

# Thieving Rascals or Desperately Poor?

**A very amateur historical review of lace stealing in England.**

Brian Lemin. November 2021.

## **Introduction.**

I think I will write this to my fellow members of Arachne Lace as it is a topic well out of my field of expertise and written for fun and for my own education, also writing to friends I can be less formal. Of course, I have to start with my inanimate *Lace bobbin* friends and tell you that of all the inscriptions I have read on bobbins, and quite a lot of them are religious, I have never found one that says "Thou shalt not steal". Having scoured the net for most of yesterday (I have a cold and got bored stiff!) I have discovered that many lace makers have stolen and indeed have been responsible for some acts of cruelty.

## **Why was I searching the net?**

The fact is that I was clutching at straws and seeing if I could find anything about the very (very) rare "Transport to Botany Bay" bobbin. We know that the Bradford Museum has one and over the years I have heard many rumours about where another could be. The strongest rumour is that there is one of these bobbins is in a private collection of a person who once lived in England and moved to Ireland, (That is all I know despite asking many questions of many people) Quite a dead end.

During all these searches I realized that there was quite a number of lacemaker felons and other people too who thought that stealing lace was a profitable activity (Of course they got caught and that was the end of their profit!)

Over my many years of interest in lace bobbins I have always taken a secondary interest in social history and have read many of the Parliamentary reports about the lace industry and lace makers. Most of it is very saddening as they report on the periods of history when lace makers were very poor and, in many cases, extremely poor. So poor in fact my humanity says to myself, "no wonder they stole". I do need to repeat that the thieves I have discovered have included non-lace makers who stole lace.

## **"Lace in Context"**

A few years ago, two academic authors burst into lacemaking genre with the title of their project that rang so many bells of truth and

reasonableness. Their project was fully titled, "*By the Poor, For the Rich: Lace in Context*" I just saw that title and really wished that it had come from one of my articles because it says everything that I believe on this broad topic, in one phrase.

The result of some 5 years or so work has been an amazing collection of articles about all aspects of lacemakers and social history. Whilst their project has technically ended, they are still contributing to it out of their own interest. I would be failing in my duty to you arachnids who are interested in social history to provide you with a link to their web page, please explore it, there are a plenty of specialist topics for you to dip into and I will be doing a bit "stealing" myself from their work in a couple of places! Smile.

Here is the link to their project.

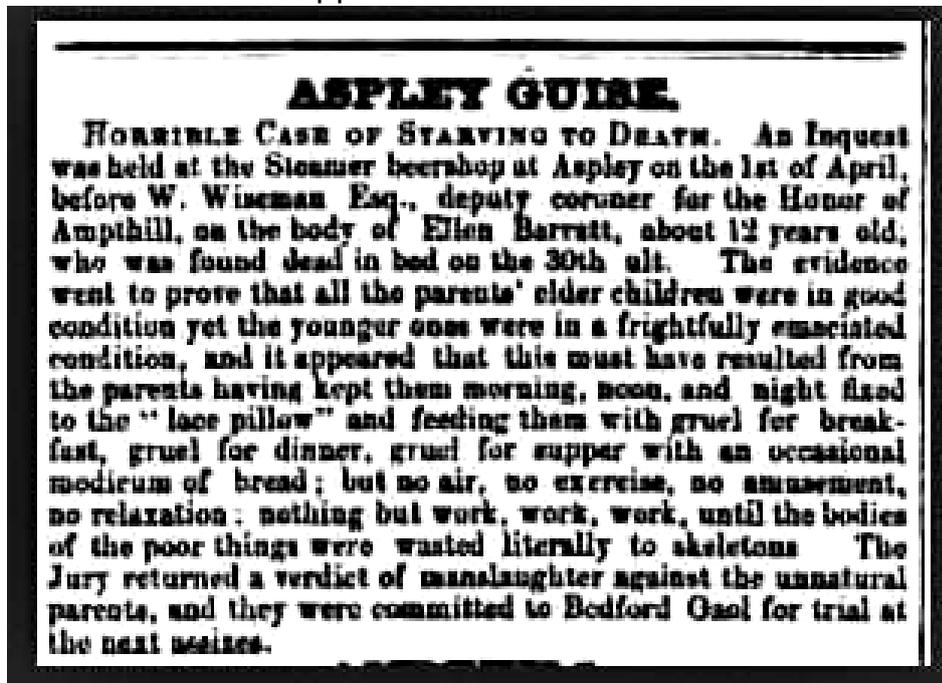
<https://laceincontext.com/>

### **Lace, lacemakers and theft.**

Like I have said, this is not meant to be a definitive treatise on the topic, just to share with you what I found on the net yesterday. Sure, it is a bit higgledy-piggledy (you see why I have written this for friends, I do not think I would use that word in an academic article! Smile) I hope you find it interesting and perhaps stimulating to your social history interests.

## ASPLEY GUISE

Here is the first snippet I have found.



It is very hard to read so here I go with my attempt to type it (two fingers and looking at the keyboard)

## ASPLEY GUISE.

Horrible case of starving to death.

An inquest was held at the Steamer Beershop at Aspley on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, before W. Wineman(?) Esq. deputy coroner for the Honor of Ampthill, on the body of Ellen Barratt, about 12 years old who was found dead in bed on the 30<sup>th</sup> ult. The evidence went to prove that all the parents' elder children were in good condition yet the younger ones (?) were in a frightfully emaciated condition, and it appeared that this must have resulted from the parents having kept them morning, noon and night fixed to the "lace pillow" and feeding them with gruel for breakfast, gruel for dinner and gruel for supper with an occasional modicum of bread: but no air, no exercise no amusement: nothing but work, work until the bodies of these poor things were wasted literally to skeletons. The jury returned a verdict of manslaughter against the unnatural parents, they were committed to Bedford Goal for trial at the next assizes.

The result of that case was:

*"In the case of the poor Ellen that cruelty had resulted in untimely death, and for that death they were now to answer. But he was not empowered to adjudge them to anything like an adequate punishment, yet he should think that wherever they might hereafter go, they would be objects of dislike if not of scorn (and he hoped not) for their cruel deeds to these (and one especially) who ought to have been so dear to them. You, Susannah (continued his lordship) have already passed a large portion of your life, and you Elizabeth, are no longer young, and I do trust that both of you, so long as you shall live, will pass some portion of every day in sincere regret and penitence for the deed you have done, the cruelty of which you have been guilty. The sentence of the court is that Samuel Barratt be imprisoned, with hard labour, for twelve months, and on the others, Susannah and Elizabeth, penal servitude for four years".*

You can read the full story and account in the following URL:

<https://laceincontext.com/lacemakers-in-the-news-the-death-of-ellen-barratt-aspley-guise-bedfordshire-1856/>

Mary Dormer

1a. 6d. a-week.

**STEALING BOBBINS.**—*Mary Dormer*, of Milton Keynes, charged with stealing twelve lacemaking bobbins from Hannah Robinson, of the same place, on the 25th ultimo, was convicted and sentenced to six weeks' imprisonment.

Oh Dear, a dozen bobbins stolen. Sure, Hannah would have missed them. I have tried (not extremely hard) to find out about Mary Dormer, but genealogy is really not my thing, Sorry.

I would guess that Mary stole them to use for herself, but she could probably have thought to sell them. However, it all ended in 6 weeks of prison.

Elizabeth Wicks.

Well, I did come across a Transport case, but as far as I know there has been not bobbin commemorating this event.

## CONVICT ELIZABETH WICKS

*(Brothers, 1824)*

by

Don Bradmore (FCRCMember)

On 25 June 1823, Elizabeth WICKS was convicted at the Old Bailey, London, of stealing 2¾ yards (about 2.5 metres) of bobbin lace, valued at five shillings and sixpence (about \$1.10), from her master, a draper. She was sentenced to transportation for fourteen years. She was 21 years of age, and single.<sup>1</sup> She could both read and write.<sup>2</sup>

With 88 other female convicts, she was put aboard *Brothers* which sailed from the Downs on 6 December 1823. With 49 others, she was disembarked at Hobart on 15 April 1824. The vessel had then gone on to Port Jackson where the remainder of the women were put ashore on 7 May.<sup>3</sup>

Her full story can be found on the following URL

[https://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/docs2/convicts/ElizabethWicks\\_Brothers1824.pdf](https://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/docs2/convicts/ElizabethWicks_Brothers1824.pdf)

The following list is just that. I really can't discover anything more about their cases. Sorry

COCKING , William St. Mary (labourer)

11 Oct 1828 Transported 7 yrs for stealing nine yards of lace

HICKTON , George (labourer) St. Mary

10 Oct 1805 Transported 7 yrs . Theft of 70 yards British white silk lace , 74 yards British black silk lace

MANNEL ,Isaiah St. Mary (labourer)

5 Jan 1831 Transported for 7 years for receiving stolen goods - 220 sacks of lace and 2oz silver.

SMITH , Samuel (labourer) St. Mary  
Easter 1812 Transported 7 yrs for stealing 18 yards of silk point net lace

SWIFT , James  
21 Oct 1829 Transported for the rest of his natural life for stealing 30 yards lace.

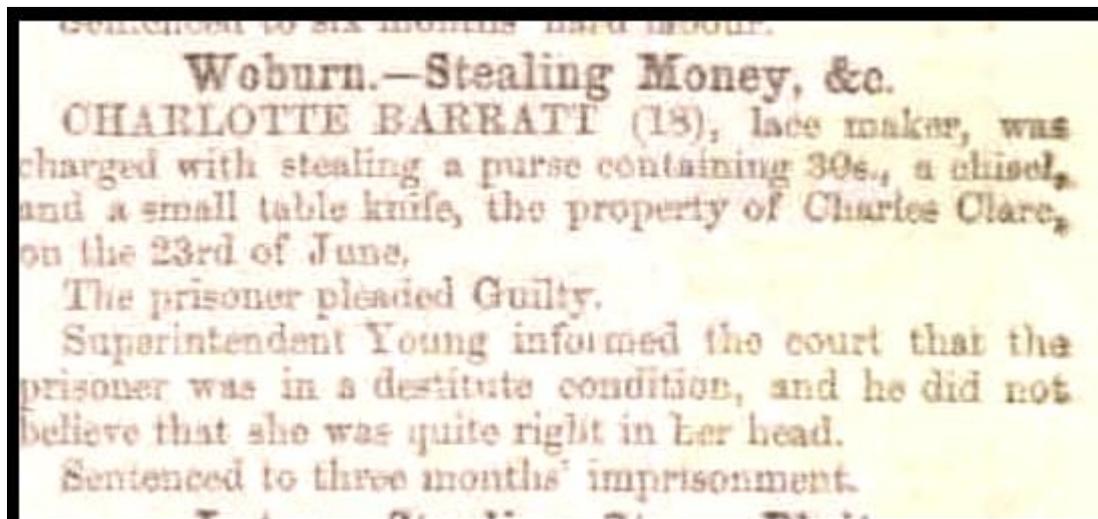
JAMES , William  
2 July 1835 Transported 14 yrs for stealing 200 bobbins and 200 brass carnages from John Smith

I have no idea what a "brass carnage" may be!

GREEN , William  
April 9 1835 Transported 7 yrs for stealing 200 bobbins and 200 brass camages from John Smith.

HAMMOND , John St . Mary (labourer)  
Dec 23 1828 Transported 7 yrs for stealing purse and lace

My only comment is that this list reflects the heavy level of punishment that we expect from these times.



Poor Charlotte. Destitute at the young age of 18 and possibly mentally handicapped. All the same she did steal 30 shillings that was quite a lot of money in those times.

I thought that this would be something of a “spectacular” finish to my findings. A Highway Man

TOM ROWLAND AND FRANK OSBORN

279

TOM ROWLAND, AND FRANK OSBORN, A GOLDSMITH IN  
CANNON STREET IN LONDON, HIGHWAYMEN

THE first of these notorious malefactors was born at Ware in Hertfordshire, and by his parents was put an apprentice to a bricklayer. But after he had served his time, being then of a slothful, idle disposition, he kept such company as soon brought him to follow evil courses. To support his extravagance in a most riotous way of living, he stole a horse out of the Duke of Beaufort's stables, at his seat at Badminton, in Gloucestershire; and then going on the highway he committed several most notorious robberies for above eighteen years; but he always robbed in women's apparel, which disguise was the means of his reigning so long in his villainy, for whenever he was pursued, he then rode astride. But at last being apprehended in this unlawful habit, for robbing a person on Hounslow Heath of a quantity of bone lace,<sup>1</sup> to the value of £1,200 sterling, he was condemned for this fact and found guilty also upon another indictment preferred against him for robbing another person near Barnet, of £84 and 9 shillings. However, whilst he lay under sentence of Death he was very refractory and was so abominably wicked that the very morning on which he died, lying in the Press Yard, for he wanted for no money whilst under confinement, a common whore coming to visit him, he had the unparalleled audaciousness to act carnally with her, glorying in the same, as he was going to execution, which was at Tyburn, on Friday the 24th of October, 1699. He was aged 40 years.

What a man, and what a story!

I suspect that in 1699 lace would have been very valuable. Mind you as a criminal he clearly wanted for nothing!

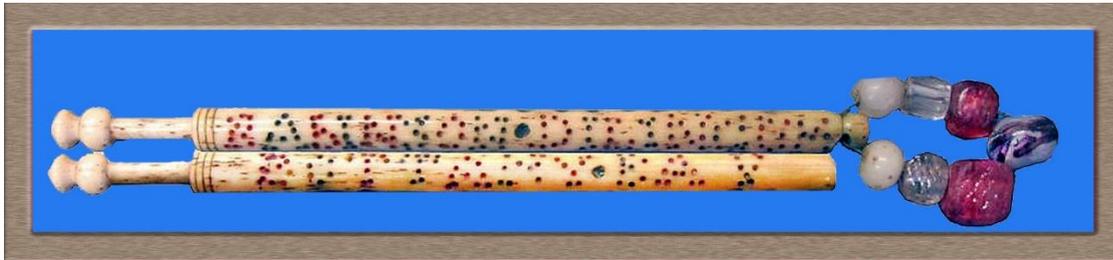
### Conclusion.

In some ways I feel a bit disappointed that I was not able to discover more about the lace makers in this exercise of mine. It is a topic that I would be more than delighted to have you arachnids add your knowledge to this topic. Please drop me a note via the Arachne list.

I am more than happy to have had the opportunity of introducing to you the “Lace in Context” project for those who had not heard about it. There is a good read somewhere in their work for us all as they cover the topic so widely; but to return to my starting point. The Transport Bobbin.

## Richard Dillingham

Richard Dillingham, one of 222 convicts transported on the Katherine Stewart Forbes, left England on 21 February 1832 and sailed to van Diemen's Land, Australia. The arrival date is 16 July 1832.



*Copyright. The Higgins Bedford, re produced with permission under their academic license.*

*Do you know where there is another example of this bobbin? Drop me a note if you do, please.*

*Thanks.*

*Brian*