

# BACK TO BASICS

## PRICKINGS PART 1

BY SUSAN ROBERTS

Before I started writing this article I thought that I would struggle to write a whole article on prickings but when I got going I realised how wrong I was, so much so that this first part of our Back to Basics series is going to be in two parts over two issues of *Lace* because there is so much to think about! When everyone had easy access to a teacher written instructions didn't need to be precise and detailed but now some are learning lace at a distance and it is so easy to misinterpret the gaps that a good teacher at your side would fill in automatically.

No matter how good a lacemaker you are if your pricking has a wobbly edge so will your lace, and although footsides are very obvious places to see where a pricking isn't perfect the same applies to any line in your lace, be it the lines around a shape or in a ground area. We all spend a lot of time working our lace and trying to get it right but you see lots of people who try to rush their pricking so that they can get started with the lace. Now lots of patterns are computer generated and very accurate and regular, as a teacher I cringe when I see inaccurate prickings from them.

These are my views on what makes a good pricking; some of you will agree, some will disagree.

Prickings have evolved over the last 20-30 years. When I started making lace people did a pricking on to card and then transferred the pattern markings to the card (I'm going to call these traditional prickings). Now the majority of people will use sticky backed film over their pattern and card (I'm calling these modern prickings). Both methods are looked at here. I use both. My Honiton prickings are always traditional (not sure how the blue sticky would stand up to the many sewings in Honiton with a needle pin) but my other prickings now are modern (unless I am doing something like an assessment where the traditional is expected).

There are three stages to making a pricking:

- Preparing
- Pricking
- Checking and marking up if relevant

The equipment you will need, depending on which method you are using, may include:

- A pricker is different to a needlepin. It has a short length of needle visible which you will see clearly if you buy a pricker that is glued in to a wooden handle. If you move to a pricker with a vice at the end you normally have to break a needle to get it to

the right length for use in the pricker. (I don't think any of the general suppliers sell cut needles these days although I know one that used to.) I use a pair of pliers to break a needle – I use the centre of the pliers to really weaken the needle at the point I want to break it (but I don't break it straight away). I then hold one end of the needle in my left hand, use pliers in my right hand to hold the other end of the needle (anywhere the other side of the weakness created in the needle) then waggle the pliers to break the needle, being careful not to create a bend in the needle when I break it. Have you thought about your lace pins? You will often use different thicknesses of pins so why use the same pricker/needle for your pricking? Because I generally work fine laces I have a No 10 sharp needle in my vice pricker – great for when I'm going to use the little Duchesse pins to work Honiton or my long fine Binche pins. I struggle, however, when I've tried to work Torchon on a pricking made with my usual vice pricker as the larger pins are much harder to push into the small holes. If I had a No 8 sharp needle in the vice, which is what most glued versions have as standard, the holes would be good for Torchon but larger than the pins for my finer laces, so that the pins would probably move about under tension. So it really is a case of not just the right pins for the job but the right needle in your pricker to match the pins.

- A cork board sold by most of the general suppliers will last you a lifetime of lacemaking and is cheaper than a box of pins. Yes you could use a flat lace pillow but this will shorten the life of your pillow. I have seen people use the back of place mats – yes it works but the cork is generally more condensed and depending on the length of your needle you could damage the other side. Never use a domed pillow to prick on because you will more than likely end up pricking at an angle. When attaching your pricking to the board I would only use drawing pins; if the card and pattern are not held together firmly one is likely to move, your pricking will be slightly distorted and checking at the end will be much harder.
- Pricking card is sold in different thicknesses and size of sheets by general lace suppliers. It is a compressed card that doesn't shed or shatter in the same way that the card you get around food can and it doesn't seem to absorb fluid in the same way packaging card does. It is cheaper than your pins or thread and a piece will normally last you quite a few prickings (depending on their size). If you are

getting sheets larger than A4 try to get them at a lace day as postage is expensive. I'm sure pricking card isn't just manufactured for lacemakers; I'd love to know what else it is used for (and its other names).

- Matt sticky film is great. Your pattern is sandwiched under it and you have all your pattern markings there. Again your general lace supplier will stock the blue/orange in small amounts and some suppliers stock clear (blue thread on a blue background is difficult to see and blue on top of a coloured pattern sheet can be very dark). You really do need the matt so you don't get light bouncing back. I was taught an additional tip of when you have finished sticking the blue film to take a pair of scissors, hold the blades together and using the handles rub over the film. If you've not done this before you will be amazed at how much clearer the pattern lines are underneath the film and how much less glare there is.
- Beeswax makes it easier to prick holes through the pricking card and is again sold by general lace suppliers. I put my needle in to the beeswax as if I were pricking it prick 10 holes, then prick into the beeswax again. This helps me to remember to keep the needle of the pricker lubricated and protect my wrist a bit. You really do notice the difference the beeswax makes, and if your pattern is anything but a small bookmark you will feel a benefit. Waxed paper is an alternative (cereal packets used to be a good source for this but sadly they have changed!). When you have finished your pricking rub over it with a cloth/kitchen paper to remove any excess wax that has been left on the surface and make sure you clean the needle of excess wax regularly.
- A fine permanent ink black pen to mark up your card if you are working a traditional pricking. I'm sure everyone has seen what happens to the ink in felt tips when the paper they are on gets wet and also the effects of lead or charcoal on hands; well the same could happen to your lace if you don't use a permanent pen for a traditional pricking – obviously your lines need to be relatively fine for lace so a permanent marker isn't the right thing to use, look for the words permanent or indelible and you will be fine. If you get a 0.05 pen you will probably find that it doesn't last very long as you need to be very careful not to press too hard so go for a slightly larger size.
- Do you use a magnifier to work your lace? Do you use the same magnifier to do your prickings and if not, why not? It really does make a difference. I don't use a magnifier all the time but for finer laces I now find that pricking under a magnifier gives me a much better end result.

### **Preparing your traditional pricking**

Take your paper pattern and cut around it leaving about 5cm around your pattern on all sides. Cut a piece of pricking card about the same size or slightly larger. Place your pricking card on top of the cork board and your paper pattern on top then use a drawing pin to hold the two together in at least four places (normally the corners but you might feel you want more). The card and pattern should lie perfectly flat. You are now ready to start pricking.

### **Preparing your modern pricking**

Modern prickings need a bit more care to set up and take a bit more time but benefits come later. Take your pattern and cut around it leaving a small amount of space around the pattern on all sides, 1cm all the way around is about right. Now cut a piece of pricking card at least 2cm larger than the pattern you have cut. This means that the pattern will be securely attached to the card all the way around. Then cut a piece of the sticky backed film about the same size as the card – it doesn't need to be a perfect match. Now you need to sandwich your paper pattern between the card and the film. I've seen people do this in various ways; some people glue their paper pattern to the card then apply the film. If you are going to do this make sure you use sparingly and use a dry glue that leaves virtually no residue behind as this will probably give you a lump and try to avoid areas with pins in them, so no PVA or prit stick type glue. I prefer not to glue but I might use a very small piece of tape over one edge to hold the paper in place while I'm starting. Although sticky backed film is great it isn't the easiest thing to handle and it sticks very easily. I tend to take a small amount of the backing paper off fold it back and place this where I want it as the top layer of the sandwich then pull back a bit more of the backing and gently smooth the sticky film out and continue this until all the backing is removed and the film is stuck all the way around. If you pull all the backing paper off at once you are highly likely to get bubbles or stretches in the film. At this point you will almost certainly have excess film around some of the edges, some students I teach were taught to fold this over on to the other side of the card. Personally I don't like this. It often isn't done well and you end up with a lump around the edges. I've also seen students leave excess film around their pricking and use this to stick the pricking to their pillow, I wouldn't advise this as it almost certainly leaves a sticky mark on the pillow when you have finished. What I do is trim the sandwich of card, paper pattern and sticky film so there is no film hanging over the card. This really is a trim of the edges so don't go and cut right up to your paper pattern edge or everything will fall apart. You are now ready to start pricking.

Next time – actually pricking the pin holes, checking your pricking, marking up a traditional pricking and piecing prickings together.