

NON-CARVED HONITON BOBBIN DECORATION.

Brian Lemin Nov 2019

This is a contribution to the East Devon and Downton bobbin project.

Introduction.

The typical Honiton lace bobbin that is decorated uses a carving technique known as "Chip carving". This is done with a clasp knife (Jack-knife/ pocket knife) tool that most men carried in their pockets for long periods of history. For example, I always carried one from the age of about 7, all we boys had one and used it for so many things in our play activities (outdoors) or just sharpened our pencils.

In modern times there has developed a wonderful artistic activity that skilled artists paint Honiton bobbins, and they are glorious to behold. How I wish I had the talent; but I am delighted that the plain Honiton bobbins have been taken and decorated in a modern fashion.

Though I do not have a date to put to the bobbins that I am going to talk about, there are examples of at least one artist using a brush or pen, ink or dye, even perhaps aqua fortis, to "paint" bobbins.

Along with painting, there is at least one example of excellent brushwork being applied to a Honiton bobbin. We have a date for that example.

Non-Carved? Perhaps another category?

As part of this project, I am endeavouring to develop a classification system or names for groups of bobbin decoration that are used on Honiton bobbins. Some are easy to name other categories are more difficult. I do not want to call them "painted" as this will not differentiate them from modern painted bobbins. I started by using the word "artistic" decoration, but this did not truly describe the talents of the decorator, so until I am offered a better description (you all are welcome to contact me with your suggestions) I am calling them "non-carved" decorations. I think that this clearly delineates them from the main method of decoration.



Non carved Honiton bobbin decoration (b)

What was the artists' medium?

The decorator either used a "pen" (quill?) or a brush to apply the colour to the bobbin.

The fact that the colours are either black or red makes me think that the medium used was a mixture of the red and black "sealing wax" that they used to rub into their carved decorations. Instead of having it dissolved to a paste they added more solvent to make it liquid. I should add that it is possible that they used a somewhat diluted aqua fortis for the dark ("black") colour.

The artistic motif the artist used was like a spine that wandered down the shaft and was then decorated with rather like a large feather. I seem to remember the term calamus for the firm spine of the feather then, the smaller pieces are barbs then the feathery stuff is the rachis. (wow, I dragged that back a number of years!) On these bobbins, I think we can only define the calamus and barbs.

Do we know who the artists are?

As always when I ask a question I do not know the answer. It is pretty clear that it was only one person who was practising this particular style. When I say this it opens the way for an individual or family member to take a bobbin and decorate it. In all English lace bobbins, there is a tradition of making, carving and decorating bobbins by individuals. I have written elsewhere about the Valentines day tradition of Devon boys making bobbins for their sweethearts.

I do know that the decorator used commercial bobbins because the person used bobbins from two different makers. We can deduce this from the necks and the heads and I have illustrated them in the two groups by bobbin maker.

Finally, I should say that the first bobbin of this kind that I came across was owned by a distant family member by marriage. I remember asking who the artist was or where she got the bobbins. Her reply was that she did not know but I felt she was being a bit cagey! The good lady has passed on now so I can't ask there the question again. BTW though we met in Plymouth for the express purpose of photographing her bobbins she actually lived near Exeter.



Ebony? Ebonising? And red paint!

For many years the following bobbin I will be writing about was my clear favourite. I had hoped I would find another like it as I continued to collect, but nothing has passed through my hands or camera lens.

I need to start with the question as to what are the black bobbins made from. Are they really ebony? Or, are they ebonised wood.

If I ever find a warm, poor condition, black bobbin I will saw it in half and find out! As yet that has not been my experience.

As a woodturner, I can tell you that the process of ebonising wood can be very effective. Basically, the woodworker dissolves steel wool in vinegar over a week or two, strains it and soaks or paints the wood in the solution. If you apply a lot or soak it a lot, then the wood goes black and can take a polish very well. I suspect that the woodworkers of that time would be ebonising their bobbins. (Guess is a word I use a lot in reporting to their project, it emphasises why I am studying these bobbins which is because we know almost "nothing" about them. We do not know who made the bobbins nor who or where they were decorated, but each little bit helps)



All I can say about this bobbin is that so far it seems to be a one-off. Then I can say that the printing and little bit of artwork is exquisite. I think also that the red colouring is paint of some kind as opposed to dissolved wax. It just looks like it. Tell me if I am wrong... please.

I do have a recent picture of a pair of bobbins that has "ebony" stamped on one of them. I suspect these are not antique bobbins.



This ebony bobbin is stamped BLACK



Black necks and possibly a partially ebonised shaft of the top bobbin?

Conclusion.

I have demonstrated just two bobbin decorators who were courageous enough to depart from the usual method of decoration to bring a different style to the look of Honiton lace bobbins; both approaches are effective and very unique compared to the genre applied to the majority of Honiton lace bobbins.

I nearly always end with an appeal to my readers to remember me when they come across interested or historical things about the bobbins of the East Midland and Downton. I am always pleased to learn from you.