

# THE GHOSTS AND SMUGGLERS OF EAST DEVON

(of course there is a little bit about bobbins too!) v2

By Brian Lemin October 2010

## **Introduction.**

The payment of lace makers by the “truck” system (i.e. payment in kind or only from the dealers shop) was not an encouraging method of payment, and may have been the reason for a number of lace makers giving up, especially when the price for lace was low.

There is a story of one young girl that had her heart set on a special winter dress. Like all young girls she pictured it in a specific colour that would suit her. It is reported how disappointed the girl was when she was *“eventually paid in a length of dull drab or brown, which no entreaties could change to blue or red”*.

The point of this story is to tell you that on Saturday it was pay day in Branscombe and it involved quite a walk for the lace makers. It is said that by the time all the payments had been made that many had a rough walk home and late at night, laden with provisions received in payment for their work.

## **Ghosts!**

It was often past 11 o’clock at night when the shop eventually closed and it took a considerable amount of courage to walk alone up those narrow, high hedged, dark Devon lanes. The roads were rough, perhaps muddy and every little sound would be amplified in the ears of a young girl walking home alone as each lane had its ghost story.

One young lady was badly frightened by a noise the other side of the hedge. She was sure that the noise of movement was accompanied by a person breathing as though out of breathe. She screamed, she ran, she tore up the lane hoping her ankles would hold out on the rough rocks that stuck up in the ruts.

At last she got home, bursting through the unlocked door and collapsing on to a hairy divan. Though the commotion she caused was great. No one woke up. After gaining her composure she undressed put on her nightdress and cap and crept into the bed she shared with her sister. Mornings started early, and she was up with the rest of them and told her family of the events of the night before. Her father took a long draft from his mug of tea and said *“Get-on-with’yer maid, yer silly ol’goat, that would have bi’n old Joe the poacher laying his traps”*. With that, he got up, walked out and the subject was never spoken of again; that is until..... a report was given to a Catholic Priest and a Nonconformist minister about the *“evil one”* haunting the lanes and byways in the form of a terrible *“Black Rabbit”*.

That the two opposed religious officers came together is a miracle in itself, but probably adds weight to the report of the devil being in the area. It appears that together they held a service to *“exorcise the Devil out of Bovey Lane”*. Apparently it was successful as the devil was observed to have *“fallen into Branscombe Bay in a ball of fire”* one wild night following the exorcism.

### **The Smugglers.**

Lace was a very profitable contraband item, and Beer being on the sea, a fishing village, and a place of natural caves; not to mention a center for lace making, was very well positioned for smuggling.

Jack Rattenbury and his ruffian crew were well known “gentlemen” who engaged in smuggling. The nature of their business being secret required a great deal of silent walking, carrying of boxes and making sure that the police did not see them. Of course they did not want anyone around when they were working and it is said that they found it “*very convenient*” to add to the tales of horror in the dark that young maidens were inclined to talk about.

There were matters of politics too as in the past the Duke of Monmouth held his secret councils in Bovey house and found it useful to keep curious folk in their beds at hours when their company was not required.

Tales are told by even those of today, that the lace makers did from time to time; take their lace making into those caves in the cliffs of Beer. When I was there I made specific enquiries about that story and got no real confirmation of it. Mind you it is a great story to have about your area. My enquiries were greeted with “knowing smiles” and I interpreted them in my own way.

### **Conclusion.**

By now you will be wondering why I am telling you stories about smugglers, ghosts and silly young girls (or were they?) The story I have told you above has a fair bit of truth in it but I do admit to stretching the facts to try and make a good story. I came to this story via an old book on Devon Lace and I was immediately drawn to my love of East Devon bobbins. There are two of them that I have, for the want of no other description available, labeled as “GHOSTS”. When I read this I decided that my bobbins would make a good illustration to that old writers’ sketchy story. So, here they are. What do you think?



GHOSTs!

