

How was it that bobbins became interesting?

Brian Lemin July 2020

*Idle thoughts as to how and why English bobbins developed. This short article proposes that it started around **1850**. Why? Read on...*

This article is written after I discovered that most, if not all early Downton bobbins were hand-carved! I had observed that many necks were hand-carved but then an expert gave me a history lesson on these interesting bobbins.

My historical and research interests began when I decided that I would like to make lace bobbins after seeing a beautiful pillow of a church member at an afternoon tea. So simple I thought and so pretty! I can easily make them I thought.

How wrong could I be?. Turning a lace bobbin that is approximately 5mm in diameter is difficult enough but then to turn a thin neck of say, 3mm diameter is courting disaster. I can not tell you how many times I have made nice shafts but broke the bobbin when turning the neck.

There is no secret that gives you instant success except that your tools need to be "very" sharp and your approach the bobbin has to be very gentle, and I suspect that many makers develop a "supportive" technique when turning fine and thin portions of the bobbins. I will not describe the supportive technique I use for legal reasons as it could be dangerous. It certainly needs a lot of care.

Of course, I am talking about a modern electric lathe and first-class steel tools, but the early bobbin makers had no such excellent machinery upon which to turn their bobbins.

The Pole lathe.

This works (I used one at an exhibition once) but you can only use it when the wood is rotating in one direction. (Coming towards you)



3 *A German pole lathe of 1395*
(Mendelesches Brüderbuch)

Foot powered

This is much the same as pole lathe except that it makes the lathe more compact



Two-handed lathes,

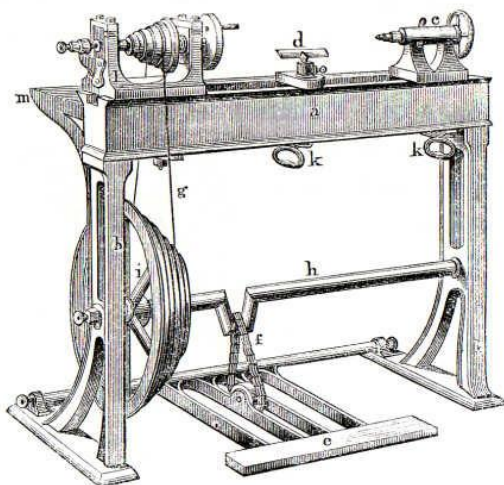
These required another person to turn the wheel. They were better but you needed a second person.



The treadle lathe.

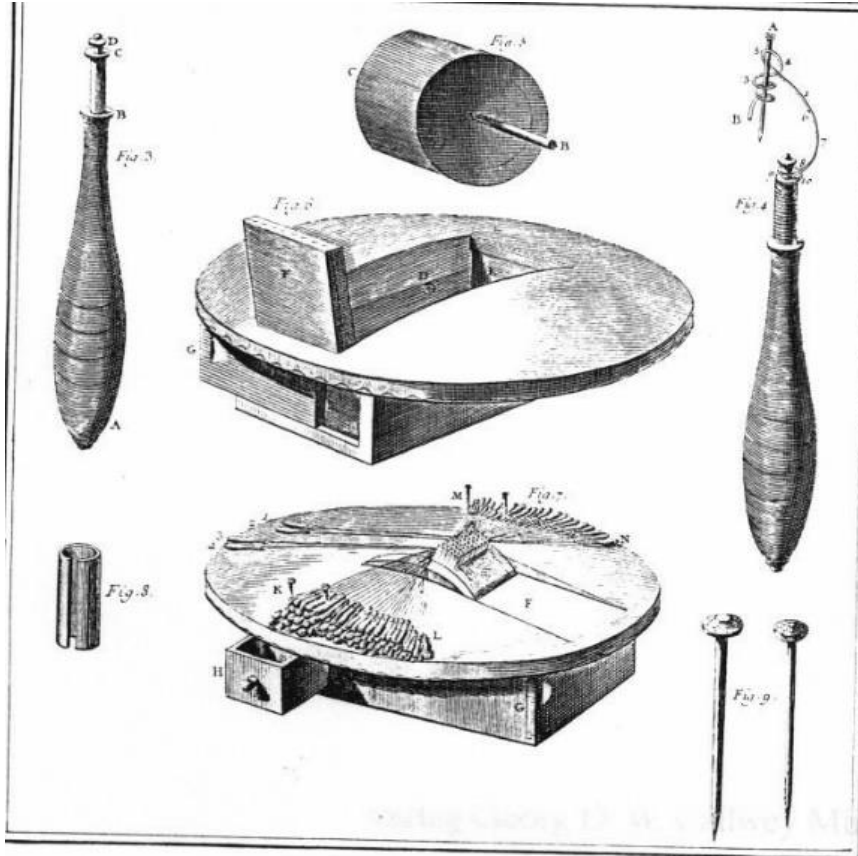
Those familiar with the treadle sewing machine will be able to visualize this easily. The wood always turns in the correct direction, the speed is controllable, and by the time these lathes were invented (around 1850) the tools being offered the woodturners were of better steel and could be made to be very sharp and thus allow for finer designs.

It is reasonable to assume that this is the type of lathe used by bobbin makers from around **1850**.



How does this apply to lace-making bobbins?

Although lace bobbins have been used for many centuries, the earliest drawing I have is dated around 1600 (French) and it is not until around 1900 (plus or minus a few years) that authors began to write about bobbins in their books on lace.



The oldest illustration of bobbins that I have found,

I am always looking for very early descriptions of the bobbin and I have been frustrated because it is as if bobbins had not been invented before the 20th century! Palliser and Wright and a few others write about them and nearly always from the "time that is current" to their writing or journeys. Failing that they described traditional style bobbins.

Whilst I take my bobbin studies seriously, I fully admit to not taking a full academic approach to these "articles of explanation" which I offer. I say this as I am fully aware of the obvious that before around the middle of the 1800s, lacemakers used what was the traditional bobbins used (on the continent) for their style of lace.

Why should authors start writing about bobbins?

I think that up until that time the bobbins used were taken for granted, but then there came a bobbin revolution. The bobbins became different, they were changing and writers became interested in them.

This was because the bobbin makers of that time had better machinery, they were interested in sales, they had seen how the arts and craft movement had influenced England and belatedly, wanted to be part of the movement and also build on the industrial revolution that had changed England over the past two (?) hundred years.

Like all artisan workers, they made lace bobbins to earn money, and if they were to improve their sales, like good businessmen, they needed to talk to the customers and try and meet their needs. Some of the changes they made were

to offer spangling,

make necks longer,

shorter,

finer bobbins,

more blunt/pointed,

Whatever they needed. They were soon able to offer a wider range of bobbins displaying many clever innovations.

Then the bobbin makers became designers and created a catalogue of beautifully turned and decorated bobbins. Buyers could have bobbins made from different material instead of just wood, they were able to offer personalised messages on them, quotes, names suitable for gifts and of course the ever popular love messages.

Bobbins had come of age. They were worth looking at, they made work a little more enjoyable, the bobbins became topics of conversation, they became items of local history, family mementoes and works of art that were lovely to look at.

All because of an improved lathe, good tools and few creative woodturners, not to mention the useful input of the lace makers.