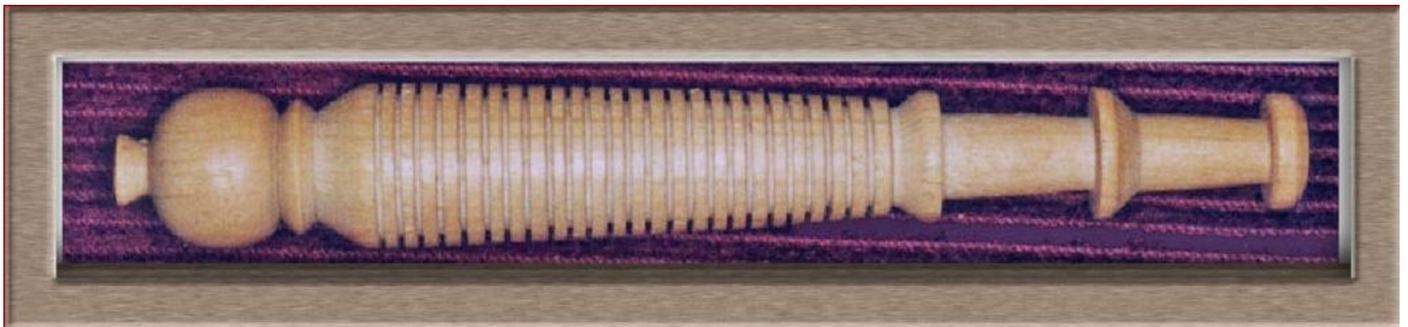
Their accession register tells us little more than the label, however, there is much discussion within lace-making circles that the tools used for making lace included bones. I think with these I make a clear distinction as to bobbins being a tool upon which “things” were wound, and lace bobbins which were bones used as lace bobbins. If I am honest, if they had been dated 1500 + or – I would probably entertain the possibility of them being “lace” bobbins but in the Iron Age... No, not lace bobbins. Probably it is a bobbin for winding some type of thread upon as opposed to a tool to make lace.

The next bobbin I have no idea where I got this image from... I am sorry.

This bobbin is identified by the “institution” as being a “Lace Bobbin”. It was found in an old Roman settlement that is dated the late 1660s or early 1700s. It is my opinion that it could well be a lace bobbin however it could be another tool such as a pricker, or a bodkin.



The next bobbin was found in a midden in Gloucester and is dated around the late 1600s or early 1700s. It is unspangled and a single neck. It seems to have some of the characteristics of what we now call a South Bucks bobbin. The illustration below is a wooden reproduction of the original bone bobbin. Of course, the fact that a lot of the older bobbins which have survived are bone reflects that bone survives better than wood.



The next bobbin could well be one of the “world’s” oldest bobbins. The find is recorded in “Danske Frihandskniplinger” By Bodil Tornhave and is part of a group of bobbins found, I think, in a bog in Denmark. Below I have reproduced only the bobbin that more closely represents the English style of bobbin. This archeological find is dated as 1550.



If I were to comment on the illustration above dated 1550, I would say it has a remarkable resemblance to the development of the English lace bobbin. It is, of course, no surprise to us as it is clear that the skill of lace making came to England via the continent, so our early bobbins were obviously “continental” and over the years they developed into the various English styles. This appears to qualify as the “worlds” oldest lace bobbin, however, we are looking at our English history of bobbins

Just one more find of old bobbins before we move on. In a few houses in and close to Eye, Suffolk, several lace bobbins were found. In a roof, under the stairs, I believe a total of close to 50 such bobbins have now been found. They all appear to be 17th-century bobbins and are clearly of Flemish origin. This fits in well with local history and since then Nicky Höwener-Townsend has completed the research and published it in her book which is noted in the bibliography.



#### THE OLDEST DATED BOBBINS.

It is not surprising to me that the oldest dated bobbins are those from East Devon or Downton. The reason for this is that the tradition of writing the date on their bobbins is very widespread, though as yet just what that date represents researchers are not quite sure, but the date of the gift or the making of the bobbin seems to be high in the running. Currently, our thinking is that as it is rare to find a date on this style of bobbin associated with an event such as a birthday or say death, it is reasonable that it was the date of making the bobbin or the giving of the gift. The chance is that these two alternatives are quite close together and would suggest that the date is reasonably accurate.

Let us have a look at a few of them.

This one is catalogued as AS 1765. It comprises a deciduous tree in the winter, and some have suggested “windmills” as the basis for the fill-in design. I am not too sure about that myself, but here we have a reasonably dated bobbin from 1765.



This next one is not quite so old. It is dated 1769. The only initial I see is a letter “F” but as I am working from a photo I cannot turn the bobbin around! I do see the lovely “face in the sun” decoration, which along with the stars gives an interesting bobbin quite a lift.



However, we are competing with archaeological finds of the 1500's and 1600's, so we must go older. The next two bobbins deserve an article to themselves, though the Shepherds Bobbin has been written up in the Lace Magazine by Carole Morris. This is the first time the wider lace community has seen it in photographic form and laid out in a form which reflects a "flat page" of the decoration.



The Shepherd's Bobbin  
T.7\_1944

Fitzwilliam Museum  
Cambridge

© Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge  
T.7-1944  
Lace Bobbin (detail)  
English, c.1795  
Wood, carved with figures

Just look at it. It is an amazing bobbin. I almost want to do a quiz on how many depictions of various kinds you can list. Carole Morris has described this bobbin so professionally that I do not want to enlarge on it in this context however the presence of a spangle on a bobbin dated 1795 surprises me. It brings me back to the reliability of dates when we try to date bobbins. If we believe the date on the bobbin then we possibly have to revise our thinking as when East Midland bobbins became spangled. So we have 1795 with possibly a few reservations.



The above picture illustrates what I was told were “very old lace bobbins” and when I managed to get to my computer I was pleasantly surprised to find a Honiton Trolley bobbin dated 1701. I include this find as an introduction to the next section that deals almost entirely with Honiton Trolley bobbins.

### Honiton Trolley Bobbins

Bobbin and Needlelace have been made in Devon since, at least, the early 17th century. It was a cottage industry, by which the wives, daughters and other females related to mainly farm labourers and fishermen supplemented the family income. It was made in towns and villages throughout the East Devon area.

I am deeply grateful to the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge for both their kindness in sending me such great pictures and allowing me to present this bobbin, in this form, to the lace makers of the world in this article.

We now come to the next contender in this presentation with the date of 1693. This beats all the above bobbins that have a recorded date inscribed on them. The bobbin itself has been published before in a booklet published by the Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum, to whom I am very grateful for the photographs that have enabled me to present them in the manner below.



(c) Salisbury and South Wiltshire  
Museum

As I have said earlier in this article, the tradition of inscribing a date on East Devon bobbins has been well established, and without having firm confirmatory evidence, the practice itself seems to indicate a desire to record the acquisition of a lace bobbin. This bobbin is accorded a geographical description as a “Downton” bobbin; its provenance confirms this.

It was found on the site of an old Salisbury Council House which had been built in 1579 and was demolished after being damaged by fire in 1780. Susan Hartley and Pompey Parry have written in somewhat more detail about this bobbin in the above book “Downton Lace”. These authors relate the above decoration to other Downton bobbins to which they have access.

This researcher has for some time believed in the possibility of a “crossover” of bobbin decorators between the East Devon bobbin decorators and the Downton bobbin decorators, particularly in the larger bobbin shared by both styles of lace, the Gimp/Trolley bobbins. Sadly I do not have access to sufficient bobbins from each of the areas to make any definite findings on this matter, but I mention this in the matter of being of some general interest.

Just as a small and most *inconclusive* piece of evidence, I share with you the following picture of an East Devon Trolley bobbin.

The following pictures are reputed by those who have a good knowledge of Devon bobbins to be “very old indeed”

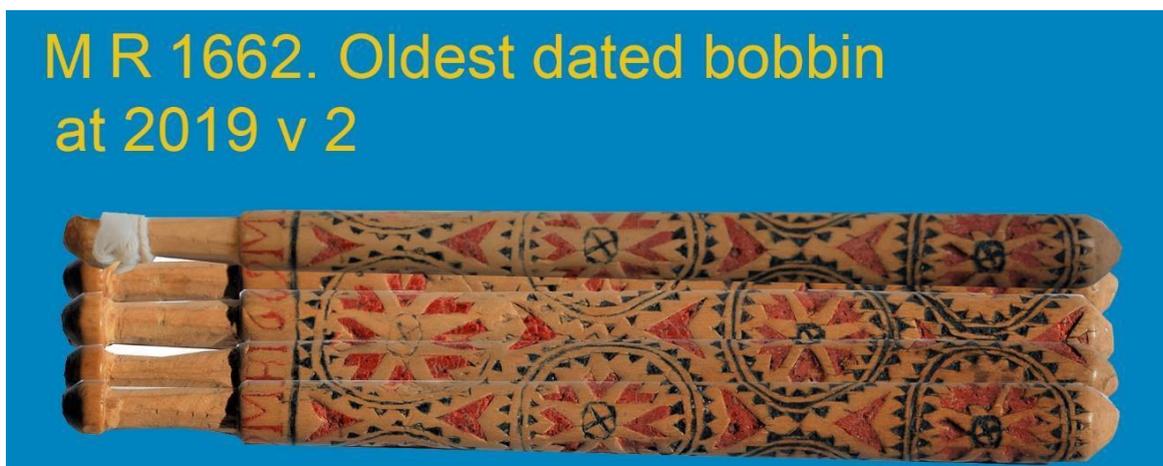




Just regarding the East Devon and Downton discussion I would say that there is little doubt that their Trolly/Gimp bobbins of olden days were the same shape and pretty well certainly the same size as each other. In this case, it could well be that the origin of the bobbins could well have been common to both groups of lacemakers. As to my assertion that they may from time to time have shared the same decorators, is a question of future research.

Concerning the 1693 bobbin, I leave the detailed analysis of its decoration to another time or another more knowledgeable person.

So now we come to the Budleigh Salterton bobbin. Which, at the time of writing this update, is considered to be the oldest "dated" lace bobbin in England. 1662. Let's have a look at it.



**Courtesy Fairlynch Museum, Budleigh Salterton.**

Let us look at it overall first. Its condition is remarkably good.

It is a series of chip-carved double circles filled with black wax. The chip carving of those tiny triangles are the bread butter shape of decorators of Honiton bobbins. They are easy to "chip" with a pocket (clasp) knife. Then the decorators added a deliberately carved arrowhead decoration coloured red. (perhaps a heart?... I doubt it?)

Within the circle, the arrows point to the centre of the circle, which comprise a poorly carved small circle with a “+” in it. All in all a very pleasant design, quite well carved overall and a delight to look at.

At the top of the shaft comes the label. Firstly the initials. M R these are nicely carved and they are seraphed capitals. This tends to indicate they were carved by literate decorators. (Some East Midland bobbins were decorated by illiterate people.)

What do these initials stand for? To be honest we do not know. It could be the maker or decorator of the bobbin or the lace makers initials. We need a lot more bobbins and genealogical experts with lots of time and patience to determine this unless a local historian bumps into and obscure reference to a decorators practice. *I have not found any reference to makers techniques in the published literature but I do know two peoples names of Honiton bobbin makers in the say 1920s. ( but that is all I know)*

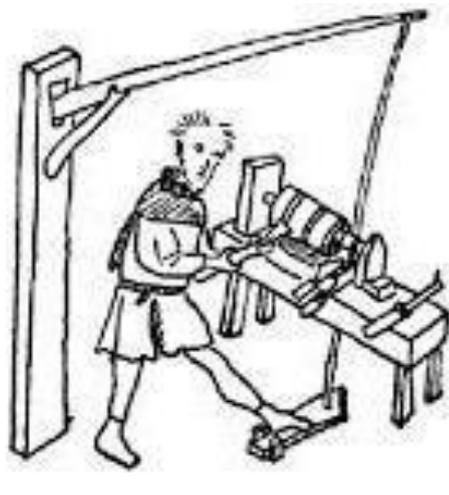
Then we come to the 1662 part of the inscription and I feel reasonably comfortable assigning that to the date of making/giving.

The real feature of this bobbin (and it is what got me all excited) was the first thing I noticed when I first saw it is that the neck, (The narrow part that the thread is wound upon) is hand-carved, not turned by the turner.

You may have noticed that I have kept the terms maker and decorator separate. Perhaps they were the same people? Perhaps they were different people, perhaps, when it comes to a large number of bobbins they were made by a group of people each doing their own special “chip” (should I have said “massed produced”?) These are the hearsay and the such like that we like to talk about when we do not have a clue! We have no proof of who and how they were decorated.

I do have a reasonable theory as to why the neck is hand-carved though; it is all about the type of lathe they were probably using at that time. It was almost certainly a “Pole Lathe”. Take a look at the diagram below. The rope is half wound around the lathe shaft, the foot pulls it down and makes the shaft turn, then the turner takes his foot off and the pole springs it up again and the shaft turns the other way!

It is inefficient in as much that the turner can only cut when his chisel blade faces opposite the direction of the turn. I have used one of these at a show. It is very difficult AND when it comes to turning a narrow neck on the bobbin for the thread, the chance of it breaking is VERY high indeed, (It is bad enough on a modern lathe)



So I think the turner turned the bobbin as a form of a cylinder, took the bobbin off the lathe and carved the neck. That is what I would have done anyway.

The publicity for this bobbin said *“It was made just two years after the Restoration of King*

*Charles II and four years before the Great Fire of London. That is pretty mind-blowing but what was happening to lace at that time?*

The lace of Devon was based on Belgium laces, the prevailing thought as to why that was is that those Belgium and Flemish lacemakers fleeing persecution had mainly settled in Devon and Somerset.

Sad to say that the lace that was being made by local makers at that time was probably a bit crude for the high-class ladies and gentlemen of society and they were buying their lace directly from Belgium costing the English coffers more money than the country could afford.

The English Parliament outlawed it in 1662 in an attempt to stop the massive flow of money being spent on foreign, rather than domestic, textiles.

I had better stop there or we come into the exciting history of smuggling lace. There are great stories there. Lacemaking history is full of ups and downs and was, from time to time, very cruel to the women of the cottage industry of lace making; by this I mean there were some periods in history when they were in desperate conditions.

## **CONCLUSION**

Possibly there is no one answer.

The world's oldest could well be from the group of bobbins in the find in Denmark.

The oldest English bobbin could well be the find from Gloucester. It has a "100-year" bandwidth (!) to be included.

Of the dated bobbins currently (March 2020), it would seem to be the 1662 bobbin in the Fairlynch Museum, Budleigh Salterton

## **References.**

Caulton. Geoff. **Suffolk Lace**. Lace Number 26 April 1982. p 26/16 An article describing the discovery of Flemish lace bobbins in Eye and the making of Suffolk Lace in that area.

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.

Morris Carole. **A Shepherd's Gift**. Lace Number 58 Spring 1990. A description of a very special bobbin that Carole found in the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge. Fascinating.

Hartley Susan. and Parry Pompei. **Downton Lace: A History of lace making in Salisbury and the surrounding area**. Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum 1991

Nicky Höwener-Townsend. **Suffolk Lace and the Lace Makers of Eye**. Kessingland (GB) 2009,

**Addendum:** The Batavia shipwreck off the coast of West Australia in 1629 revealed a few lace bobbins. I have excluded them from this update as they are not English Lace bobbins. You may read my account at the following URL:

[https://www2.cs.arizona.edu/patterns/weaving/webdocs/lb\\_2014\\_04.pdf](https://www2.cs.arizona.edu/patterns/weaving/webdocs/lb_2014_04.pdf)

