

Free Information Note No.8

About Bobbins & Spangling Bobbins

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The East Midlands Lace Bobbin

The traditional East Midlands bobbin was, and still is, a slender bobbin made from either wood or bone. They could be completely plain or highly decorated, made by an amateur or by a professional bobbin maker. Wood with a close fine grain was used and, for the bone bobbins, the leg bones from large horses such as the Shire Horse.

The decoration on these old bobbins was quite varied and ranged from messages pricked into the surface of the bobbin and stained, lead which was poured into grooves cut in the wood, spiraling wires wound around and along the bobbin, inlay, and so on. Some forms of decoration were specific to wood and some to the bone bobbins. These old bobbins are highly sought after by lacemakers of today but obtaining old bobbins is now a very costly pursuit because old bobbins became collector's items a long while ago. Lucky the lacemaker who inherits a collection of bobbins from within the family or lives in a traditional lacemaking area, where bobbins are passed from lacemaker to lacemaker.

The modern bobbin is made from wood or plastic as common materials and, less commonly from bone, horn, glass and silver. Bone, of a thickness needed for bobbin making, is exceedingly difficult to obtain now. Solid glass or silver bobbins are usually too heavy.

Many of the bobbin makers carry on the tradition of beautifully decorated bobbins, others prefer to let the wood 'speak' for itself. There is a bobbin to suit every purse and every preference.

Old bobbins are lovely to have and to use because they are so smooth and they look beautiful on a pillow but they don't improve anyone's capacity to make lace!! I quite happily use plastic bobbins along side my wooden bobbins and the very few old bone bobbins I possess. I see no reason to be elitist about what type of bobbin is used, so long as it fulfills its function. In fact, in preference to the cheapest of the wooden bobbins available, I actually prefer the good quality plastic because the finish is better.

I suggest beginners start with plastic bobbins because they can be purchased already spangled (beaded) and that allows you to search in a more leisurely manner for suitable beads, wire and tools for when you buy wooden bobbins. You can always change the beads on the plastic bobbins at a later date to personalise them if you wish.

The anatomy of the lace bobbin

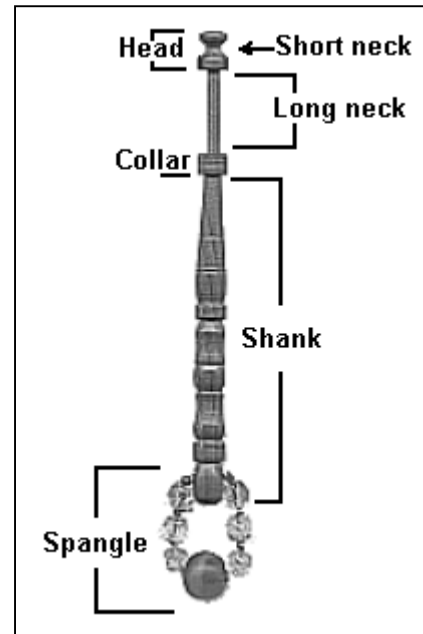
Like any other type of bobbin or shuttle, the lace bobbin is a vehicle for carrying thread.

Thread is wound onto the long neck and, for an East Midlands bobbin, secured by a running hitch tightened around the short neck.

The collar separates the shank from the long neck. Our fingers should never stray above the collar.

The shank is the part we hold onto when working.

The spangle of beads is there to give weight to the bobbin. The purpose is to tension the thread when working and to prevent the bobbin from rolling on the pillow when it is not being handled.



Many of us buy our bobbins sight unseen and we largely accept whatever we receive. However, if you don't like the shape (too thick or thin), the length or the finish on a bobbin then send it back because you will never enjoy working with it.

If you have small hands and are purchasing by mail order, then a good idea is to request short bobbins, even including a measurement for your hand length.

If you are fortunate enough to be able to choose your bobbins directly from a maker or supplier, then the main features to look for in a good bobbin are as follows:

- A smooth but natural finish on the wood- highly polished or varnished bobbins can be a nuisance as they slip around too readily and are hard to keep hitched.
- The lead-in to the short neck should be a smooth curve, not an abruptly cut groove.
- The short neck should be fairly shallow – deep indentations usually prevent the hitches from running smoothly and the threads lock onto the bobbin. Having to interrupt your work to unhitch thread is not only a nuisance it can also contribute to you making errors.
- Select bobbins where the combined long neck and head is no greater than 1/3 the bobbin length. Bobbins with short shanks are difficult to use comfortably without touching the thread.

If you have very small hands, select bobbins of a length to suit your hand size. Suppliers usually have a range of shapes as well as some that are shorter in their overall length.

A little about spangles

The spangle is a hoop of wire threaded with either five, or seven beads. The central bead is generally a larger bead, usually a more expensive and more ornate bead.

Traditionally, the side beads were cube shaped beads called 'square cuts' and were generally made by the village blacksmith. These beads were made in a similar manner to the modern lamp work beads but were shaped into a cube with two smooth ends and dimpled sides. The dimples were a result of the molten bead being touched with a file to shape them. The bottom beads were also lamp worked beads with some being of local manufacture and some imported.

In practice, spangles on old bobbins varied enormously, from the traditional form to whatever the lacemaker could afford, or chose to use. I have a few old bobbins with spangles made up from beads in the traditional way, as well as others with combinations of beads and buttons. The buttons range from boot buttons to military buttons. Obviously, these spangles had sentimental meaning for the lacemakers and, where possible, I have left these spangles as they were when I purchased the bobbins.

As well as the sentimental spangle, lacemakers used any excuse to add commemorative bobbins to their pillows. Modern lacemakers still follow the tradition of the commemorative bobbin, adding bobbins to their pillow to mark special family events or landmark occurrences. I use a set of bobbins where the spangles have beads with the initials of each family member. Another set of spangles feature the Chinese Zodiac birth signs for the four of us.

Spangling bobbins is fun, especially when you have gained a little experience in handling wire and pliers and have built up a nice stock of beads. I have found, however, that the more beads I own the longer it takes me to compose a spangle, so I definitely think you can have too much choice.

Spangling bobbins

Spangling bobbins is not a particularly difficult activity and nor should it be terribly expensive either. The tradition has been to use glass beads but glass beads have become extremely expensive of late and the cost of a spangle can easily exceed the cost of the bobbin. I happily advocate the use of plastic beads or a combination of plastic and glass beads. We always need more and more bobbins as the patterns we work become more complex and I take the view that buying more bobbins takes precedence over expensive beads. With the improved plastics technology of today, it is sometimes difficult to tell, just by appearance, which beads are plastic and which are not.

The traditional form of a spangle is to have five or seven beads threaded onto the wire, although I have seen as many as nine. There is usually a 'bottom bead' that is larger than the side beads and this is often a more decorative bead also. The side beads may be of a uniform size, or graduated.

The tools listed below can be found in most hardware shops. The wire is available at shops selling components for electronics or jewellery. There is no need to buy expensive

tools because making a spangle requires minimal pressure and the readily obtainable and inexpensive tools are adequate.

When purchasing beads it is wise to carry a piece of the spangling wire with you, to check the hole in the bead is large enough to thread onto the wire. Bottom beads should have much larger holes to allow you to conceal the join on the wire if using coated copper wire.

Materials needed for spangling

- Beads in Metric sizes: 0.4mm/ 0.6mm and the largest 0.8mm to 10mm/ approximate Imperial sizes: 1/8,1/4 and 3/8 and a little larger, either faceted or smooth. Avoid lumps and bits that stick out to catch on thread. Tiny beads can be used as 'spacers' providing the hole is large enough to take the wire.
- Tinned copper wire (sometimes also known as Buss wire). This is available in several sizes but the most useful size is probably 1mm or 1.2mm/ B&S wire gauge 18 or 16. Thicker wire is stronger and the spangles are less likely to break but hole diameter of the beads can limit the wire size you are able to use.
- A pair of 'snipe nosed', or similar pointy nosed pliers.
- A pair of 'side cutters'.
- An alternative wire is Tigertail. This is available from shops that stock jewellery supplies and is fine steel that is coiled to produce an exceptionally strong wire. If you purchase this type of wire then obtain the appropriate tools at the same time. You cannot twist this wire to lock it, you must purchase small metal beads that are crimped onto the Tigertail.

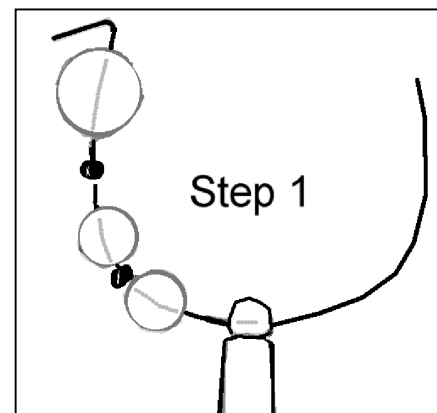
Approaches to spangling bobbins using smooth wire

The diagrams below show an operation with the bobbin held in the left hand. I happen to use small beads as spacers and I drew the diagrams that way, without thinking about it, so just ignore the spacer beads.

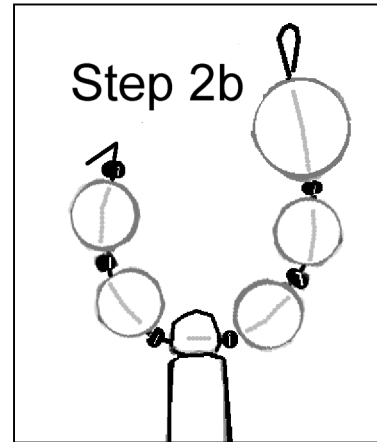
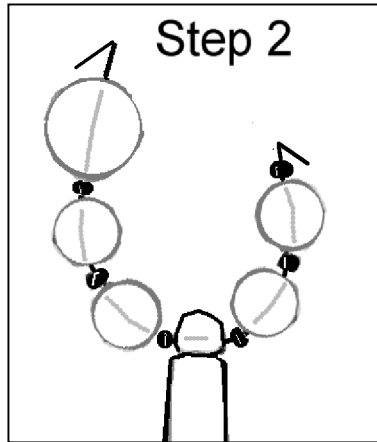
Until you are familiar with the process, allow yourself a lot of latitude in the wire length. Cut a piece of wire at least 70mm/2-3/4inches in length. Any excess can just be cut off later.

Arrange your bead selection on a plate or tray so they don't roll away. Lids from small, disposable plastic food containers are ideal for holding beads.

Step 1: Hold the bobbin bottom end up, with the wire threaded through. Thread one set of side beads onto the wire, then the bottom bead. Bend the end of wire outward to keep the beads from slipping off.

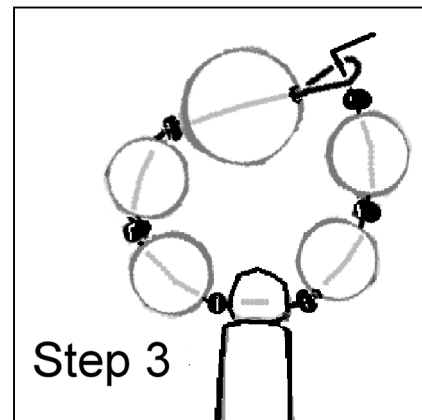


Step 2: Thread side beads onto the opposite side then bend the wire outward. Turn the bobbin around to change sides (Step 2b). Bend the end of wire protruding from the end of the bottom bead to form a loop, using the pliers.



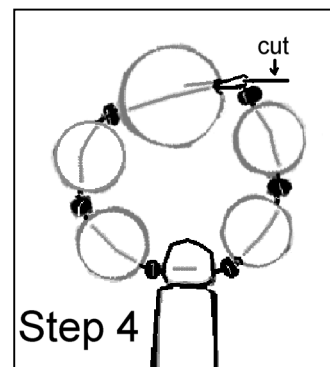
Step 3:

Turn the bobbin back to the original position. Bend the side with the loop toward the opposite side where the end of wire is bent outward. Slip the wire loop over the end of bent wire. Hold the loop of wire against the last side bead, forcing the beads against each other and the bobbin.



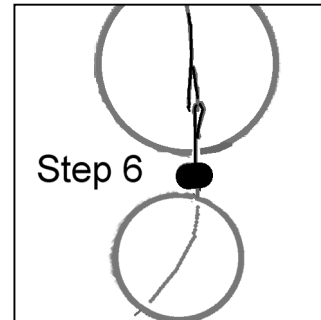
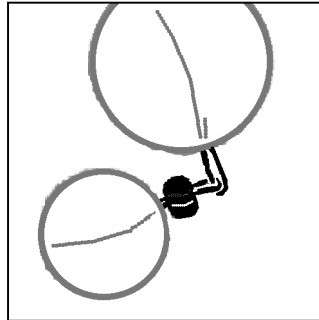
Step 4:

Grasp the bent end of wire in the pliers and pull the wire forward, then outward to lock the wire over the loop. Using the nose of the pliers, force the end of the wire loop inside the large bead and squeeze the loop end to flatten it, as much as possible. Cut short the bent end of wire.



Step 5:

Hold the beads below the bent end of wire to prevent them from moving. Force the bent end of wire inside the nearest bead creating a loop of wire, then squeeze the loop to flatten it.

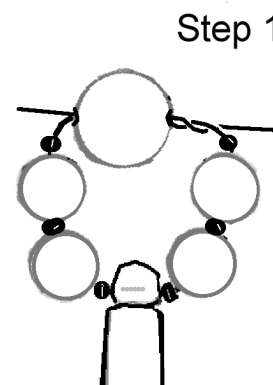
**Step 6:**

Manipulate the wire so that the interlocking loops flatten out to a curve, not the angled position shown in the diagram above left. Force the interlocking loops into the bead with the largest hole (shown here as the bottom bead).

If none of the holes are large enough to conceal the interlocked loops, at the very least, force the wire ends inside the holes either side of the connection. Force the beads along the wire as far as possible. The wire will form an angle at that point but the spangle will still be perfectly functional.

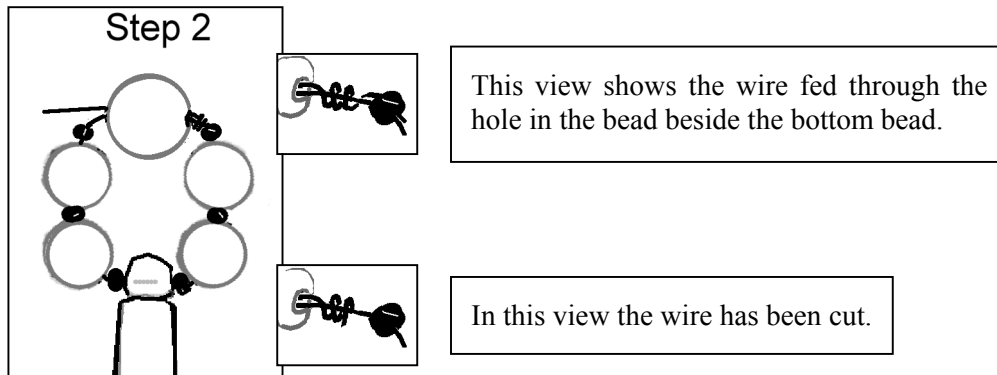
An alternative method**Step 1:**

Thread beads on both sides of the wire. Wind the two ends over each other then push the second end through the hole in the bottom bead.

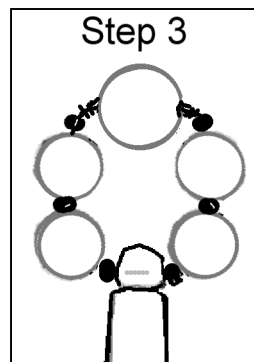


Step 2:

Hold one end of wire in your fingers and the other with the pliers and pull both ends to tighten the wire. Keeping hold of one end and using the pliers on the other end, twist the other end over and over the wire between the bottom bead and the next bead along.

**Step 3:**

Turn the bobbin over. Hold the bottom bead firmly with the fingers of one hand and grip the end of wire with the pliers. Pull the wire very firmly to eliminate any slack. Wind the end around the wire between the bottom bead and the next bead along.



These examples of spangling methods are only two of many possibilities. As you become familiar with using the pliers, threading beads and twisting the wire, you will find your own preferred methods.

With Tigetail wire, both ends are threaded through the bobbin hole and the special beads are used to lock those ends together.

