

SPECULATION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH LACE BOBBINS AND THE NEED FOR SPANGLING

Brian Lemin
January 2022

Introduction.

To be different to my usual style of writing I have written this article in two parts, firstly I have briefly outlined my thinking, then in part two, I have added detail to my thinking. If you like, I would not blame you for just reading part one, then move on if you are interested in what I am speculating.

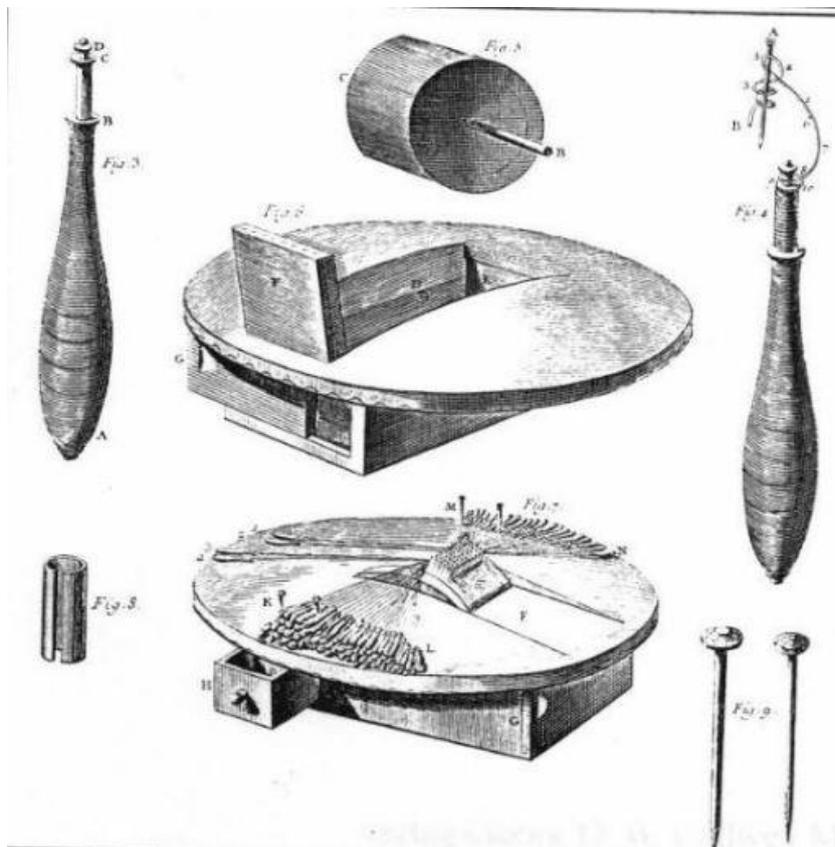
Part One

Well, this is a speculative document where I have collected together what I have gleaned over the years of my special interest in lace bobbins. Like quite a few articles I write I often think that they will be, sometime in the future, really capable academics who might find my thinking valuable and then go on to answer the topic more definitively.

I have speculated that:

1. Migrant lace makers from the European continent brought their lace making skills and equipment to England around (plus or minus) the year 1600. Their bobbins were varied and very different from what they became in the East Midlands lace-making district some 100 or so years later.
2. To achieve this dramatic change to spangled bobbins, the bobbins would have to become much thinner (lighter) and have double necks. Of course, they must also be suitable for the style of lace that their users were making; thus, the uptake of these bobbins was mostly in the East Midland area of lacemakers in England.
3. The innovative design of these bobbins was facilitated by improved lathes and tools. It made it so much easier to experiment. These turners were also caught up in the industrial revolution when innovation and experimentation were encouraged.
4. The designs of these new-style bobbins may well have been innovative via the bobbin turners, possibly be user-initiated (i.e., ideas from the Lacemakers) or even copied from a similar style of bobbins that were traditionally used in parts of Europe (Say Northern France)

With this in mind, I share with you the oldest depiction of a lace bobbin that I have found in my studies. It is dated 1625 and has a detailed drawing of its components. If you look closely, it has a double neck!



5 From this, and the other examples of some bobbin designs historically remaining in Europe, the double-neck would have been less of an innovation than the thinning of the bobbins. I speculate that this (creating double necks) might have been the first of the design changes.

6, The thinning I suggest, was more of an exercise in copying designs from Europe. As this thinning reduced the weight of the bobbin the users of the East Midlands had to find a solution to their problem.

I am suggesting that firstly they tried what has become known as "tiny spangled bobbins". i.e., bobbins that had only two or three beads as spangles. From that innovation came the fully spangled (say 9 beads) bobbin that we currently have been used widely in England. The need for spangles could be to replace weight, reduce unwinding of modern (at that time) thread or to suit the style of pillow the makers used.

7. Makers certainly offered spangled or un-spangled bobbins over a changeover period.

8 Having been a bobbin turner at an early stage of my interest in bobbins, I can tell you that bobbin makers need to sell their products! I put down the variety of designs and decorations to the business model that turners

developed. I do not think we can overlook the Arts and Crafts movement that like the Industrial Revolution encouraged innovation. This includes the proliferation of bone as a bobbin material.

9. Frankly I do not think the changes to the bobbin necks and the diameter of the shaft as particularly revolutionary; developmental certainly, perhaps even over a long number of years, but the introduction of spangles and the variety of turners designs and decorations was a particularly innovative period.

Part Two

When I first thought about using that title, I thought to myself: "*I must be mad to try and tackle that topic*" and I still do think that way. I justify trying to offer at least some sort of explanation because, as a bobbin maker, I realise that the change from a continental style of the bobbin to a thin double-necked bobbin with a set of spangles could not have happened in one single design. It had to be gradual, it had to bring the lace makers along with each development it had to be a commercial idea too as they, the bobbin makers, had to sell to keep in business. Only the East Midland makers (or because of the styles of lace they were making) embraced this new style of bobbins.

Just using the sort of feelings collectors have I would say that until around the 1750s lace-making bobbins were of the same type as the immigrants from the European continent brought with them, to a degree each form of lace used a different style of bobbin, but bobbin makers from the time of "chicken bones" have used whatever suitable tools they can find to meet their needs. Even in the comparatively affluent times makers mix their bobbins and have done for many years.

I am going to use as my starting point that most bobbins used before spangling were of the Flemish (or similar) in style. I would like that to be a researched statement but it is not as I have no idea how to research and establish it as a fact. It is based on one of the greatest influences on English Lacemakers, i.e., the migration of lacemakers from Europe who were mainly Flemish or at least made Flemish style lace.

The origins of lace in England are somewhat obscure, whilst many believe it came via the large migration of European lacemakers from Flanders (Flemish) and France during the various persecutions of protestants living in those areas, it is also thought that lace making was established in England earlier in the 16th century than these periods of migration. I am far from pragmatic about these "origins"; however, it seems a reasonably

pragmatic decision to make that the bobbins of these lacemakers were the ones predominantly in use in England at that time.

Should the reader want to delve more extensively I have culled from various books a list of the lace styles that did or may have come over with the lacemaker migrants.

Original imported lace styles with the refugees.

Lace (annotated with thanks to Anna Binnie)

Alencon

Argenton en Alencon

Arras

Chantilly,

Cluny (this is similar to Bedfordshire and probably preceded it)

Cluny en Dentelle du puy (this is similar to Cluny but comes from Southwest France the designs are a bit different)

Lille

Lille en Point de Paris

Valenciennes

(This is lace with the plaited ground, it comes from northern France/Southern Belgium)

**

*Lace*Flemish/Brussels

Applique

Binche

Brabantse

Bruges

Brussels rose point

Drochel

Duchesse (similar to Honiton)

Florence

Guipure de Binche. (Guipure refers to lace style of Binche ditto for Flanders)

Guipuure de Flandres

Lille

Mechelse/Mechelin

Pillow Guipure

Point d'Angleterre a Brides

Point de Brussles

Point de Gaze this is a needle lace

Point de Paris Paris Lace (it come from Belgium)

Rocco

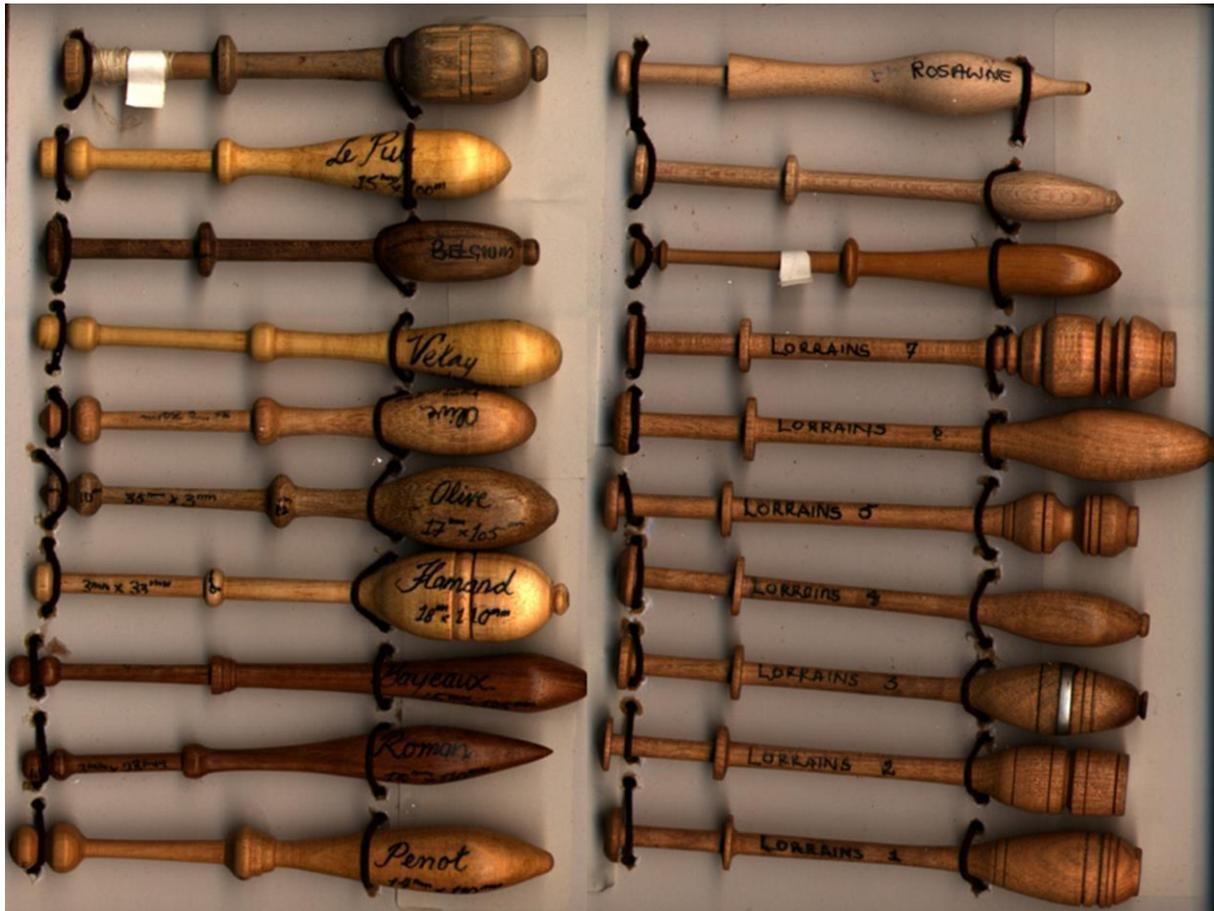
Rosaline

Torchon

Trolle

Flanders

I show below what is a "representative" selection of the types of bobbins these migrants may well have brought with them. I am not saying that they are all appropriate to this article, however, I am saying that the large/thick/ bulbous aspects of many of these bobbins are a feature that had to be changed in the development of the English Spangled bobbin from these approximations of the originals.



Archaeological Finds

(Note. The oldest bobbins excavated are most interesting. Bodil Tornehave 1987 (Danske Frihandskniplinger. Notebene p 17) has a photo in her book of seven bobbins excavated from middens that could be dated from 1570 to 1650. The oldest amongst them is a slim single neck bobbin made of bone that is un-spangled. The rest of the bobbins are unmistakably in the bulbous continental style. However, these are Continental bobbins))

To reinforce this speculation of the development in English lace bobbins, I must now refer you to Carole Morris' (1988) article, "England's Oldest Bobbin?" in which she describes an archaeological find in Gloucester (approximately dated late 1600 or early 1700). It is of a bone bobbin which, whilst shorter and fatter than the traditional East Midland bobbin, is thinner than the generic continental bobbin and has a type of double-neck, which could easily have been the starting point for the development of the now traditional double neck of the East Midland bobbin.

I have to say that the 11mm diameter of this ancient bobbin is still a bit thicker than I would have expected, but if this was the start of an evolutionary process of design, there is no reason why the eventual design should not have started as a thicker bobbin and developed into a

thinner one. Carole Morris also comments on the unusual thickness of this bobbin and this leads us to further speculation that there was probably not enough bone of this thickness around, so they became thinner over time because of lack of thick bone

A line drawing of the Gloucester bobbin. Note single neck

I add to this (for interest only) a similar, this time (2022) antique bobbin.

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



Typical bobbins from the Eye find. (Note, single necks)

The craftsmanship environment.

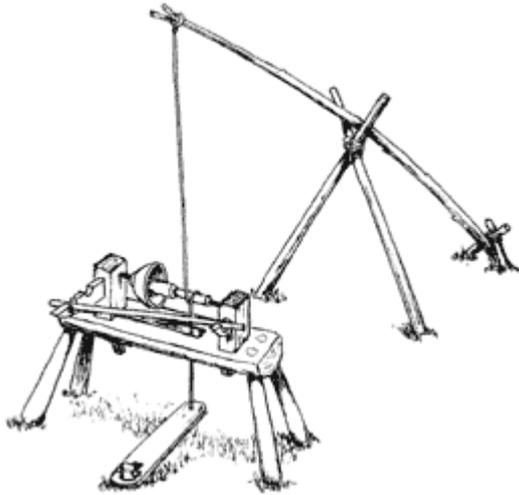
There are two movements that I would like to mention in particular to this article, Firstly the English Industrial Revolution starts around 1760 and the Arts and Crafts Movement starts in about 1860 and lasts until 1920.

Firstly, I would like to look at the possible effect of the industrial revolution on the English lace bobbin. Let me make it clear at the start the development of the heavy industry with the invention of machines; steam and water-driven and the use of iron and steel, has very little impact on what was (and remain) wooden bobbins! What does have an impact are the modern tools that were developed used for carving and turning wood and also the lathes used to turn these cylindrical tools.

Firstly, let us look at the lathes. Instead of being foot pedal-driven and the turning mechanism going both forward and backwards with successive pedals, they are now able to be driven by various means; via steam and pulleys (Unlike used by our bobbin turners) water-driven (quite possibly could have been used by some bobbin turners), but the reader's familiarity of the treadle sewing machine will describe quite adequately the new lathes that our bobbin makers almost certainly used.

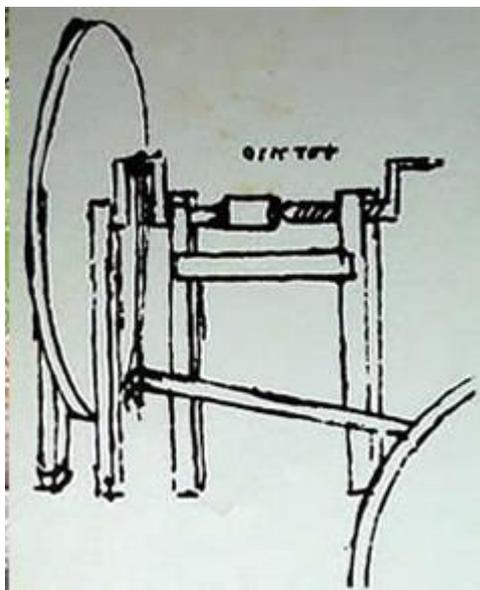
Then we add to this the higher quality tools that the bobbin makers had access to. They were made of harder materials and most importantly could hold their sharpness for much longer.

Here is a drawing of a pole lathe



You can see by the "turn" of the driving rope around the wood how the direction of the revolutions would go opposite for each cycle. The turner could only cut when it was revolving towards him.

The next one to show you is the "handwheel" that was turned to a good speed and then left to slow down. (Though this diagram a further development of a foot mechanism to keep the large wheel turning.)



Perhaps the children or the turner's wife (!) would do the turning for him?

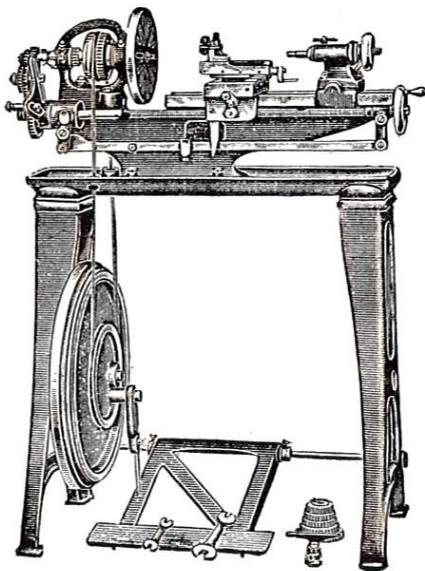
The Water driven Lathe

Of course, this method of driving his lathe would depend on the turners living near a river or suitable stream to turn a wheel which would then be connected with a wheel and belt to turn his lathe.



A water-driven lathe

The final and most enduring design was the treadle lathe, which was propelled like so many of the early sewing machines. They were efficient and with the improved tools could cut and shape a bobbin much quicker and safer than the older lathes



A Treadle Lathe

Finally, just a glimpse at the early woodturning chisels used in antique times.



The Arts and Craft Movement.

This swept through England from about 1860 and was similar to the DIY movement of modern times, "Everyone" was doing art, carving, weaving and just about all the crafts you know about. My wife and I once bought a house in Liverpool (UK) where the previous owner was a shoe shop assistant who made (and played) violins in his attic. This was typical of the general movement, but from this also came skilled craftsmen and artists whose work these days is still much sought after.

In many ways, this movement came too late to be part of the revolution of English Lace bobbins in size shape and spangling, but I do believe that it did have some influence on the decoration of the bobbins over the years.

Recap!

I need to remind readers that I aim to speculate on the change in English (East Midland styles) lace bobbins from saying this:



Copies of a variety of "imported bobbins" from around say the late 1500s, many of the imported designs would differ in some respects to the above examples. However, these serve as generic examples.

To this:

Currently (2022) on sale on eBay (antique)

In general terms, our modern English (East Midland) bobbins have to become double-necked, thinner and have a beaded spangle.

What would be the first development?

From now on I am fully aware that I am speculating and can probably be challenged in many of these speculations as to the development I perceive is laid out. I am not concerned about speculation being challenged because as many ideas we can glean from challenges leads very often to new knowledge and people like me changing my mind!

However, I think the first change would have a practical and immediately beneficial effect on the lace makers and their ease of work. I propose the first development would be the double neck.

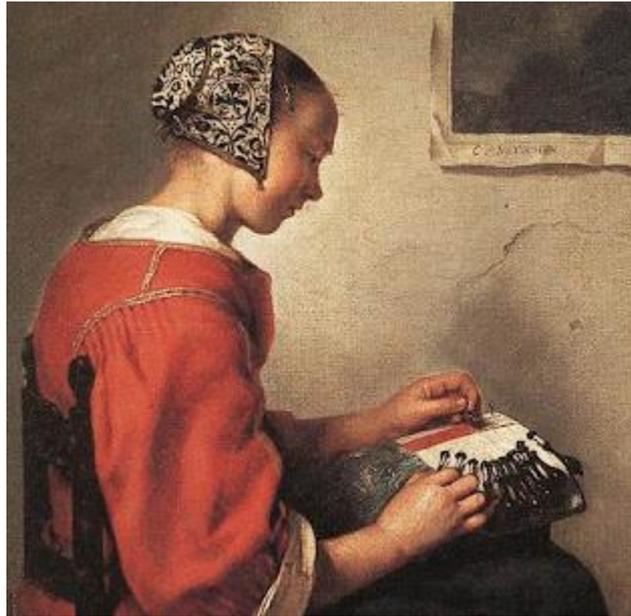
I not only say this because of the work being made easier and less frustrating by the introduction of the double-neck, but also the fact of there being many bobbins in use today that have traditional "Continental" shapes that still have a single neck. Clearly where the double neck was not an aid to their work those concerned rejected the innovation. (i.e. the South Bucks community)



Old Flemish styles say pre-1700.



Modern single neck Flemish Style



I know it is hard to see but this lady's bobbins are single necked and the painting is said to be 1635, it is Continental, true, but so were the migrants to England.

The bobbins become thinner

Perhaps I could be more correct by labelling this section in some way referring to the bulbous end of the continental style bobbin is "removed".

Most of the continental bobbins have quite slim shafts with various designs of a bulbous end. Not all the bobbins are like this especially the bobbins from the northern area of France.

The following picture shows a selection of bobbins from Normandy that appear to have made the transition towards bobbins that begin to look like they have made the transition that I am talking about.

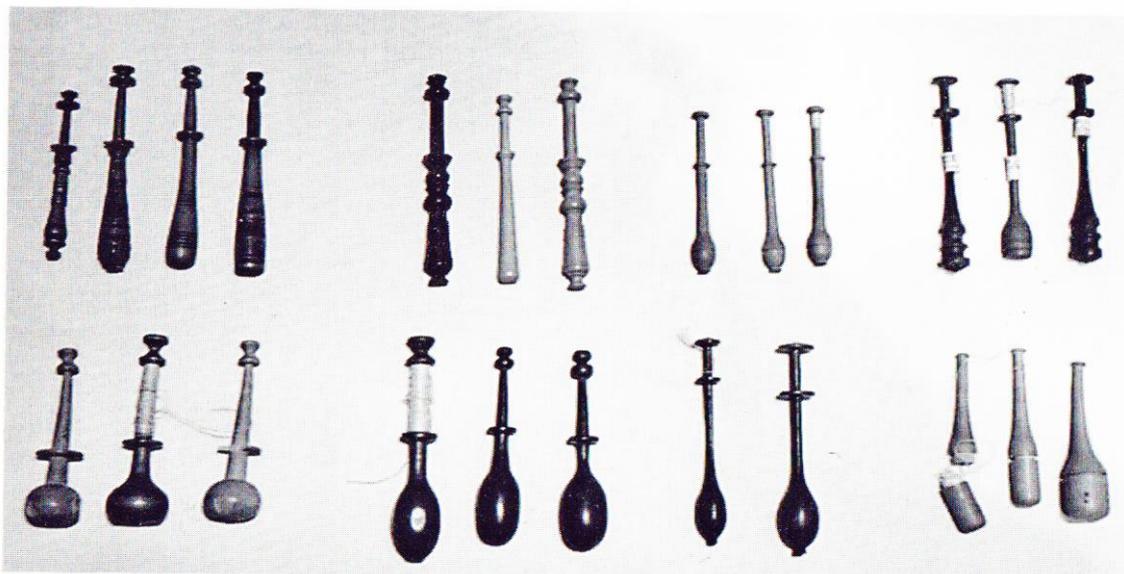
As an aside, I have often thought that instead of the complicated procedure I am trying to explain in this article, the English bobbin makers just copied the Normandy and similar bobbins! I have been in touch with bobbin makers and historians in Normandy and they assure me that the following bobbins are the traditional style that they have used in lacemaking history! I still think that may be a possibility and we "just added" the spangles.



Traditional bobbins from the Normandy area.

When we look at these bobbins, we can see that they have not done away with the weight of the bobbins yet, but they do have gingles, aquafortis, and even a bone bobbin!

Another view of how easy it would have been to slim the bobbins down follows as we review the range of Mechlin bobbins shown in Kant wereldwijd. Lieve Lams



Verzameling Franse klossen, v.l.n.r.(boven) Manche (1-4), Bayeux (5-7), Valenciennes (8-10), Elzas "sonnette" (11-13), (onder) Le Puy (1-3), Mirecourt (4-6), Straatsburg (7-8), Cottier-klosjes (9-11)

Regarding the two pictures above (Mechlin and Normandy) the matter of a double-neck cannot be accepted as an innovation, rather using this design on other bobbins. It seems apparent that the East Midland bobbins could have been simply adapted from these two Continental examples (above).

The addition of spangles

Having slimmed down the bobbins the turner has reduced the weight of bobbins and I can not think it would belong (if not immediately) that the turners got the message that the bobbins needed more weight!

This is what Wright says about spangles:

- Page -168-

The earliest bobbins—called Dumps or Bob-tailed Bobbins—were ordinarily of box-wood, quite small and without spangles; and they were used to make only the finest kinds of Bucks Point, the thread of which would have been broken by heavier or spangled bobbins. To these seem to have succeeded the wooden bobbin with spangles. Almost any close-grained wood was used. Plum

- Page -171-

And yet the Huguenots did not influence in the same way every locality in which they settled. The bobbins of the Aylesbury and Thame district, for example, are squat in form, plain to a wonder, and they have no spangles ; (? South Bucks styles)

Weight is clearly the issue; the simple Dumps were fine for the finer laces but something was needed for those using the heavier threads.

Probably the first experiments were using the style of bobbins that appear to have got the name of "tiny spangles". Many think that these were transitional bobbins between the fully spangled (Nine beads) and the unspangled bobbins.



A set of "Tiny Spangled bobbins from Gertrude Whiting's collection.

I am inclined to agree with that view and it would have been very easy for those wanting more weight to add the extra beads themselves.

It might not all be about weight. as many years ago Arachne members offered many other suggestions for the need for spangles, and the type of pillow being used ranked highly. There is also the introduction of modern threads and the tension that their winding had.

Like many innovations, this development of bobbins could well have multi advantageous these suggestions, but I have sufficient trust in Wright to accept that the initial reason for spangles after the bobbins took on the slim shape was weight.

When did "spangling" occur?

This is indeed a difficult question and perhaps we will never know the exact time. I have always used the date 1750 for either the earliest experiments with the new type of bobbin or possibly its introduction.

In recent years I have taken to looking at artists' depiction of English lacemakers and tried hard to scrutinise their artwork to decide as to what bobbins were being used. Possibly the main difficulty I have found is that there are comparatively few artistic portrayals of English lace makers, secondly making out the details of their depiction of the bobbins is very difficult.

I am happy to stay with that date as an approximation as it seems that Carol Morris's find of the Gloucester bobbin and dating it late 1600 or

early 1700 makes it the first bobbin that has been through the "thinning stage" and as yet has not had the double neck added to it. Also, it is a bone bobbin and they appear to have been rare at times (or we would have found more of them as they are bone and would last longer when "lost" or thrown away.)

I know this is a single bobbin find and I must not read too much into it, and if I am to contradict myself it "should" have a double neck. So perhaps I am wrong in my speculation and the thinning process preceded the double necks. Quite possibly so.

It is not really until we can latch on to the excellent work of the Springetts, that we can begin to have even the semblance of proof regarding when spangling became the norm. Their work studied a few known bobbin makers and was able to offer the Date of Birth of many of them.

Joseph Haskins was born in 1779 and his life's work shows him as possibly the preeminent bobbin maker of his time. Fortunately, the Springetts gave us a very good guide as to how to recognise various bobbin makers and by doing this process we can have some form of proof as to when the spangle trend started. Just look at the two pictures below, both pictures show bobbins by Joseph Haskins, one set it spangled and the others are not, yet we can see that he offered his bobbins spangled or un-spangled.



Let us say that Joseph Haskins was 20 years of age before he gained all his excellent turning and decoration skills. This puts a date of 1799 when bobbins were being offered spangled. Yes, I know that you could shoot holes the size of a cannon ball through this as a date for spangling; we are in a position of not knowing and probably never knowing, the "correct" date and this is a reasonable compromise in the circumstances.

PostScript.

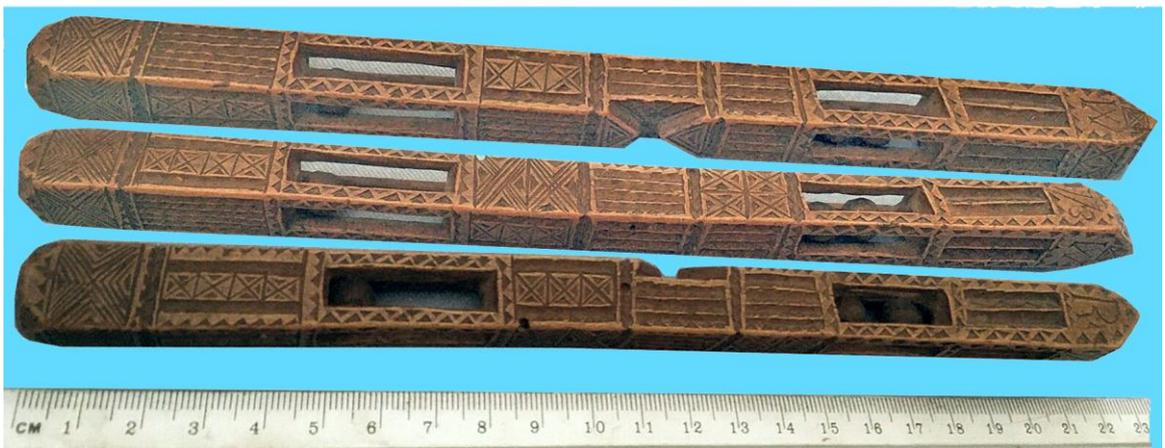
After having written this article my bobbin "background collaborator" sent me the following picture of a knitting sheath. The key features of this hand-carved tool are

1. It is dated, 1773, (I would love to find dated examples of East Midland bobbins that had verifiable dates around this time!) and
2. In a hand-carved form, it has the features that the development of lace bobbins included as time went on. i.e. lantern slots with carved balls in them (Reminiscent of many bobbins and especially mother and babe designs.)
3. The point I want to make is that the decorative ideas were "out there" for bobbin turners to adapt and adopt for lace bobbins.

George 3, wooden knitting sheath, probably from Wales.

Dated, 1773, Inscribed R & W

Two Lantern slots with balls chip carved with triangle, chevrons
Two way slots across handle, Hole for needle at one end



I have now attached a few interesting pictures I found during my research for this article. All pictures or paintings of lacemakers are by English

artists/photographers.



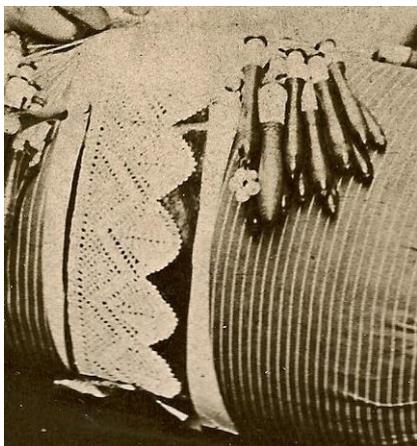
Year - 1816, Dec 7

J. Godwin & Co. 41 Skinner St. Snowhill, Dec 7, 1816

"RACHEL SKINNER, AGED SIXTEEN YEARS,"

Page 455.

J. Godwin & Co. 41 Skinner St. Snowhill, Dec 7, 1816.











Painted by J. Mackay

Engraved by L. Stokes

THE LACE-MAKER.











Bibliography

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

*Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum 1991 Nicky Höwener-Townsend.
Suffolk Lace and the Lace Makers of Eye. Kessingland (GB) 2009,*

*Bodil Tornehave 1987 (Danske) Frihandskniplinger. Notebene p 17)
Kant wereldwijd. Lieve Lams*

Kant wereldwijd. Self published (?) 1994; Lieve Lams