

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR ON YOUR DECORATED HONITON BOBBINS?

Brian Lemin

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*Is it a street gas lamp or a flower?*

### **Introduction:**

This is really the first article resulting in my quest to raise the profile and record the history and beauty of East Devon and Downton Bobbins. This article concentrates on the Honiton bobbins as my recording of Downton's is still very incomplete (Honiton's too come to that!)

The only book that has any detailed information about these bobbins is H J Yallop, the History of the Honiton Lace Industry. He deals with bobbins only in a very general manner, but he does have 4 full pages of drawn illustrations and divided into sections. These are Triangles, Bricks, Lines, Diamonds, Hearts, Foliage and flowers, Living creatures, Human Artefacts, Ships, and finally Humans and others. That gives you plenty to look at!

His is an excellent start in organizing the main styles of decoration on Honiton bobbins, but what I have discovered so far in this little piece of research is that owners or collectors are not sure of what they see on their bobbins.

The best example of this is the discovery of England's oldest dated bobbin in the Fairlynch Museum. It had been in the museum for a long time and it took a guy from Australia to enable them to realize what they had! I am willing to bet they have lots of other interesting bobbins there too. The truth is that Honiton bobbin decoration is so encompassing and often appears so abstract a design that people miss it or indeed dismiss, important historical or artistic messages on their bobbins. People often see them as pretty, artistic objects that they love to look at or use on their pillow. Fair enough.



*A Honiton Trolley dated 1662*

It is ironic that my wife for some 59 years has monthly, weekly, daily, told me to "look properly" as I open the fridge or a cupboard and fail to see an object that is looking me straight between the eyes! Now I am extolling you to take a good look at your bobbins. Smile!

### **Your first impression.**



*A mix of Honiton Bobbins*

This might well be a field of red and black triangles diamond, hearts flowers, even bricks, all put together in such a pleasing manner. They are lovely to look at. However, if you look again you may see a bird somewhat hidden in the foliage, a laughing sun peering through the bushes, then you might see an anchor, if so, then look for a fish, or perhaps a fishing net? Now we are on a nautical note you might even see a mermaid...

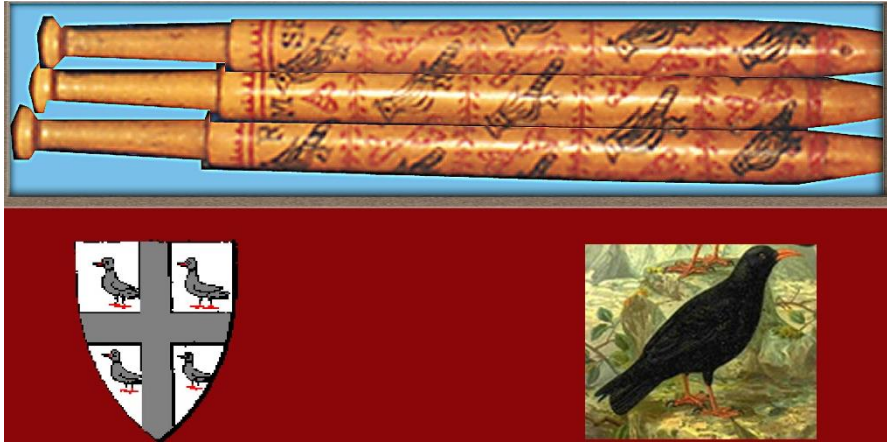
Is it a bobbin decorated like a brick wall? Does it have many or few concentric and coloured circles? (If so, this bobbin may be from Branscombe)

Did you see the date? That is mostly a panel at the top of the shaft. Does it have initials? Perhaps they are of the giver and the receiver or perhaps the initials of the maker (who may also be the giver?) You might also find a date in other places on the shaft.

I should pause a moment because you may have a trolley bobbin that you are looking at. It is larger than the ordinary bobbin, vaguely similarly

decorated but the date on this bobbin almost certainly the date that it was made. At the moment the oldest is 1662, so do check to see if you have an older bobbin!

## **Birds.**



### *Choughs*

What adorable creatures. They may be a chough (often) as these are a popular and quite common West Country bird, but it could be a pheasant, a sparrow, a peacock. If you find a lot of birds on your bobbins you could make a separate "bird book" of bobbins, like "look at my collection of birds on bobbins" and proudly display them. (Like being a stamp collector really!) Smile.

## **Anchors**



### *Fouled anchor and seaweed*

If you are a really keen "anchor" historian you can eventually almost get examples of the full history of anchors. It's a bit like collecting cards from the supermarket. I will swap you this anchor for that anchor! *I have just stopped writing to look at my anchors and I might have to retract the term, "full history", but there are a lot of them to collect.*

## **Hearts**



*Heart, arrow, and look the lower part of a ship!*

For all you Valentine fans there are so many hearts around they could keep you going with gifts for a long time. You won't like what I call some of them. I have "hairy" hearts broken hearts and though I do not have an example, there are cupid arrow hearts to be found.

### **Diamonds.**



*A diamond over an anchor*

Don't get excited, I find them less than artistic and very few would like nice as personal adornment. Some have a shaded frame around them others look more like a crucifix than a diamond.

### **Flora and foliage.**



*Variety of Flora*

For all you gardeners out there you can have a field day trying to identify the herbs, the grasses, the twiglets and the flowers. It is good to let your imagination loose when looking at these groups. I am not a gardener but I can identify a thistle, a sunflower and a pot plant (of some kind).

### **Ships**



*This is the Vioktoria*

Being a West countryman who still has a Devon accent despite living in Australia longer than in England, these are the apple of my eye "M'eDeers". I could go on all day about these but one or two of you(!) might know about "The Asp" that Jane Austin writes about, in her novel Persuasion. ... the ladies' pore over it, with the professed view of finding out the ships which Captain Wentworth had commanded. ... *"Never was a better sloop than the Asp in her day"* Yes, it is there on a Honiton bobbin.

Sadly, I have researched it and there are a number of ships called The Asp around that time; but I enjoy a love story and as far as I am concerned, "my" Asp, is "The" Asp. Never let the facts get in the way of a fine feeling! There are fishing boats, trawlers with their trawling net. Fish and lobsters abound, so you can have a feed too.

**Humans**



*Faith Hope and Charity. You can also find Peace on some bobbins*

Among the humans are the figures of three ladies "Faith Hope and Charity", the three virtues. That is a set worth collecting. I always thought I would like to meet a mermaid, well in some way I have but they are not portrayed as gorgeous on bobbins as in fairy stories.

How about a wedding? A booze-up (Of course not you), they are all there.



*Wedding Toast*

## Conclusion

Then there are bricks. They abound in all sorts of configurations, sometimes they cover the whole bobbin. I did not mean to be rude about bricks or some of the designs because, in the artistic view the decorators which are carved and coloured, they all seem to come together in a most pleasing and sometimes enchanting manner on a decorated Honiton bobbin.

I have not mentioned the inscribed bobbins, mostly because I have very few to look at and study (well you all know I am out begging for these!) They reflect the thoughts of the day, the events of the time and also have a fair smattering of religious sayings which fit into the social society of that time.

One final thing, we (I) have no idea who or where these bobbins were made or decorated so, if in your idle reading you come across a clue please drop me a line.



This has been a very light-hearted account of "some" of the things you can find on these wonderful tools. I hope this chat will encourage you to view these bobbins in a new light, not to compare them to the East Midland bobbins, they are the turners and lapidaries delight, the Honiton bobbins are the artists delight and a history book of the times.

Enjoy.

Brian