

A Whorl, a Metal Detector and Three Reenactors: The Rediscovery of a Lost European Spinning Tradition

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A whorl

A long time ago on a patch of land that would eventually become a field just outside the city of Newport in South Wales, there was a person who had a spindle whorl. We can say almost nothing about them. Were they young or old? Rich or poor? What did they wear? What did they eat? What was their life like? The answers to the vast majority of such questions are lost to us. However, we can make a few conjectures. If we assume that the whorl was in use, or at least carried by its user, then the person was probably female – spinning was a highly gendered activity for the majority of British history, enough so that the phrase ‘distaff side’ became a term for one’s maternal lineage. By looking at the whorl’s material (lead) and its size, shape and lack of decoration, we can estimate that this person lived some time between approximately 1250 and 1400CE. However, despite all these vagaries caused by the mists of time, we know one thing for certain – this person was about to have a *very* bad day.

Once again, we have to enter the realms of speculation to suggest what might have happened. Was a woman or girl spinning whilst walking on the way to her fields? Or perhaps to her neighbour’s house or to market? Maybe she kept or watched sheep or pigs or cattle and spun whilst at work. Maybe it wasn’t a spinner at all, but a child who took their mother’s or their older sister’s spindle whorl out for a day of chores and playtime. Regardless, what is clear is that the whorl was lost. Perhaps the child dropped it whilst running home, late for supper. Perhaps the spinner went to investigate a stuck sheep, dropped her spindle and was unable to find the whorl that was knocked off into undergrowth. We can’t say.

What is fairly certain is that the whorl lay in that field, at least relatively undisturbed, for over six centuries. Sleeping in its bed of damp, alluvial soil, time passed. People and sheep came and went. Spinning moved on from distaff and spindle to the spinning wheel and then to industrial mills. And then, along came a metal detector.



The whorl, pictured with a modern recreated spindle stick

Photo: Alice Rose Evans

A metal detector

In the early 2010s, the whine and beep of a metal detector sounded. Its owner, Bob, put down his detector and took up his spade. Within a few minutes, our whorl was unearthed from the soggy ground of the Gwent Levels and woken from its centuries-long slumber.

Bob and the whorl went home, later visiting his local Finds Liaison Officer to declare the discovery. So far, so routine. Such a story is played out on a regular basis by whorls and metal detectorists up and down the country. However, a chance meeting between Bob, his newly discovered whorl and some medieval reenactors would cause a small but important change in the crafting landscape of the British Isles and beyond.

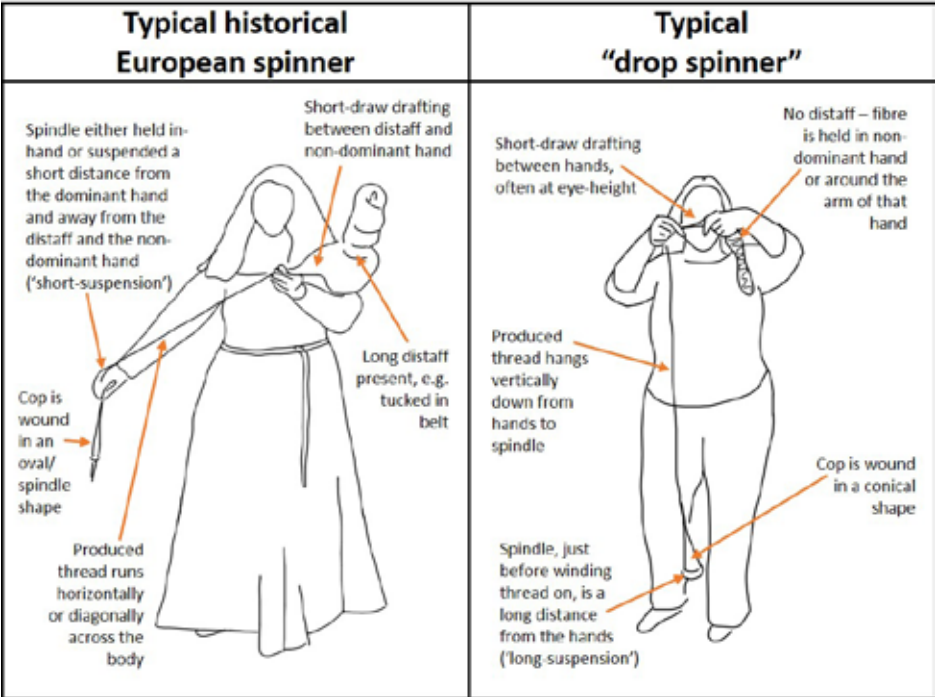
The reenactors

Not very long after our whorl was unearthed, Bob happened to visit a rather unprepossessing place sited in a warehouse on an industrial site on the outskirts of Newport. Despite appearances, this was a history-enthusiast’s dream: housed inside is the Newport Medieval Ship, a remarkably complete mid-fifteenth century ship excavated from the banks of the River Usk in 2002 during the building of the Riverfront Arts Centre. However, on this particular day the Friends of the Newport Ship were hosting an open day and, along with their medieval reenactment group, Mary and Alice were volunteering. Naturally, Bob, Mary and Alice got talking... and talking... and talking. One thing led to another and the whorl ended up going home with Alice with the hope of spinning with it again, of bringing it back to life.

Reality sets in

Unfortunately, this plan didn’t go very well! Try as they might, neither Alice nor Mary could make the whorl work. The whorl, being lead, is rather heavy – 80g, even before you include the weight of the spindle stick it’s used with. It’s also much smaller than most ‘drop’ spindles – only 29mm diameter at its widest point. This makes it spin quickly but for a very short time. It is highly prone to backspin and inefficient to use when ‘drop’ spinning. Over and over again the whorl was put aside in frustration.

Very quickly, it became apparent that we were missing something. This was an original medieval spindle whorl – indeed, a fairly typical one, if on the upper end of the weight range.



Spinning techniques of a typical historical European spinner and a typical ‘drop spinner’
Image by Mary Cleaton, © EXARC at <https://exarc.net/ark:/88735/10582>

It was characteristic of many thousands of medieval spindle whorls that have been excavated across Europe over the past 150-200 years. Thus, it clearly was a tool and one that had – at one point – worked and worked well. Our medieval ancestors were not stupid – spinning was not a hobby for them, but a vital necessity not just for clothing but for bedding, packing materials, sails and many other items. Clearly, they would not use the same frustrating, desperately inefficient tool design for several centuries instead of innovating a better one. Thus, there must be something we were doing wrong. The answer came from yet another unexpected place – Australia.

A breakthrough

Unbeknownst to us, the Australian reenactor Cathelina di Alessandri was also researching medieval spinning practices and had discovered a novel source of evidence. The then-newish platform YouTube was rapidly increasing in popularity and everyone was uploading home videos. This included both museums and regular people in central and south-eastern Europe. They uploaded videos of elderly women spinning yarn with a unique yet consistent technique that looked remarkably similar to that seen in medieval European art yet was completely different to ‘drop’ spinning’. Using this evidence, Cathelina was able to recreate the medieval technique, sharing it via her blog ‘15th Century Spinning’. Using Cathelina’s blog, combined with additional historical imagery and YouTube videos of elderly European spinners, we cracked it! The whorl spun again!



The north side of the Tournai Font at All Saints Church, East Meon, Hampshire, estimated to have been made c. 1130-1140.
The leftmost figure is Eve, who is clearly spinning with distaff and spindle

Photo: Jane Hunt

Rediscovery and revival

Shortly after this initial breakthrough, Mary and Alice met Jane at a surprisingly sunny reenactment event at Caerphilly Castle. And thus, the dream team was born. With Jane's decades of spinning expertise, plus an ever-increasing stash of images of spinners in art (such as Eve from the Tournai font in All Saints Church, East Meon) we were able to refine the technique further. Now, the whorl not only spun, it spun *beautifully*. Fine, high-twist worsted yarns were easily produced – just the sort of yarn that its original owner would have cherished all those years ago.

The key missing points were found – this whorl worked fantastically when combined with its original spinning technique. This included use of a long distaff, drafting between distaff and non-dominant hand, production of thread in a horizontal or diagonal 'across the body' motion and a spindle rotated via the in-hand or 'short-suspension' methods. Both of these methods ensured that the spindle remained constantly near the dominant hand, enabling backspin to be easily prevented and the rapid rotation to be fully exploited.

However, we couldn't just stop there. The simultaneous excitement at rediscovering a craft technique long lost in this country and the surprising ease, ergonomics and productivity of the technique meant we accidentally started evangelising to spinners whenever we encountered them – be that at reenactment events or elsewhere. A presentation to a visiting



Romney-Shetland yarn spun with a distaff and spindle and dyed with (top to bottom): foraged walnut husks, home-grown French marigolds, home-grown madder, Saxon blue, undyed white and undyed grey. Also, a pair of knitted socks, made using Romney-Shetland yarn spun with distaff and spindle, dyed with Japanese indigo

Spinning, dyeing, knitting and photo: Jane Hunt

group of Norwegian crafters was soon followed by another at the Medieval Dress and Textile Society and an article in the experimental archaeology journal EXARC. A community Facebook group and numerous workshops followed. More recently, we presented at the AGWSD 2024 National Conference, 'The Riches of Wool'.

All those centuries ago, a whorl and its owner parted ways. Yet in the last decade, that same whorl has brought so many spinners together from around the globe and helped to save an endangered textile craft. We hope you have enjoyed hearing its story – and might even feel inspired to take up distaff and spindle yourself, to carry on its legacy.

Footnote

- ¹ In usage within this article we are referring specifically to the modern, Western sub-type of suspended spinning as shown in the diagram rather than the more general category of suspended spinning which includes many sub-types specific to various places/times.

About the authors: Between them, Mary, Alice and Jane have approximately 75 years' experience handspinning and approximately 30 years' experience spinning with distaff and spindle in the historic European style. They are three of the most experienced distaff spinners in the revived tradition worldwide and have been teaching the technique for over five years as *The Thread of Time*. They are also keen medieval reenactors and can be seen sharing spinning and other textile crafts with the public at events in the UK and beyond.



Mary, Alice and Jane, spinning with distaff and spindle in mid-fourteenth century clothing

Photo: Sally-Ann Spence