

LACE BOBBIN FASHIONS Dec 2010

A short, "sort of serious" note by Brian Lemin. Nov 2010

It should be seen as just another contribution to the conundrum of just when and why East Midland bobbins became spangled.

Introduction:

Many of you will know that, in the past I have proposed a broad date for the introduction of spangling to lace bobbins. I based this purely on what I was seeing in my bobbin studies. I also had to take into account the styles of lace being made around that time, and knowledgeable people in that area of lace history, questioned my assumptions. Quite rightly too, as any proposal does not stand up without the rigor of academic challenge.

Was I wrong?

I could well be wrong as of now I have not found any documented evidence of when such an event took place, and of necessity it was over a period of time, not just a particular date.

It was while I was looking at the bobbins that most lace makers are using today that a thought passed through my head that there may well have been fashions in the bobbin world just as we have fashions in our everyday life.

What I saw in the modern bobbins was a clear fashion for thin bobbins. In my usual jocular manner I decided that, compared to antique bobbins the modern bobbins were anorexic. I say this with due respect for a serious illness that many are suffering from; so please do not label me as being unsympathetic.

Sure there are some small thin bobbins in the antique world but for the most part they are around 6 mm to 8 mm in diameter, whereas most of our modern bobbins are about 5 mm in diameter. Of course they really beautifully decorated Haskins bobbins are very thick, it was the only way he could manage to get all that beautiful, intricate turning and decoration on to the bobbin.

In the recent correspondence on the list about your favourite bobbin makers, the most frequent comment I picked up was "they are so smooth". Yet I look at my bobbin collection, (of course I like the decorated ones) they are far from smooth. They have pewter inlays, drilled dots, spiral inscriptions, cages for baby bobbins to go inside.

So I began to think that instead of just thinking that spangling was due to a design of pillow, the tension of the thread, the newly introduced mechanically spun thread and the many other variations that I have pondered upon for years, I decide that I would take the "fashion" approach.

Is there a time line of bobbin fashions?

Big question. I can tease myself by saying "yes there is", but proving it will be very difficult. I love bobbins, for the most part my study of them and writing about them is plain fun. Do not get me wrong I get totally fed up with them from time to time and do nothing for months on end until one of my bobbin friends drops be an email version of "Kicking my bum" and telling

me to “pull my finger out”. ☺ So do you mind if I have a bit of fun trying to sort out the time line of bobbin fashions?

Let us start with a bit of history, and then drop it quickly. We are mostly in agreement that the lace industry migrated here (England) from the continent via French, Belgium/ Flemish lace makers. There are some that just might challenge that and say that a few entrepreneurial English people saw that there was money to be made in lace and actually imported the people and the skills to England. (Ha! That will get us arguing around the lace pillow next week!) The archeologists have been finding “continental type” bobbins in England over the years. For the most part they are obviously from Northern France and Flanders (is that the right word?) Let us look at what is possibly the oldest bobbin found in England.



The picture above has a wooden version of the oldest bone bobbin found in England. It is dated early 1700s. The top bobbin would approximate early to mid 1800s I am guessing. I love that picture as the top bobbin was clearly a non spangled bobbin to start with... then the fashion changed?

What happens next might get me in trouble with the lace making historians, but it would seem that regional England started to make their individual styles of lace. Honiton, the center of the East Devon lace industry; Downton, geographically close to Devon. Then Malmsbury with their long straight sticks that perhaps has a Devon look about them; but what happened in the East Midlands?

Let's look at the pictures.

Well to be more accurate I will tell you what we see in the pictures as I do not have copyright to publish those that I have looked at.

What I see is that spangled bobbins are well and truly in vogue by the mid 1800s. In Diana Smith's new book *East Midland Lace Makers in Photographs* (Self published, see eBay) there is an undated picture of a lace maker with both spangled and unspangled bobbins on her pillow.

What is fascinating about this picture is that, as far as I can see, the mix of bobbins on her pillow almost identically fit my proposal that the changeover to spangled happened around the time of The Haskins family business, in particular possibly Joseph Haskins.



This picture shows a number of makers offering undrilled, unstapled bobbins for use on the pillow.

Before I move towards making (with great difficulty) some conclusions I would like to introduce you to another genre (?) of bobbins. I have been calling them "Transitional" bobbins. My reason for this is that they are wonderfully turned bobbins, well proportioned and all seem to have just the one (perhaps two) beads as spangles.



Both single and double heads, spangled and unspangled. These bobbins can be found in antique lots quite regularly. One well known lace maker told me of her absolute joy to unpack a box of lace gear in a museum and found bag of these wonderful, pretty bobbins all with the tiny spangle on it.

To me these epitomize transition.

1. Transition from the continental single head to the double head
2. The fashion of various decorations. On these we see decorative turning, aqua fortis staining and pyrography.
3. The movement to spangling, and in these transitional bobbins, just the small spangles as opposed the later fashion of full "9" bead spangles.

If you look at them, they are possibly made by the mid 1800 makers in the East Midlands.

The next move is towards them becoming what we recognize as the traditional East Midland spangled bobbin, and here are the pictures to go with that proposal.



In the two pictures above we see almost identical bobbin both spangled and unspangled. The method is drilled and stapled.

Conclusion.

How did all this happen? I think I have shown that it did happen. As I started this little essay, I am suggesting that it was fashion rather than “technical” need because of lace, pillows, machine made thread and the like. I know that there must be something technical that had to allow this fashion to be adopted.

Bear with me while I dream a bit about this transition. At this moment I am puzzling just how long such a transitional period may have taken. Quite a longish time I am thinking.

I give you full permission to smile at me or even guffaw with laughing, but this is my scenario.....

When everyone made lace with the same old European bobbins there was no real bobbin fashion or need to be different, but then different types of lace began to come on the scene and also very creative lace bobbin makers were around who had to make a living.

The bobbins they were offering were slimmer and very much prettier, such that any lady would love to be the first to own one of these “new fangled” bobbins.

The well proportioned and nicely turned “transitional bobbins” were taken up first and the small single bead or double bead spangle was found to enhance their looks and not hamper the lace making operation.

The pillows were becoming interesting and individuals had a little bit of control over their lace making personality.

The bobbin makers were clearly on to a good thing and began to pretty up their bobbins in amazing ways. Not only did that but they personalized them with their name, a favorite motto, a memory of a mother and on and on. One of the least “technically accomplished” bobbin makers started a line of hanging bobbin memorabilia, and the ladies loved the thrill of having one of those on her pillow. I am sure he made a lot of money with that line of bobbins!

If you could not afford one of the new super bobbins, then you could personalize your bobbins by making a pretty or very different kind of spangle, by putting a coin or an ornament on it. I do not want to suggest that the lady lace makers would be competitive in having the “best” pillow in the village, but it would not surprise me in the least! The saucy, “I love the boys” or “Kiss me quick” would have brought great excitement to the owner, especially if it were a gift from the girl’s boyfriend.

OK, I will stop there but with one last comment. I do not think that things have changed much. When I am with a group of lace makers I certainly look to see who has the “best” pillow! 😊 (I do not reveal my decision to anyone) To some it does not matter what or whose bobbins they have on their pillow, to others I think it does.

We have gone through many phases of fashion in bobbins, the older “continental” styles, thin and simple, decoratively turned, painted with flowers, painted with animals; I am sure you could all add to these many fashions.

Long may they live and may the bobbin fashions bring joy to you and delight to your pillows.

I remain your crazy bobbin “thinker”. 😊

Brian