

TWO UNUSUAL EAST DEVON LACE BOBBINS.

Brian Lemin Feb 2011

INTRODUCTION.

I suppose that when I first saw these bobbins I registered "total surprise". I photographed them from the collections generous collectors in Devon many years ago and had no real idea what to do with them. At the moment I seem to have got myself in the position to be writing about unusual bobbins and those articles will be appearing soon on "weavers". I just thought it would be a good idea to share these two bobbins with you.

THE WEDDING TOAST

First of all imagine that you saw this as you were looking through a box of bobbins.



The first thing I noticed was the clay pipe. I remembered them well from my childhood, then the sailor's trousers. I was fascinated already. So I took a closer look. Unusually I am now going to tell you to scroll down and see what I discovered.

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Well this is what I discovered.



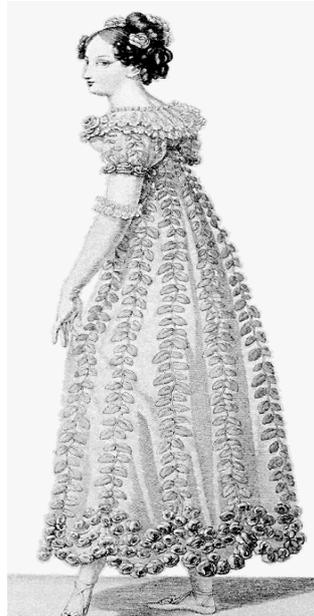
I can't tell you what to see, but welcome to the wedding! OR... could it be the first night back from a trip to sea? I leave that to you. I am for the wedding.

THE LETTERING

East Devon bobbins have a very high quality of lettering. If you want to compare it to the lettering on East Midland bobbins, these decorators get a "ten". I suppose it is because most East Midland lettering is done with multiple drill holes forming each letter, the East Devon bobbin decorators are very deft at the use of the "jack knife/ Penknife". What we see here is "DRINK POLL"

THE LADY

The lady's dress is most colorful and I have found it very hard to date it. Perhaps this comes closest. I could suggest that it would have been self made, but none-the-less quite attractive.



Alas, I doubt the lady on the bobbin could afford this dress but the style seems reasonably 1820's from what I could discover.

It is the unfashionable depiction of the lady's hair that bothers me, on bobbins, we do see ladies hair depicted rather spiky from time to time on bobbins, unless you represent certain virtues or possibly a mermaid.

The "champagne" glasses date quite well, in fact I seem to remember that shape being used for champagne in my younger days. (!) However, did you know...

As the story goes, King Louis XV was so enchanted by the shapeliness of his mistress' bosom (Madam Pompadour) that he engaged his glass makers to mould champagne glasses around her breasts... which supposedly is what owes to the 'coupe style' glasses shape.

[That has nothing to do with the bobbin but just my, trivia for the day.☺]

Her shoes look neat and overall the sailor seems to be a lucky man.

THE SAILOR

He is every bit a stereotype of a sailor. I recognized him from his striped trousers but I was almost wrong, as enquires sought at a maritime museum told me that that the official uniform of the sailor was never the striped trousers! However, money was short and in earlier days (I never did get a date) the pursers used their money as wisely as they could and this cheap material that looks like mattress ticking to me was purchased and the trousers were made from it.

He has a typical Jack Tar hat too. *In the days before modern materials, seafarers used tar to protect themselves and their belongings from the elements. Sailors became known as Jack Tars because of their clever use of this natural gooey substance to waterproof things. The name Tar, in this context, dates back to the 17th century and is short for 'tarpaulin' which in those days meant a seaman. In a bid to keep dry, mariners slapped tar on hats, capes, coats and even sea chests – anywhere where the ever-restless sea, spume and driving rain were likely to penetrate.*



A variety of hats worn by early seamen.

The next stereotypical item he has is a clay pipe.



A variety of clay pipes

Again I show my age by remembering, just a few, men who smoked clay pipes.

Conventional wisdom, at least that to be found in the pages of the Encyclopedia Britannica,, credits the introduction of the tobacco pipe to Europe to "Ralph Lane, first governor of Virginia, who in 1586 brought an Indian pipe to Sir Walter Raleigh and taught the courtier how to use it."

Smoking a pipe was said to be comforting to the sailormen who spent many long months, even years away from home.

CONCLUSION

Quite unique bobbin though I understand that Exeter University Museum might have a Mermaid bobbin that could have some connection to this one.

We still have not decided what the celebration is? The sailor is proposing the toast. The inscription on the bottom of the bobbin is a date of June. I would like to think that it is a wedding celebration, but then I am a sucker for romanticism.

Let us now move on to the next bobbin

THE STEAM ENGINE



This is inscribed 1820; SH and has further initials FAN.

This has been quite a puzzle for me over the years, and after much consultation with steam engine and train enthusiasts we have come to no conclusion at all.

What is clear is that it is a steam engine; after that we begin to speculate. Of course we know that bobbin decorators can be far from accurate in spelling and depiction. In fact, other than a few illustrations, most East Devon bobbin decorations are graphic depictions rather than **artist's** illustrations. It is therefore reasonable to assume that this steam engine is the same.

A TRAIN?

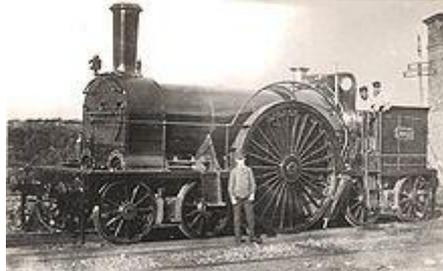
What might make us think it could be a train? Firstly there looks as though it is on rails. The alternative is that it is an agricultural steam engine, in which case it would not be on rails but in a "field". So is this depiction not of rails but marking a level of a field or lane? There are not two rails in evidence.

Then there is the apparent depiction of bumpers and or couplings and in an agricultural engine these would be less apparent.

There seems to be, what in our modern eyes could be called a cab or a place where people (the driver) would be. Agricultural engines often do have a "roof" but not an enclosed cab.

The Honiton Railway station opened in 1860 the Exeter station opened in 1854.

Here is train in Exeter dated 1876



This is a very different machine to that depicted on the bobbin.

AN AGRICULTURAL STEAM ENGINE?

Of all the myriad of decorations on East Devon bobbins, there is a distinct absence of anything agricultural. By that I mean no farm animals, corn storks, scythes, in fact almost anything to do with farm work. Whilst a lot of the lace industry was indeed coastal it was not confined to that area and the lace making areas included a lot of land put over to farming. So why, with such a unique depiction as this would they "break this rule" (if it ever was a rule)

Most agricultural steam engines have belts of some kind in evidence, but not on this machine.

We have also investigated the issue of it being a pump of some kind and whilst this is not out of the question to our modern eye, we would not have thought it would have been a priority in a non mining community. A lot of steam engines were used as pumps in mines.



A Horse drawn steam tractor



A steam Tractor (model)

Examples of larger ones can be found but they get less and less like the bobbin picture.



CONCLUSION

I need to say that of my enquiries to various "steam engine" organizations and enthusiasts cannot come up with an answer, who am I to venture an opinion?

However, venture it I will and suggest that it is some kind of agricultural steam engine. I say this mostly because it does not seem to fit in with any railway engines of this time; and those are very well documented.

FINALLY

These are two unique East Midland Lace bobbins, both of which, in their own way, are depicting portions of social history. They are somewhat opposite in their approach as one shows a wonderful happy party which a sailor and his "wife" are enjoying, the other marks the introduction of machines into an aspect of their work.

They are most enjoyable bobbins and ones which stretch our imagination in different directions; but that is the joy of bobbin collecting.

As always your feedback and contributions to this article is appreciated. It could be that you too may have contact with experts that can offer their opinion. They will be welcome.