

Towards a Standard Nomenclature for Lace Bobbins.
THE “COW-IN-CALF” – “JACK-IN-THE-BOX” CONFUSION.

INTRODUCTION.

The names of lace bobbins are notoriously difficult to define. History records a great deal about lace making history, its rise and fall, the fashions, the results of census and more than a few Acts of Parliament, but when it comes to the tools of the trade the humble lace bobbin is treated rather scantily.

We have to accept that some of the reasons for this are that we are dealing with a period of history where ordinary people did not travel very much, thus local names remained local, and that we are dealing with what is essentially social history which was not well documented.

It is clear that names of bobbins changed over periods of time and that the same bobbin may well have different names in almost adjoining villages. They certainly often had different names in different counties. What is not clear is why this would be so? Whilst the lace workers did not travel far from their village or town they certainly had visitors from around and about.



Cow-in-Calf and Jack-in-the-box.
Bullock. page 82.

COULD LOCAL BOBBIN NAMES HAVE BEEN SHARED?

First there were the lace buyers, though they did not range far in their dealings with the lace makers certainly traveled extensively to sell the lace that they had bought. It would be reasonable to assume that they met with other lace buyers from different parts of the country. It could just as easily be assumed that they talked only of lace and not lace bobbins, but there was at least a chance for cross-fertilization of bobbin names.

Then there were the lace bobbin makers themselves. Again they were comparatively local, but there were more than one maker in each district and the lacemakers bought from all of them, so again there was a possibility of bobbin names being discussed.

Then there were the fairs where lace bobbins were sold. It appears that the most popular of the bobbins sold at these fair were those called “fairings”, rather gaudy, tinsel bobbins. But the fair people were indeed itinerants and would have had the opportunity to know the names of bobbins from much farther afield.

Perhaps all this did happen as I have speculated but in the end each district kept its special name for a bobbin and those who traveled used the name that was familiar to the lace workers in that district.

One other point that should be raised is that it would appear that many of the writers on historical lace and lace making copied from each other rather than engaging in original research. Thus we can not be fully sure that what the writers say is necessarily accurate.

COW AND CALF OR JACK-IN-THE-BOX.

The above bobbins, along with “church window” bobbins, probably give us the most difficulty with regard to confusing nomenclature. Firstly we should review what the published literature says on these bobbins. Each quote is dealt with in chronological order of publication of the book they are taken from.

Cow and Calf or Jack-in-the-Box.

(Wright) A variety of gold lace bobbin the lower part of which pulls out or unscrews, and releases a miniature bobbin also of wood. (p127)

(Whiting) *cow in calf* miniature bobbin lying inside the windows of the real bobbins. P 220) *Jack in the box*. For making metallic lace. The lower portion of the stick pulls out or can be unscrewed, disclosing inside a small wooden bobbin about which to wind the gold or silver thread. (p 222) [I think Whiting is incorrect here. She is firstly describing a church window bobbin and secondly there is no way that the loose bobbin could have been used to wind metallic lace around]

(Freeman) *cow in calf or jack in the box*. Made in sections with a hollow space inside concealing a miniature bobbin either loose or attached to the foot. Some with single necks. (p33)

(Hopewell) *cow in calf or jack in the box*. Pulls apart to reveal a baby inside, ... [attached to the bottom in the picture the description captions of cow in calf or Jack in the Box]

(Bellerby) *cow-in-calf*. Made in two or three sections of different coloured woods the center is hollow with a miniature bobbin inside. (p21)

(Springett C & D) *cow and calf*. the end section of the hollow shank pulls apart to reveal a miniature bobbin that is attached to the tail part. (p6)

(Bullock) *cow in calf also known as jack in the box*. made in two sections, one fitting tightly into the other. The inside of the shank was hollow and contained a miniature bobbin. Some times the small bobbin was joined on to the base of the top section. if made of brass, the two sections sometimes screwed together. (p87)

(Springett D) *cow and calf*. Outwardly looks quite plain but has a hidden secret. Pulled apart there is a tiny bobbin, the calf, attached to the bobbin tail end (p6)

Again there are differences here as to a) whether the bobbin is attached or loose and b) which of the two types describes what. There is clearly a great deal of confusion over the terms that we use for these bobbins.

One other observation should be made. From the available illustrations it would appear that the only illustrations we have of historical bobbins that we have which shows a loose bobbin inside is a South Bucks “Thumper”. The significance of this is discussed below.

A LOOK AT THE COW AND CALF / JACK IN THE BOX.

Firstly I would like to address the basic terminology of whether it be Cow *in* Calf or cow *and* calf.

These are the alternatives that present:

1. That the cow *in* calf is a representation of a cow being pregnant and as such has the bobbin attached to the part that pulls off.
2. That the cow *and* calf refers to the cow after it has delivered its calf and has a loose bobbin in side the shank.
- 3 That the names were interchangeable.

Now let us look at the bobbins that carry these names. We have the following

1. An East midland bobbin that has a hollow shank and a *loose* bobbin inside it.
2. An East midland bobbin that has a fixed bobbin attached to the *top* pull out portion.
3. An East midland bobbin that has a fixed bobbin attached to the *bottom* pull out portion
4. A South Bucks “thumper” that has a *loose* bobbin inside the shank.

SOME PROPOSED ALTERNATIVE DESCRIPTIONS

Firstly, it is clear that these bobbin shanks are hollow and that this hollow can not be seen from the outside of the bobbin (As opposed to church Windows that can be observed externally) There fore we can say that these bobbins have “*a hollow shank that is not visible from external examination*”.

We can also say that they are made from *wood or brass*.

It is almost certain that those made of wood are made in a *sectioned* manner, i.e. two contrasting colours of wood are used.

The above are common to both types of bobbins.

But now we come to the difficult part, what names do we give to the remaining constructional features of these two types of bobbins?

For the cow *and/in* calf I propose to use the “*placental model*”, it seems to me that this is a model that could easily be understood by lace makers and would make some sense to the lacemakers. Therefore we would call a bobbin that had the calf fixed to the pull out part would be the *pregnant cow and thus called cow **in** calf* and the bobbin that had the *loose calf inside would be called the cow **and** calf*.

As for the Jack in the Box, I would like to stick my neck out and apply this to *the South Bucks Thumper* that has the top pull out portion and the loose bobbin.

My reason, as indeed are all the propositions in this article, are purely *speculative*. South Bucks bobbins are different to East Midland bobbins and have very different names, even when the same bobbin is used in areas other than the South Bucks region. The South Bucks bobbins were made in a small area in the Cotswolds, quite far enough away from the East Midland areas to have a degree of isolation. Therefore I think it is quite reasonable for this bobbin to have a distinct name.

Frankly the strongest argument is that the two names are interchangeable. However, whilst history may present possible confusion there is no need for us to continue this confusion and we should agree on a standard nomenclature for these bobbins, whilst at the same time acknowledging the historical derivations and difficulties..



Jack In the Box



Top: Cow and calf
Below Jack in the Box



South Bucks Bobbins
Both are Jack In the Box

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I look forward to your comments on this speculation
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