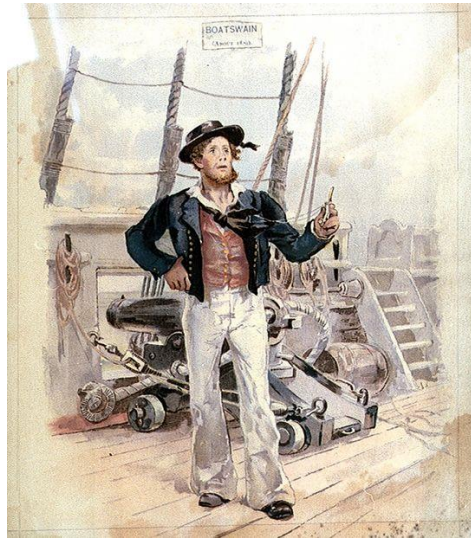


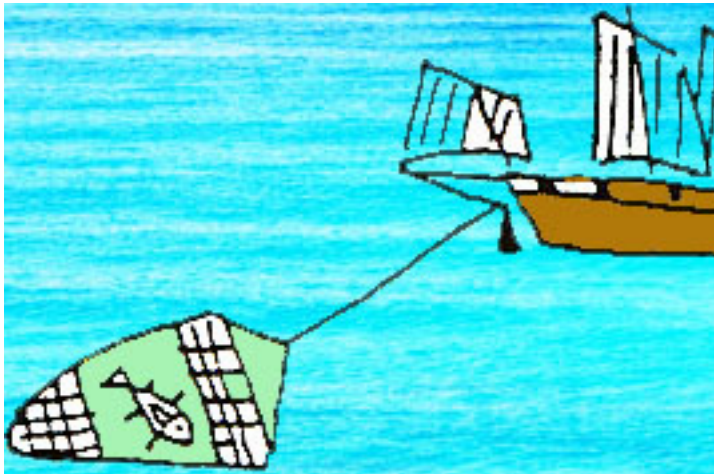
## A BOBBIN LOVE STORY

Brian Lemin May 2014



All stories of this nature start with “Once upon a Time”. In fact it was around 1815 when the good ship The Asp docked in Plymouth. Jack Tar was a young man from Beer a town on the coast of Devon. Basically it was a fishing village and Jack had grown up with boats all his life.

His father was a trawler man fishing out of Beer and Jack had been serving with his father for quite few years as a boy and young man; but as with many a young man he wanted more excitement than small fishing Village could offer.



*A trawl net extracted from an East Devon bobbin decoration*

Mind you Jack had enjoyed many moments of excitement even as a boy; for when the French Smugglers came, his father used his boat to go out and collect the contraband. The nights were dark, the mission was a so called secret, but the entire Village knew what was going on. Barrels of grog mostly, some textiles but not lace, the Beer people would not allow that.

The French boat lay a few miles off the coast and the local boats from Beer quickly read the signals of a flashing light from the ship and made something of an orderly queue to get the goods on to their ships.



*The above painting in the Smugglers' Cellar at Fairlynch Museum records the moment on 29 January 1821 when he (a BEER man called Rattenbury) narrowly escaped being arrested a mile or so off Budleigh beach on his way back from France, having as he later admitted in his memoirs "a cargo of goods, consisting of one hundred kegs of spirits, and a bale of tea."*

The distance between the edge of the sea and Village was quite short. A walk with a heavy barrel to the lane along the coast line took only few minutes and it was then that the horse and carts of the Villagers came into play.



*Smugglers in East Devon by G Morland*

The high cliffs in that part of the coast hid a myriad of caves and the villagers quickly and expertly hid the smuggled goods in them. Of course the children of the area could not be kept away from such goings on, but they knew that what they were seeing had to be kept a secret.



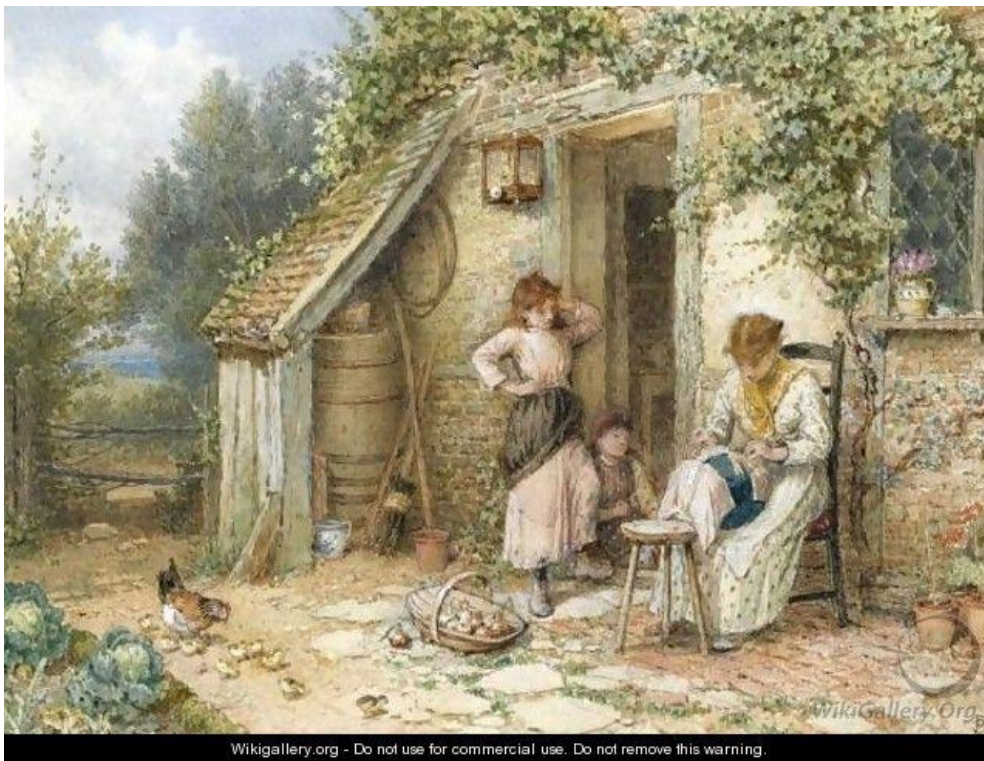
*Beer East Devon*

By the end of the exercise, Jack was pretty tired and decided that he would take rest by the side of the lane. Very soon, two or three girls a little younger than he, walked by in a group and gave him some cheek, and then

giggled on their way. One of the girls Jack recognised as girl in years past he knew but took no notice of, but now she had blossomed into a lovely young lady. Mm he thought I will try and catch them up, and that he did.

Of course he manoeuvred himself to be beside the girl that he fancied and soon remembered that her name was Polly, and they started chatting as quietly as the other girl's cheekiness and interruptions allowed. "I gotta hurry" said Polly, "I have to help me Mum secure the caves in case the excise men turn up an' be lookin'". So off she went but not before Jack and Polly made an assignation for the following evening. That next evening was the first of many meeting between Jack and Polly during which time they became very fond of each other.

Polly was the oldest girl in a large family of girls all of whom went, in turn, to the Lace making school run by Mrs. Burbidge. She was something of a tyrant as a teacher, but gave them all good a good technical foundation for the making of the beautiful Honiton Rosettes, which when sewn on to a lovely lace ground made the prettiest lace in the whole of England, so the girls said. Every fine day mother and daughters set up their pillows outside the fishing cottage and made their lace, with much chatter, a lot of fun and not very much income for their efforts, but father was a pretty good trawler man and the made "ends meet", as it were.



*The Lace Maker" oil on Canvas. M Foster*

Each day Polly had to put up with the teasing of her younger sisters about her romance with Jack, but one day when they started into her, she snapped back at them and started to cry. "What's the matter maid" her Mum said in the broad Devonshire accent of Beer. "Oh Mum" she said, "Jack is going to join the Navy. He says he wants to see the world and earn enough money so that we can get married when he comes home. But I shall miss him terribly".

That quietened all the girls down very quickly and Polly's Mum comforted her and even her sisters became kind and sympathetic towards her. It was the next day that Jack would make his way to Plymouth, most of a week's walk for him.

As he walked past the fields he stopped when he saw a steam engine acting as a power source for a threshing and binding of the wheat harvest.

H22

The bobbin and detail of the possibly, agricultural mace dated 1870



When he finally got to Plymouth he joined the Asp, a 15 gunned Sloop bound for the West Indies. Sure Jack knew the sea and knew his way around a small trawler, but this was for him a baptism of fire. He knew nothing about guns, and that was what they put him on. He was strong and athletic and very willing to learn.

H118

A detail taken from an ASP bobbin. It looks as though there are four canons on it (It would have had more than this for sure) But this inscribed ship does appear to have some movement in it. It seems to be sailing in a good wind. I like it!

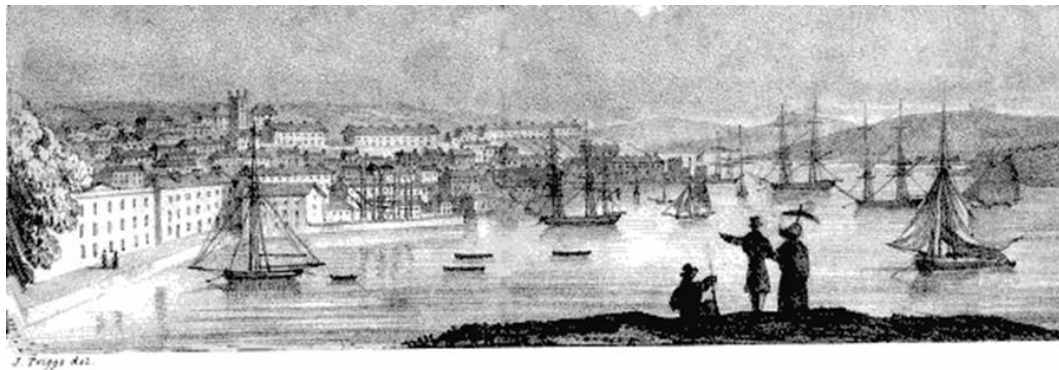


The English ships of that type were not heavily gunned; their cannon balls were somewhat smaller than those of the French or the Spanish ships that they often skirmished with. Of course “skirmish” really meant Pirating as that was the way in which the navy operated in those days. So much fighting for the country and so much “piracy for themselves!

It was hard work. To make up for the small shot size the English ships drilled and drilled until their shot rate per minute was almost twice as fast as those of the French and Spanish. That gave them an edge which reduced the hand to hand fighting that was inevitable to capture the ship they were attacking.

The trip to the West Indies was incident free and Jack spent his time carving and decorating lace bobbins for Polly. He had done one depicting the Asp, another telling her of his love and more than few plain bobbins to fill up her pillow.

As they approached Jamaica; they could smell the spices, and other things, from away out to sea and after a few nights ashore in Jamaica Jack thought that this life as a sailor was a great life! He managed to get a sailor on one of the other ships to take back his carved bobbins to Polly so she would get them before he arrived back ‘ome.



VIEW OF FALMOUTH FROM THE BASE OF CENDENNIS .

#### *Falmouth Jamaica*

The trip on his way back taught him the reality of war and it became all too real. Incident after incident took its toll on his new friends, but they did eventually prevail. Captain Wentworth ran the Asp, a rather old rather and dilapidated ship extremely well, and having done his duty for his country he began to look for a ship that would bring them all some bounty as they came closer to England.

It was in the Bay of Biscay, a rough stretch of water, when they came upon a well laden Spanish cargo ship making heavy weather of the wind and waves of that huge Bay. The Spanish ship thought it was pretty well home and dry and was surprised when the small fast and high speed firing English ship attacked them and overwhelmed them. The sailors of the Asp were delighted with their prize as they towed their victim into the Plymouth harbour overlooking the Hoe, where their hero Sir Francis Drake went out to defeat the Spanish Armada many years before.



*Pirate Ship and Merchantman*

Jack took his share of the bounty, secreted it well, disguised himself as civilian, in case someone knew of the money those sailors had and robbed him on his journey. He afforded a stage coach trip for part of the way, but walked the rest to make sure he and Polly had money enough for a good start in life.

He knew he was close to home when he began to see the beautifully black shiny feathers of the bird they called the Chough. That meant he was getting close to Exeter.

†196

More about Choughs. You know they are a type of blackbird, now very rare. They are also featured on the "coats of arms" of a few local families.



Polly was so surprised to see him when he walked up to the cottage that she knocked over her pillow in her rush to meet him. Her sisters were almost as exuberant to see him also. Mother, with her eye on the production of the lace, was nice to him but got the girls back to work very quickly but not before Polly proudly showed him the bobbins he had made for her resting proudly on her pillow.

†1116

The "ASP" is the most seen of ships on these bobbins. It is famous from the novel by Jane Austen, "Persuasion". It is variously described as a frigate or corvette. There is just a smattering of evidence that it became a fishing boat off the coast of Devon after it was retired.



(Very doubtful evidence!) This is a fairly crude inscribed ship. You might notice a small fish near the tail of the bobbin.

1197

Another partially shown bobbin with its motto. Similar mottos appear on East Devon bobbins. The lettering is so good.



They were in a hurry to get married; they had been away from each other for more than year so they decided that they would spend some of the bounty on a down payment for a trawler for Jack and then a splendid wedding and party at the local inn.

113.

This could well be a wedding scene. Bride (? Polly) and her groom drinking a toast. This is the most human dipiction I have seen on any bobbin.



Wedding Toast

As all stories of this kind it has to end with the sentence, “and they all lived happily ever after.

*Brian’s Note:*

*Writing this little story made me almost home sick. Way back in the mid-50s I lived and worked not many miles from Beer. One of my colleagues lived in Beer and I bought my first guitar from him. Of course I knew “nothing” about lace and less than nothing about bobbins then, but like Jack Tar, I liked the local girls! (No, I did not marry one of them!)*

*Half way through writing this made me remember that I once spoke with a broad Devon accent, now heavily modified by living and working in a few countries over my life time, but even now a person from Plymouth will know that I am a “Plymouth boy”, the moment I open my mouth.*

*I wrote the story, just as an excuse to use a few of the bobbin pictures I have... you might have just guessed that! **Are they not amazing?***

*The Asp is discussed in Jane Austin’s novel Persuasion. The bobbins are full of local history. I also took the opportunity to find a few pics from Google images.*

*I managed to resist the temptation of showing you a picture of my beloved Plymouth Hoe.*