



A display of nineteenth century lace shows sprigs scattered on a netting background and a picture illustrating how the lace was worn.



The Lace Shop, Honiton showing collars £125-£300, handkerchiefs £95-£125, mittens £95, black lace £125, individual sprigs £10 each.

Honiton and its lace - a history and price guide

by Zita Thornton

Lovers of lace visiting Devon, shouldn't miss the opportunity to take a trip to Honiton. This market town, fifteen miles east of Exeter, was the centre of the East Devon lace industry for over 400 years.

It is debatable when lace was first made in Honiton or where the craft originated. The burial register in the local church records the deaths of many lace merchants in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A James Rodge, was buried in the churchyard in 1617 and it is clear that he had been trading for some years before his death.

Bobbin lace made in Honiton, used the finest possible thread and its quality and beauty achieved a national reputation amongst royalty and the wealthy who could afford it for flounces and edgings, to trim their clothing, and for collars, cuffs, accessories and wedding veils. The trade spread to other villages and towns such as Branscombe, Beer and Seaton, but still went under the name of Honiton. By 1676, there were 5,299 lacemakers in East Devon, a third of them in Honiton, mostly living in and around the High Street.

This was a highly developed cottage industry. The designs were commissioned from an artist by the merchants who employed lacemakers to produce individual motifs, known as sprigs. These were brought to a finisher who joined them together by means of fine netting and made them into the finished product ready for sale. The lacemakers received only a shilling a day, less than a farm labourer, and would produce only one square inch of lace. By the early nineteenth century the hand-made lace industry suffered competition from machine-made lace produced more cheaply in places such as Nottingham.

However, the Honiton lace industry was revived by Queen Victoria who wore the lace and commissioned some for her wedding veil and dress. Although it became fashionable as people followed her lead, it could not compete with mass-produced lace. By the end of the century, two thirds of the lacemakers were unemployed and the death of Queen Victoria marked the end of the Honiton lace industry.

Early Honiton lace was densely packed with motifs, including the stylised flowers typical of Flemish and other Northern European lace. During the eighteenth century, the motifs become more spaced out with netting as a background. Victorian lace has an enormous amount of netting with few motifs. With care you can see where strips of hand made netting were joined together. The theme for Honiton lace motifs has always been nature; flowers, birds, butterflies, cobwebs and scalloped edges. It was never a furnishing lace, its fine qualities being displayed on clothing and accessories rather than on the table. Edgings, shawls, collars, cuffs, bonnets, handkerchiefs and later parasols, fans and wedding veils were common choices to show off fine Honiton lace.

Honiton lace was always made with bobbins on a pillow, traditionally covered with blue fabric so that the very fine thread could be seen more easily. Honiton bobbins are unusual in that they do not have the bead spangles common on other types of lace bobbin.

The Allhallows Museum

The Allhallows Museum, in the High Street in Honiton, has an excellent display of Honiton lace, arranged chronologically so that its history can be appreciated. The display includes some impressive and important pieces with a provenance. Life size mannequins wearing lace trimmed costumes and accessories allow the visitor to see how Honiton lace was worn. Displays of other types of lace allow comparison and there are cabinets with historical lace making equipment and summer demonstrations of lacemaking. The museum, which is housed in a thirteenth century chapel and an eighteenth century school dining hall, also displays Honiton pottery, archaeological finds from the local area and relics of the early school. The museum is open from April until the end of October. Telephone: Museum 01404 44966.

The Lace Shop

The Lace Shop, in the High Street, (see page 95) has a fine display of antique Honiton lace and a comprehensive selection of all types of European lace from the sixteenth century to around 1900. Also available are framed sprigs of Honiton lace and lace mounted as paperweights, pendants, brooches and trinket boxes. Antique bobbins are also available. Owned by Jane Page and managed by her son Jonathan, the Lace Shop also offers a cleaning and restoration service. The shop has an attractive bridal department where antique wedding veils are displayed. Prospective brides can see and try on veils, from full length versions, to smaller bonnet veils.

Lacemakers can buy lacemaking equipment and books, whilst tourists are catered for with an exclusive design of white Honiton motifs on a blue background, found on all kinds of items including bags and aprons. Other gift items such as prints of lacemaking, charms in silver, thimbles and pincushions are available.

Honiton lacemakers

Honiton lace may no longer be made commercially, but the tradition has been kept alive by local lacemakers. Pat Perryman is a teacher with a reputation which attracts lacemakers from all over the south west of England to her weekly Tuesday classes, held at the Community College in Honiton. She also runs residential courses for students from all over

the world and travels herself, to teach Honiton lacemaking, in this country and abroad. Her lace school for children is continuing a tradition with its roots in the early lace schools of the seventeenth century. With past pupils acting as helpers she is ensuring that the skills of lacemaking continue well into the future.

Pat has updated the traditional motifs, giving a contemporary feel to her designs and including figures, birds and animals as well as flowers. She raised public awareness of Honiton lace by making the jabot and cuffs for the last Speaker of the House of Commons. These are worn by the current Speaker, Betty Boothroyd on special occasions.

Pat's group of lacemakers are completing a millennium project of a christening gown which will be displayed in the museum but will also be available for loan for baptisms.

The front lace panel has been made as piecework in the traditional way by all the lacemakers. Pat is applying them to netting and the gown is to be made up by Joan Becket, one of the Honiton lacemakers.

Buying Honiton lace.

According to Jonathan Page of the Lace Shop in Honiton, Victorian lace is most in demand. People buy collars to wear and handkerchiefs for special occasions such as a wedding. Expect to pay around £300 for a collar in top condition and £75 upwards for a handkerchief. A stole in the Lace Shop was £195, mittens £95. Wedding veils vary from £125 - £1,250 for a very long, heavy example, but a typical price for one with less sprigs would be £795. Short veils are £75-£300.

Black lace was in fashion when Albert died but not much survived as the dye caused the lace to disintegrate. The Lace Shop has a few pieces from time to time. Small pieces are between £125-£145.

Earlier lace is for collectors and the market changes rapidly. Rarity, condition and style have a bearing on price. A shawl as special as the one in the Allhallows Museum would cost around £10-£15,000 on the market. However, collars can be found for £40-£50, hair pieces for £95.

Individual lace sprigs are £10 at the Lace Shop. Framed and mounted they are £39-£50. Christening robes are difficult to find in good condition as they were often used afterwards as day dresses. They are often too small for today's babies but when they can be found, they would be around £225-£300 for one with lots of lace, £50-£75 for one with less lace.

At Christie's last June a christening gown with a panel of densely worked Honiton lace formed part of a lot which sold for £437 and also included a European lace gown and baby clothes. In the same sale, three flouncings of Honiton lace of varying sizes between just under 1 metre and just over 5 metres, sold for £805, almost twice its estimated price.

Two years ago a triangular shawl densely packed with flowers and leaves sold there for £920 but two other lots containing Honiton lace, including a wedding veil from 1830, failed to sell whilst a large mixed lot of lace including two Honiton pieces raised £437. Another lot containing four collars and two caps sold for £368. Includes buyer's premium.



Stained glass window showing the origins of the museum as a church.



Exterior of the Honiton Lace Shop.



Unusual lace flounce in the museum with cobweb and spider motif.



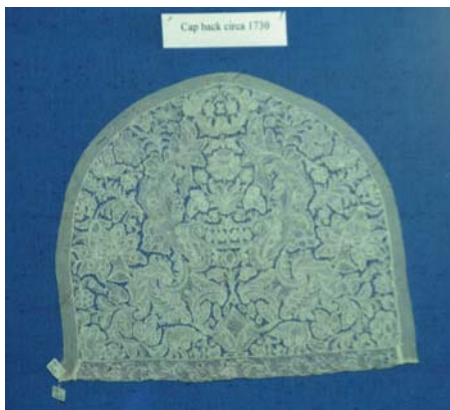
Old print of a lacemaker in the Lace Shop.



Wedding veils in the bridal department.



Victorian mother of pearl and lace fan with peacock motif, in the museum.



Cap back c1730.



Densely packed motifs on wedding lace from 1750.