

TOWARDS A STANDARD NOMENCLATURE FOR DESCRIBING CHURCH WINDOW LACE BOBBINS.

INTRODUCTION.

When a newcomer to the world of lace bobbins and using sources of information that were almost exclusively from the published literature, I discovered that the possibility of confusion over the names of certain bobbins is very real. Starting at Wright (1919) through to Springett (1996) this article endeavors to bring together these authors descriptions of types of *Church Window* lace bobbins, compare them and offer *for discussion* names for each of the types that are revealed. There is a plethora of books on lace making, but very few of them devote very much space to the bobbins used, barely a paragraph or two seems to suffice in most of the books. A similar situation pertains to many of the books on lace history and lace identification. A review of the bibliography available to me reveals seven books and one series of articles that treat the subject of lace bobbins in any depth. These are, *Wright T* The Romance of the Lace Pillow. *Whiting G.* Old –Time Tools and Toys of Needlework. *Freeman, C.* Pillow Lace in the East Midlands. *Huetson, T. L.* Lace and Lace Bobbins. A history and Collectors Guide. *Hopewell, J.* Pillow Lace and Bobbins. *Bellerby, D.* Lace Making Bobbins. Lace. A Series of 9 Articles. *Springett, C and D.* Success to the Lace Pillow. *Bullock, A.* Lace and Lace Making. *Springett, D.* Turning Lace Bobbins.

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION.

Many publications have mistakes in them or are perhaps written in a manner that opens the interpretation to be mistaken. Generally the rule in historical research is that a publication that is nearest the time period under review is considered to be the most accurate. For that reason I propose to use Wrights book as the primary reference and compare the other publications to that. There is another reason for choosing this as the benchmark publication. In his preface to the 1919

edition Wright says that he wrote this volume because "the work must be done at once or never." (p x) the reason for this statement was that the "old workers, who have supplied the greater part of the information conveyed in these pages, will have passed away." He then goes on to mention particularly the chapters on "the Bobbins and Lace Tells" as particular examples of their contribution. The implication is that he has spoken to many of the lace workers alive at that time. This must add weight to his observations and record.

In this discussion I am not proposing to discuss the other confusion, i.e. whether the term should be Mother AND Babe or Mother IN Babe but rather address the question, What is a *Church Window* bobbin?

MOTHER-IN-BABE DESCRIPTIONS & CHURCH WINDOW DESCRIPTIONS.

(Wright) Under the sub heading of wooden bobbins he says, "...in the hollow shank of which a tiny wooden bobbin rattles." "Sometimes instead of a tiny wooden bobbin one finds beads or shot" (p126). Later, under the sub heading of bone bobbins he has this to say. "The most ingenious is the Mother-in babe, now often called the *Church Window* bobbin. The shank is hollowed into compartments, similar to those in the wooden variety, but, thanks to the good humour of the material, with infinitely better result, and in each compartment is a miniature bobbin." (p 129)

(Whiting) Talking about *Church Window* sticks, (p 218) she says, "These have been hollowed and pierced with a tiny saw." She then describes the number of tiers she has seen and the fact that they contained a "tiny bobbin." Further on in the paragraph she describes other *church window bobbins* that she has which contain "beads... and balls." She later describes *Cow and Calf* and *Mother in Babe* bobbins as having "miniature bobbins lying inside the *windows* of real bobbins." (p 220)

(Freeman) “Shank hollowed and cut into open-work compartments in one or more sections, sometimes spirally, the spaces often containing miniature bobbins, coils of wire, lead shot, wooden balls or glass beads.” Later known as *Church Window*. (p 34)

(Huetson) “...or BABY BOBBIN. These are almost always made of wood of two contrasting colours but as distinct from the "spliced," the join in this case is a dowel joint. The part of the shank into which this dowel fits is made hollow and in this hollow space, hidden from view, there is a miniature bobbin, the baby. A tight fit keeps the joint together, which however can be pulled apart to release the baby. If one shakes one of these near ones' ear the baby can be heard rattling about inside.” He then states that he prefers the term *Church Window*. (p 118)
(This is clearly not a description of a Mother in Babe or a *Church Window*. See later for an explanation of this confusion).

(Hopewell) “...OR *Church Window* which has two tiny bobbins in two tiers of four "windows"” (p210)

(Bellerby) “The shank is pierced through leaving one or more compartments containing a miniature bobbin.” (21)

(Springett C & D) “Miniature bobbin enclosed in a pierced shank.” (p 7)

(Bullock) “...also *Church Window*. ... the shank of the bobbin being hollowed out and vertical slits cut, the whole effect being that of a tall *Church Window*. ... in each compartment there was usually a tiny bobbin, but lead shot, wooden beads, glass beads or little balls of wire were not uncommon.” (p 87)

(Springett D) MOTHER AND BABE. Not described in words, but a picture shows a *Church Window* with a miniature bobbin inside.

DISCUSSION.

MOTHER-IN-BABE, BABY BOBBIN, MOTHER AND BABE, *CHURCH WINDOW*.

Wright describes this bobbin under a sub heading of wooden bobbins, (p125) as being hollow, in which a "tiny wooden bobbin rattles." "Sometimes instead of a tiny wooden bobbin one finds beads or shot" (p126) later, under the sub heading of bone bobbins (p128) he has this to say. "The most ingenious is the Mother-in-Babe, now often called the *Church Window* bobbin. The shank is hollowed into compartments, similar to those in the wooden variety, but, thanks to the good humour of the material, with infinitely better result, and in each compartment is a miniature bobbin." (p 129)

We must ask the question whether Wright is describing the same type of bobbin in each of these descriptions. One must say that it would appear that he is. The first description could be classed as a short comment and the second, more detailed description; he refers the reader to the wooden type in his first description

The next question to explore is whether his Mother in Babe is the same as those of other writers?

Whiting, because of her "flowery" and romantic style of writing does appear to intermingle the contents of the *Church Window* bobbins. i.e. in her opening description when talking about the tiers of *church windows*" but later on she distinguishes Mother in Babe and Cow and Calf, by the fact that they contain "miniature bobbins lying inside the windows of real bobbins." (p 220)

Huetson, whilst describing what he calls a "baby bobbin" is definitely not describing what Wright has in mind, even though Huetson does say that he prefers the term *Church Window* (p118) he is not describing either a *Church Window* or Mother-in-Babe. His baby bobbin is clearly a "Cow-in-Calf or Jack-in-the-Box". We must presume that this is a mistake by Huetson.

The next question is that of the Mother-in-Babe versus the *Church Window*.

Bellerby is the only author that offers a description of a *Church Window* separately from the association with the Mother-in-Babe, and at the same time, it is clear that he describing the same construction as Wright. He says it is a "Shank pierced or drilled with *no* loose object inside." (p 21)

It is possible that in Bellerby one is seeing a more modern convention occurring. Leaving aside the published literature, there appears to be amongst bobbin collectors the possibility of using the *Church Window* term in two ways. The first as a generic term for all bobbins that have hollow shanks, in which the contents are visible (i.e. as opposed to the Cow-in-Calf or the Jack-in-the-Box.) or secondly a term that applies to a hollow bobbin that is pierced in the *Church Window* fashion but the hollow shank is empty.

If we take the view that the *Church Window* term came about as the result of looking at a *Church Window* we can decide that, a) it is just the tall narrow characteristic of the *Church Windows* that the bobbins are meant to emulate, therefore a *Church Window* could be an empty *Church Window* shank or, b) that as most *Church Windows* are of stained glass and as such have "contents" then of course the *Church Window* bobbins could also have "contents". It is evident that we still have a dilemma. Are *Church Windows* empty or do they contain objects? Or indeed, both?

Whiting (p 217) offers the best alternative explanation for the confusion by printing a picture of an English church-window lantern... "an historic object, which may indeed have been the inspiration that gave us the delicate, dark wood, *church-window* bobbin." To all intents and purposes the lantern is empty. One presumes that when in use it would contain candles. This together with another statement that she makes regarding the *church windows* "These windows are sometimes called lights." (p 218) could well allow us to believe that the church window bobbins were originally empty, and then the turners began to use their ingenuity and placed all kinds of oddments inside them, with the types that

included miniature bobbins developing descriptions of Mother in Babe and cow and Calf. (See below for another speculation)

On a recent holiday to England I discovered a reported letter from Mr. Huetsen to the cataloguer (JRB) of the Baker, Knight, Huetsen lace bobbin collection (Olney Museum - now broken up). She writes,

“The other area that I found very difficult to deal with was CHURCH WINDOW/MOTHER IN BABE/COW IN CALF/ BABY BOBBINS. With impeccable timing Mr. Huetsen commented on this in a recent letter I received from him. I can do no better than quote:”

“ The one item I find difficult to explain is what I call ‘Church windows’. These are often called ‘baby bobbins’, ‘mother in babe’ ‘Cow and Calf’. This to my mind is wrong, as they are different from a church window. The slots in a Church Window” look like church windows. In any case some of these ‘church windows’ have something else other than a small bobbin inside them, so they could not rightly be called ‘Baby Bobbin,’ etc.

...I have therefore fore classified CHURCH WINDOWS as such – window shaped cuts that you can see straight through; MOTHER IN BABE etc. contain a small bobbin or object of that shape; OTHER INSERT means just that.”

At this stage I believe that we must return to the historical assumption that those writing at the time of the events or who had access to the lace workers, i.e. Wright, should be believed unless there is just cause to prove the writer wrong and I do not believe that we can do that.

Wrights description of the Mother in Babe / *Church Window* bobbins not only covers the term Mother-in-Babe but also the other contents of these *Church Window* bobbins i.e. "beads, shot or balls of bone." (p 129)

My own view is that if we are to stick to historical principles of interpretation then from the above discussion we must conclude that "*Church Windows*" became a generic term for all hollow bobbins whose content (or lack of contents) is visible through *Church Window* types of piercing.

If this is correct; what names should we give the different kinds of *Church*

Windows?

Historically, we must accept that the term *church window* became a generic term for bobbins that were pierced, contained small bobbins or other objects, or were empty; but historical accuracy does not require us to live with confusion and that, it certainly does.

I must say that I like the JRB / Huetson solution and would like to suggest that collectors adopt their approach. This would be as follows:

Church window. A bobbin that has window-shaped cuts that you can see straight through

Mother in Babe. A bobbin that has window-shaped cuts which contain a small bobbin or insert of that shape.

Other inserts. A bobbin that has window-shaped cuts which contains inserts other than a small bobbin or insert of that shape.

To take the descriptions a little further to include some of the other types of bobbins alluded to in this article, I would suggest that we use the following definitions;

Jack in the Box; A hollow bobbin that contains a small loose bobbin that can only be seen by dis-assembling the bobbin. i.e. unscrewing it or pulling it apart.

(Huetsons, Baby Bobbin; Springetts, Secret Bobbin

Cow in Calf; A hollow bobbin that has a small bobbin inside that is revealed only when dis-assembled by pulling it apart or unscrewing it. The small bobbin is attached and not loose and may be attached to either the top or the bottom of the two parts.

Without wishing to add to the confusion, I am personally attracted to the term “Lantern” as an alternative to “Other Inserts.” If this were to be adopted the contents of the lantern would need to be specified.

Whilst researching this article a question crossed my mind about the “small bobbins or object of similar shape.” Could it be that the “object of similar shape” was meant to be a candle? i.e. confirming the church-window lantern source of the bobbin makers inspiration? Perhaps the earlier inserts were candles and later became bobbins?

Would some of you who have collections, look at your bobbins and see if there is any evidence of this speculation. I would be delighted to hear from you the results of your “look and see.”

Brian Lemin.
11/28 Deaves Road.
Cooranbong
New South Wales
Australia. 2265.

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