

AN ANALYSIS OF MARITIME DECORATIONS AND POSSIBLE DECORATORS OF SHIPS DEPICTED ON EAST DEVON BOBBINS.

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INTRODUCTION.

Whilst no sailor myself, I was brought up in Plymouth which is a famous seaport in SW England and my life always seems to have been surrounded by ships. When I discovered the depiction of ships on East Devon bobbins it would appear that these influences attracted me to them in a special manner.

David and Christine Springett's book *Success to the Lace Pillow* has directed bobbin collectors to the identification of bobbin makers as an adjunct to their collecting activities.

It has to be said that this activity in relation to East Devon Bobbins is infinitely more difficult due to the fact that most of the bobbins are very plain; however there are also a body of intricately decorated bobbins too.

Gertrude Whiting offers two names of makers and I confess that whilst I have not definitively looked for these names they do not readily reveal themselves in local history studies. They are Mr. Goode and Mr. Miller. From hearsay I had it suggested to me that there were specialist decorators of East Devon Bobbins that existed as a cottage industry. Again I have not found any clues to this being the case, however it is plausible when you see the quality of, particularly, the printing on many of these bobbins; it is undertaken with great skill.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE SEA

Whilst Honiton was the traditional home or market place for the lace products made in East Devon; this was mainly because it was to that town that the stage coach came and later the railway. In other parts of Devon machine lace was developed and produced, but the cottage hand lace industry fanned out towards the coast line of East Devon. The villages were certainly not all on the actual coast but close enough to have the maritime influence, mainly fishing, but also the men folk being sailors of the coast and the "seven seas".

Whilst those East Devon bobbins that are decorated depict birds and flowers and other rural beauties in a stylized manner, it would appear that, with possibly one exception, (? a tractor) the agricultural industry as such is not depicted, certainly not its tools or implements. By this I mean no ploughs, no horses, no hay ricks or the like, but there are a considerable amount of maritime images included on decorated bobbins.

Sailors are certainly stereotyped as romantics and possibly even romancers but it is clear from history that in quiet times onboard the ship they indulged in more than a few decorative arts. For example, my own grandfather was a tinsmith or artificer on board the Royal Navy ships, but he was also a very capable 'Fair Isle' and sock knitter. Another well known skill was that of the "scrimshaw artist", these sailors incised artistic sea scenes and activities on such things as whale bones or whale teeth.

SCRIMSHAW

Traditionally, scrimshaw is the art of scribing an image onto a whale tooth, then enhancing that image by rubbing ink or lampblack into the scratched lines, which provides contrast against the white ivory. Scrimshaw is a younger art than many people suppose: for market reasons, it did not arise full blown until after the Napoleonic Wars. The marketing thing was all about the sale-ability of whale bone and whale teeth to China and other exotic locations of that

time. When this fell through the sailors had the raw materials for that art to hand. Scrimshaw was a popular past-time for whalers (whaling sailors) while on cruises which lasted two to four years.



This is apparently a rare example of pictorial scenes scrimshawed on to a flat bone. Now I think we can begin to see the links between the scrimshaw art and the East Devon lace bobbins, including the message for the sailor's sweetheart or wife.

All the above pictures are from the middle to late 1700s.

HOW DID THEY DO IT?

Various tools were used for cutting, scratching, and engraving; however recent forensic examination has corroborated Melville's observation that the common sailors' knife – universal tool of the mariner – predominated even among the very best scrimshaw artists:

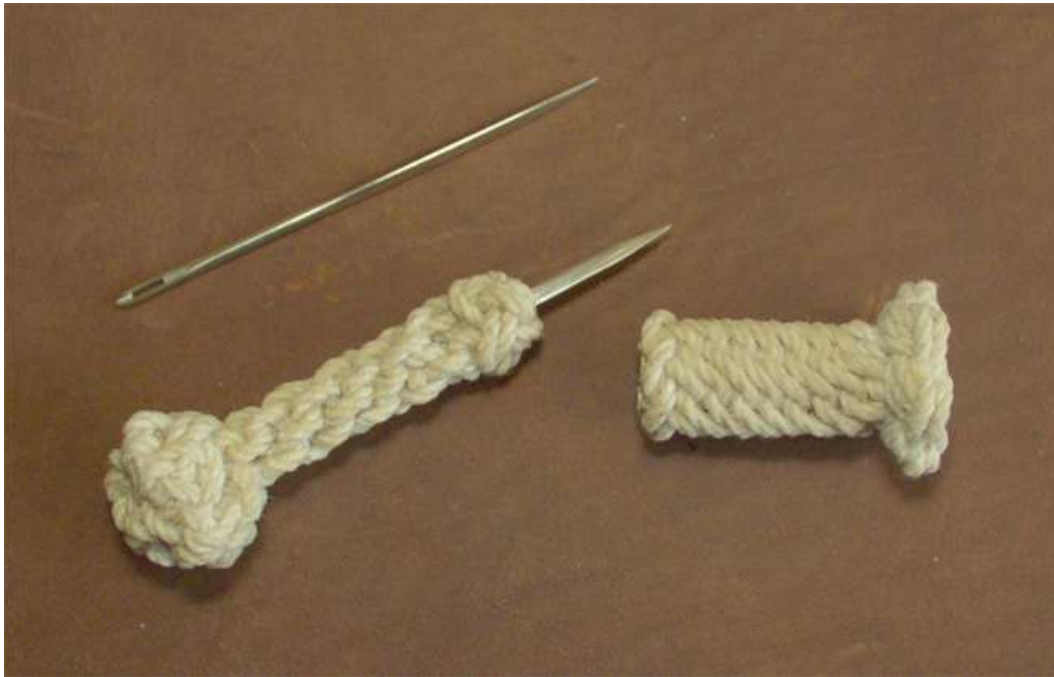
Some of [the whaleman-artisans] have little boxes of dentistical-looking implements, specially intended for the skrimshandering business. But in general, they toil with their jack-knives alone; and, with that almost omnipotent tool of the sailor, they will turn you out anything you please, in the way of a mariner's fancy.



A Sailors knife with blade and awl



This is thought to have been used just for inscribing images



A Sailors needle and scratch awl with modern string handles.

The knife shown with the blade and awl is quite old but what we all would know as the “Jack Knife” (i.e. “Jack” Tar, the sailor) would also have been used.

So you can see that the sailor certainly had all the tools he needed to do his artistic inscribing.

Not all sailors had this talent; very often those who were employed as artisans, i.e. carpenters, tinsmiths and such like, seemed to be the ones that showed talent for this art form. I mention this as we see a variety of artistic “scrimshaw” skills on the East Devon maritime bobbins.



This is a whale's tooth scrimshaw of a whaling scene.

By showing you this picture I am trying to draw the link between sailors, scrimshaw and the maritime decoration of East Midland bobbins.

The next scrimshaw example is even more revealing and linkable to our theme especially when you see the bobbin examples that I shall be showing you later in this article.



In this example we see firstly a drawing that is just a little less sophisticated than our first example, however it contains depictions of a ship, and anchor, a whale (near the top) and on the extreme left, a sea maiden

EAST DEVON MARITIME DECORATIONS.

I am not quite sure where to begin, I know I want to end with the ships; but as an anchor features on the scrimshaw above I will start with them. Anchors play a large part in the maritime decorations, often they are almost hidden in the rest of the picture, but just as often they play a front line role. Have a look at these examples.

Anchors.



The ships' anchors in general use, in the 1700's, consisted of a long, round, iron shank, having two comparatively short, straight arms, or flukes, inclined to the shank at an angle of about 40 degrees, and meeting it in a somewhat sharp point at the crown. In large anchors, the bulky wooden stock was built up of several pieces, hooped together, the whole tapering outward to the ends, especially on the after or cable side.

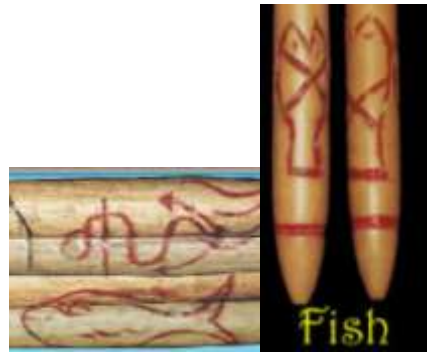
About the beginning of the 1800's, a clerk in Plymouth naval yard, Pering by name, suggested certain improvements, the most important of which was making the arms curved instead of straight.

I have included the above bit of history, probably more as trivia as when we are dealing with stylized sketches made with crude tools (jack knife) we may well not be able to fully draw the conclusions that I had intended, this was to date the anchors. From the above we could reasonably assume that they are anchors from the 1700's, which is entirely possible from the point of view of the lace industry, but I would suggest that it probably reflects the lack of uptake of the improvements to the anchors onboard the ships.

Notice the presence of the anchor chain/rope in various configurations around the main shank of the anchor. The depictions of these ropes curling around the anchor indicates in heraldry circles a "fouled anchor". I am not sure of the significance of this to our study.

In the above examples the anchor is the only maritime device illustrated, the remaining images are such things as flowers, leaves, geometric designs, bricks and decorative banding. I see some things illustrated that just might remind me of a capstan wheel.

Fish



Here are two examples of fish, a whale (left) and two stylized fish on the right.

The whale is readily recognizable and surprisingly is never shown with the blow hole plume rising. Whales and other fish are often seen on the maritime theme bobbins. The fact that the whale is shown could well reflect the prevalence of whale fishing at that time and the subsequent experience of many sailors. Whilst the left hand bobbins when shown fully, depicts a complete nautical theme, the fish on the right are the main feature of the bobbins. Do we make an assumption that they were inscribed by sailors of two different sailing occupations? Who knows?

Mermaids



A mermaid and child?

This mermaid comes from Beer (In E Devon... not the drink!)

Just look at the second scrimshaw (above) and the woolly hair of the sea maiden!

I have to be honest that a case can be made for this Beer mermaid to be another depiction, however as my aim is to link these types of incisions to the sailors, on this occasion I will stick with it being a mermaid. The babe in the “winkle” appears on other maritime bobbins, the implication of the “expectant mother” is to me, a delight. Just to think of a sailor carving his bobbin scrimshaw for his expectant wife. I may be fanciful, certainly I am a romantic, but I am not pedant so you can draw whatever observations you might wish to have regarding this “mermaid”.

THE CELEBRATION

My next maritime example might well surprise you, but nautical it certainly is. I pushed you to think of the “expectant mother” mermaid, but now I want you to look at the “wedding”!



I love this bobbin, I do not own it and I need to get more detail from it, but I did not take enough pictures when I visited the collector. It is terrible to admit but I do not know what the words say! ☹

Never mind, it is part of my sailor/scrimshaw/bobbin story/. My colleague has now told me it says "DRINK POLL". Very appropriate. Just a note about the depiction of sailors in striped pants (this was never uniform) While sailors (merchant and naval) were often depicted with striped trousers these were never officially uniform. *"There was a system known as "slops" which meant the purser organised and provided bulk (cheap) clothing stores but ratings were not awarded a designated uniform until 1857"*. I gather then, that striped pants depictions were before 1857?

THE SHIPS

There are a surprising number of ships depicted on East Devon bobbins. From the famous, the ASP as mentioned in the Jane Austin novel persuasion, to nondescript fishing boats.

At this stage I really become investigative and speculative. Certainly the following pictures add to my case of the possibility of the link between sailors/scrimshaw and certain maritime decorated bobbins; but is it possible to link some of these maritime bobbins to a particular (but un-named) sailor? Well, let us have a look.

Before I start I have sent these pictures to maritime museums, historical ship model makers, altogether some 8 such "authorities", and they either cant guess what the type the ship is, i.e. they do not conform to the rigorous definition of various types of ships, or they offer a best guess. I will go for the best guess

as these artisans were not trying to be pictorially accurate, but to create an atmosphere for their love ones to dwell upon as they made their lace in the sailor's absence.

I have also done considerable research on the ASP in order to try and identify what just may have been the ship that Jane Austin was actually talking about. I failed in that and discovered that there are many ships both in the UK and America called the ASP. I was very disappointed to have to leave that investigation hanging in the air, as you know.... I am a romantic and it would have so nice to link a bobbin to Jane Austin.

As I write this I truly have not fully formulated my ideas about these ships and their possible bobbin decorators, I have some ideas of course but I am not sure how to present them to you. I could warn you that I am looking at the tail decoration and other features of the bobbins decoration. So here are the ships.

Brigatine Favourite. Possible ID features:

Tail Undecorated - Black and red on sails

Bottom banding



Second bottom band



Heart



Letters Numerals



Top Banding



8 Gun Cutter - ASP. Possible ID features:

Woven wave band at top

Bottom band, tail undecorated



Lettering name



Bricks



Lettering



Bird



Eight gun cutter



The ASP. Possible ID Features:

Conjoined circles above tail



Name and lettering



Top banding and numerals



Black and red in ship sails



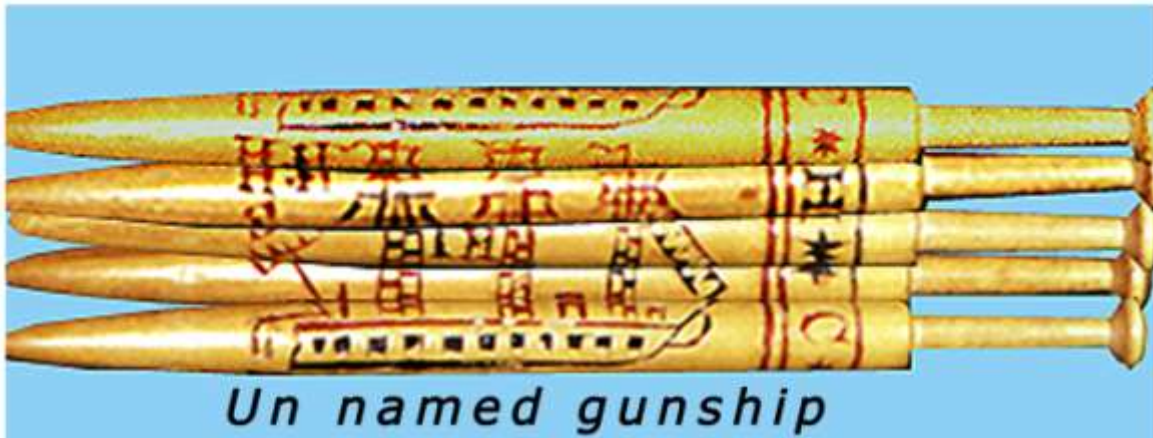
Gunship. Possible ID features:

*Top banding
and lettering*



Plain tails

The ship itself



Un named gunship

*Possible commercial vessel.
ID features could be:*

*Double
top banding*



*Possible
hairy
hearts*

*Lettering
Numerals*



Anchor



Bricks



*Tail
decorated*



Unclassified sailing ship

Possible ID points are:

Broad top banding



Hairy faced hearts



Tail decorated



Simple sketch



Unclassified. Possibly 4 canons

Fishing boat. Possible ID features are:

*Top
Banding*



*(? B W)
Hairy
faced
hearts*



Anchor



*Tail
decorated*





This has few features of significance, but should be taken into consideration.

The VIOKTORIA. Possible ID features:

Dynamic drawing and detailed.

Mix of red and black in the drawing of the ship

Plain tail.



Conjoined rings banding



Running loops banding



Fully Rigged ship of the line

The possible ID features of this bobbin are:

Anchor shape



Hairy faced heart



Sea weed waving



Tail fully decorated banding



Whaling Scene

An unusual two ships bobbin was sent to me since finishing the initial analysis. A red flag seems evident to me that I have not seen before as well as two ships one above the other. A plain anchor is also featured.

TWO SHIPS ID POINTS

LETTERING
S L



ANCHOR



BANDING



FLAG?



The final bobbin does not include a ship but rather two mirror image long tailed “fish”. Both the owner and I have interpreted the to be “whales, because it indicates a large fish and the tail fin is diagrammatically like that of a whale.

ANCHOR AND WHALES

ANCHOR



LONG TAIL
WHALES



WINGED?
BIRD



INITIAL ANALYSIS

Hairy Hearts.

Yes I coined this phrase but an artist friend of mine offered me a more professional description. She has suggested: *“They are not “hairy Hearts” but hearts decorated with picots to make them look more like lace”*

As I end this study, I believe that those who read what I write can often add very useful contributions.

Ships

Here is where I want the input of you the readers of this. I realize that I have only concentrated on design aspects of the ship bobbins. Whilst the ships themselves are unique to this maritime classification there are many other aspects of design that appear on other decorated bobbins; hearts and various bandings etc. The lettering and numerals are especially interesting in the broader aspects of decorated East Devon bobbins, but I am *hoping* that a friend of mine who has a special interest in this kind of thing will offer an educated opinion on this.

If we are to follow the example of C and D Springett and try and identify unique bobbin decorators then my conclusions below apply. I tend to think that there are more aspects of bobbin decoration in East Devon bobbins than their decorators. There is clearly an artistic and possibly symbolic relationship to their designs.

From simple observation I think I could reasonably conclude that maritime bobbins with ships, hairy hearts and decorated tails are all from the same make or the same school. There are similarities in the simple uncluttered line drawings of the ships too.

The unclassified commercial sailing ship also has the tail decorated, but this decoration is rather refined and lacks the robustness of the other group of tails. This design might well stand alone from any grouping.

The Vioktoria and the 8 gunned Brigantine, plus the ASP (unclassified) might group together with the two colored sails and the concentric circle banding at the tail end.

That leaves the un-named gunship and small sketched sailing ship in two separate and unrelated makers groups.

I am inclined to leave out any attempt to group makers in the general maritime bobbins that I have used to demonstrate the link between scrimshaw, sailors and bobbin designs. At this time it is probably too hard; but more than that I believe that at least some of them possibly come into a more general category of bobbin design.

CONCLUSION.

I would suggest that there is very little doubt that the maritime genre of East Devon Bobbins has a definite link to scrimshaw. That scrimshaw is an art form that is historically associated with sailors plus the fact that East Devon lace villages were close to or actually on the sea - there seems little doubt that the sailors scratched these for their wives, mothers or sweethearts.

It has been interesting to learn that the crude tools of their trade offered the ability for them to express their talents not only on whale and other products from the sea, but also to the tools of their women folk who they left behind.

This particular study I have made has brought to my attention what I consider to be an important question; were *these bobbins scratched at sea or when they came to land or retired from the sea?*

Why do we ask this question? Mainly because associated with the maritime scenes depicted are the traditional decoration symbols of the typical East Devon bobbin. When I look at other pure scrimshaw scenes they are artistically scenic and do not draw upon any stereotypical decoration that applies to the source of the tool they are decorating. Of course the artists at sea knew what the bobbins that their loved ones were using looked like, and included those traditional features.

I keep an open mind on this question; however there are some who hold to an oral tradition that maintains these bobbins were decorated by a group or a firm of “specialist bobbin decorators”

My simple answer is that I do not know. What do you think?

Many thanks

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Special thanks to the private collectors who gave me their images and to my “private” collaborator.

End Note

The Asp

Persuasion. Jane Austen. Wordsworth Classics 1996. p 46,47.

Anne suppressed a little smile, and listened kindly, while Mrs Musgrove relieved her heart a little more; and for a few minutes, therefore, could not keep pace with the conversation of others.- When she could let her attention take its natural course again, she found the Miss Musgroves fetching the navy list (their own Navy list, the first that had ever been at Uppercross); and sitting down together to pour over it, with the professed view of finding out the ships which Captain Wentworth had commanded.

“Your first was the *Asp*, I remember; we will look for the *Asp*”

“You will not find her there. - Quite worn out and broken up. I was the last man who commanded her. - Hardly fit for service then. - Reported fit for home service for a year or two-so I was sent off to the West Indies”. The girls looked in amazement.

“The admiralty,” he continued, “entertain themselves now and then, with sending a few hundred men to sea, in a ship not fit to be employed. But they have a great many to provide for; and among the thousands that just may well go to the bottom as not, it is impossible for them to distinguish the very set who may be least missed.”

“Phoo phoo,” cried the admiral, “what stuff these young fellows talk! Never was a better sloop than the *Asp* in her day. - For an old built sloop, you would not see her equal. Lucky fellow to get her! - He knows there must have been twenty better men than himself applying for her at the same time. Lucky fellow to get anything so soon, with no more interest than his.”

“I felt my luck admiral, I assure you;” replied Captain Wentworth, seriously. “I was well satisfied with my appointment as you can desire. It was a great object with me, at the time, to be at sea - a very great object. I wanted to be doing something.”

“To be sure you did. - What should a young fellow, like you, do ashore for half a year together? - If a man has not a wife, he soon wants to be afloat again.”

“From a South Wales Tourist brochure.

OS193

Maritime decorated East Devon Bobbin Probably 10 canons.
Date probably 1842. No initials. Ships name WILLIAM. Other
decoration, hatched triangles and compass stars and flower motive.

