

# ENGLAND'S OLDEST LACE BOBBIN. *Do we really know?*

Brian Lemin Jan 2011

## **Preamble.**

*I have been collecting photographs of lace bobbins now for at least 15 years and over that time I have been helped by a large number of people. They have been individuals who have shared their often large collections with me and those who have passed on just a picture of one bobbin. The Arachne community has been the source of many contributions to my photographic collection.*

*Other than the Luton Museum who gave me full access to their secondary bobbin collection and limited access to their main display and the All Hallows Museum in Honiton, who support me in every possible way they can; I have to say that, in general, my experience with museums in trying to gain study-access to their bobbin collection, either in person, via a proxy, or their sharing of photographs with me, has been totally frustrating.*

*Today I am pleased to be able to say that I have been bountifully helped by the **Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge and the Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum**, and in the latter case, by my proxy Pompei Parry.*

*This does not diminish in any manner my grateful thanks firstly to my small cohort of fellow bobbin researchers (who are modest to a fault) and all those who have shared their bobbins with me in the past. If I were better organised I think the list of names would fill a whole page at least. Thank you all.*

## **INTRODUCTION.**

This article takes the opportunity of investigating which may be the oldest known English lace bobbin, to look at the wider issues in the dating of lace bobbins. As to coming to a conclusion I leave it to you to decide after you have read the article.

I should mention that this article gives readers the first opportunity to see photographs of two very special bobbins in our history. I have presented them in the best way I know of giving a person far, far distance from the actual bobbin to really have a look at it and sort of “turn it around” to get a good look at it. I hope it works for you

## **HOW OLD IS A LACE BOBBIN?**

If we try to get to the start of lace making we go back a very long time. Wright talks about ancient Egypt and even the words of the Biblical prophet Ezekiel. Various other authors take us on a meandering trip through the ages and through Europe until possibly we get to England in about the 16th century. For this article I would like to leave it at that as all I am attempting to do is to ascertain how old we could expect the oldest bobbin to be.

The anthropologists have a fairly well accredited method of dating finds and whilst I am not expert in their techniques I am quite comfortable when they say where they found a bobbin and the surrounding environment and documented history indicates that “such and such” would be an approximate or close date. If however there is a lace bobbin dated xxxx then I become more sceptical. Let me give you an example from one of my favourite lace bobbin makers.

The illustration below is pretty clearly a bobbin made by James Compton and we know that he was born in 1824. The inscription reads: WILLIAM. M. SHEPHERD. BORN MAY 17 1802.

Without us happening to know the date of the maker's birth we could well assume that the bobbin was made in or about 1802. Clearly a trap we should be aware of.

WILLIAM. M. SHEPHERD. BORN MAY 17 1802.



### THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL OLDEST.

A. The following “bobbins” I found on the internet from the Oxford Museum Service



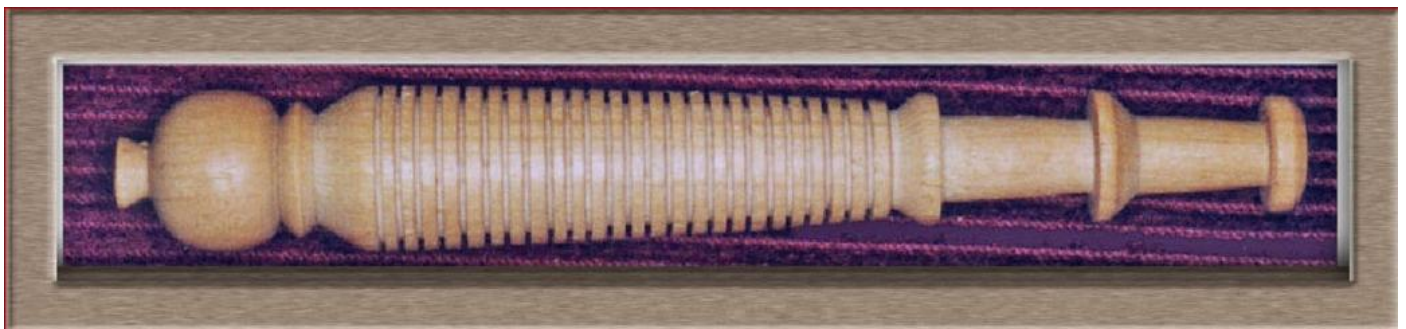
Their accession register tells us little more than the label, however there is much discussion within lace making circles that the tools used for making lace included bones. I think with these I make a clear distinction as to bobbins, being a tool upon which “things” were wound, and lace bobbins which were bones used as lace bobbins. If I am honest, if they had been dated 1500 + or – I would probably entertained the possibility of them being “lace” bobbins. Iron Age? No, not lace bobbins.

B. The next bobbin I have no idea where I got this image from... I am sorry.

This bobbin is identified by the “institution” as being a “Lace Bobbin”. It was found in an old Roman settlement that is dated late 1660s or early 1700s. It is my opinion that it could well be a lace bobbin however it is possible that it could be another tool such as a pricker, or a bodkin



C. The next bobbin was found in a midden in Gloucester and is dated around the late 1600s or early 1700s. It is unspangled and a single neck. It seems to have some of the characteristics of what we now call a South Bucks bobbin. The illustration below is a wooden reproduction of the original bone bobbin. Of course, the fact that a lot of the older bobbins which have survived are bone reflects that bone survives better than wood.



D. The next bobbin could well be one of the world's oldest bobbins. The find is recorded in "Danske Frihandskniplinger" By Bodil Tornhave, and is part of a group of bobbins found, I think, in a bog in Denmark. Below I have reproduced only the bobbin that more closely represents the English style of bobbin. This is dated as 1550.



If I were to comment on the illustration above dated 1550, I would say it has a remarkable resemblance to the development of the English lace bobbin. It is of course no surprise to us as it is clear that the skill of lace making came to England via the continent, so our early bobbins were obviously "continental" and over the years they developed into the various English styles.

E. Just one more find of old bobbins before we move on. In a few houses in and close to Eye, Suffolk, a number of lace bobbins were found. In a roof, under the stairs, I believe a total of close to 50 such bobbins have now been found. They all appear to be 17th century bobbins and are clearly of Flemish origin. This fits in well with local history and since then Nicky Höwener-Townsend has completed the research and published it in her book which is noted in the bibliography.



#### THE OLDEST DATED BOBBINS.

It is not surprising to me that the oldest dated bobbins are those from East Devon or Downton. The reason for this is that the tradition of writing the date on their bobbins is very widespread, though as yet just what that date represents researchers are not quite sure, but the date of the gift or the bobbin seems to be high in the running.

Let us have a look at a few of them.

This one is catalogued as AS1765. It comprises a deciduous tree in the winter, and some have suggested “windmills” as the basis for the fill in design. I am not too sure about that myself; but here we have a reasonably dated bobbin from 1765.



This next one is not quite so old. It is dated 1769. The only initial I see is a letter “F” but as I am working from a photo I cannot turn the bobbin around! I do see the lovely “face in the sun” decoration, which along with the stars gives an interesting bobbin quite a lift.



However, we are competing with archaeological finds of the 15 and 1600's, so we must go older. The next two bobbins really deserve an article to themselves, though the Shepherds Bobbin has been written up in the Lace Magazine by Carole Morris. This is the first time the wider lace community has seen it in photographic form and laid out in a form which reflects a "flat page" of the decoration.



© Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge  
T.7-1944  
Lace Bobbin (detail)  
English, c.1795  
Wood, carved with figures

Just look at it. It is an amazing bobbin. I almost want to do a quiz on how many depictions of various kinds you can list. Carole Morris has described this bobbin so professionally that I do not want to enlarge on it in this context however the presence of a spangle on a bobbin dated 1795 surprises me. It brings me back to the reliability of dates when we try to date bobbins. If we believe the date on the bobbin then we possibly have to revise our thinking as when East Midland bobbins became spangled. So we have 1795 with possibly a few reservations.

At this stage we stop for a “commercial break” well sort of!

I am deeply grateful to the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge for both their kindness in sending me such great pictures and allowing me to present this bobbin, in this form, to the lace makers of the world in this article. We now come to the final pictures in this presentation and a date of 1693. This beats all the above bobbins that have a recorded date inscribed on them. The bobbin itself has been published before in a booklet published by the Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum, to whom I am very grateful for the photographs that has enabled me to present them in the manner below.



(c) Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum

As I have said earlier in this article, the tradition of inscribing a date on East Devon bobbins has been well established, and without having firm confirmatory evidence, the practice itself seems to indicate a desire to record the acquisition of a lace bobbin. In fact this bobbin is accorded a geographical description as a “Downton” bobbin; its provenance confirms this.

It was found on the site of an old Salisbury Council House which had been built in 1579 and was demolished after being damaged by fire in 1780. Susan Hartley and Pompey Parry have written in somewhat more detail about this bobbin in the above book "Downton Lace". These authors relate the above decoration to other Downton bobbins to which they have access.

This researcher has for some time believed in the possibility of a "crossover" of bobbin decorators between the East Devon bobbin decorators and the Downton bobbin decorators, particularly in the larger bobbin shared by both styles of lace, the gimp/Trolley bobbins. Sadly I do not have access to sufficient bobbins from each of the areas to make any definite findings on this matter, but I mention this in the matter of being able to have some "reasonable" certainty of the inscribed date relating to the above bobbin.

Just as a small and most *inconclusive* piece of evidence I share with you the following picture of an east Devon Trolley bobbin.



These are more "modern trolley bobbins from Devon. Say the 1800s



The following two pictures are reputed by those who have a good knowledge of Devon bobbins to be "very old indeed"



Just in regard to the East Devon and Downton discussion I would say that there is little doubt that their Trolley/Gimp bobbins of olden days were the same shape and pretty well certainly the same size as each other. In this case it could well be that the origin of the bobbins could well have been common to both groups of lace makers. As to my assertion that they may from time to time have shared the same decorators, is a question of future research.

With regard to the 1693 bobbin, I leave the detailed analysis of its decoration to another time or another more knowledgeable person.

#### CONCLUSION

Possibly there is no one answer.

The world's oldest could well be from the group of bobbins in the find in Denmark.

The oldest English bobbin could well be the find from Gloucester. It has a "100 year" bandwidth (!) to be included into.

Of the dated bobbins it would seem to be clearly the 1693 Downton bobbin in the Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum...

#### References.

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