

1861

Queen Victoria and the Whitby Jet Industry



In 1861 Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, died at the age of 42. They had been happily married for twenty-two years. Following Albert's death, Queen Victoria plunged into a period of deep mourning which lasted until she died in 1901.

As a mark of respect to Prince Albert, the Queen chose to wear black for the rest of her life. As part of her mourning apparel (or clothing), the Queen wore jewellery made from a black stone called jet. The wearing of jet by the Queen greatly influenced the ladies in the country and it soon became highly fashionable and much sought after.

This increased demand and boosted the jet manufacturing industry in Whitby, where much of the best jewellery was made. During the 1870s, there were 200 jet workshops in the town employing over 1500 men, women and children. The jet workers' tools were lathes, drills, knives, files and polishing wheels. Skilled craftsmen were able to produce the most intricate and beautiful of designs.



Jet mining was extensive for hundreds of years throughout the northern moors and coast. This was done using basic mining techniques and hand tools. Jet is also contained in the sea cliffs at Whitby. Parts of these cliffs sometimes fall into the sea and the jet can be washed ashore with the tide where it can be collected - that is, if you know how to recognise it! There are many black-looking stones on the beach but many of them are sea-coal - it is only jet that will show brown when scratched with a sharp point. This is the test for jet.

But what is jet? It is a relatively light, dense fossilised wood which grew during the Jurassic period, 200 million years ago, when dinosaurs still roamed the Earth. It was a type of monkey-puzzle tree (*Araucaria*), a coniferous tree related to modern-day trees which are sometimes called the Chile Pine. Whitby jet, said to be the best in the world, can be given a high polish much admired for its deep black sheen. This is where the expression 'jet-black' comes from. Jet was also thought to have magical properties and was worn as amulets or lucky charms as far back as the Bronze Age, around 4,000 years ago.

Next time you are on the beach at Whitby, see if you can find a piece of jet.
Good luck!

QUESTIONS

1. When did Prince Albert die?
2. How did this affect Queen Victoria?
3. What did Queen Victoria do as a mark of respect for Prince Albert?
4. How did Queen Victoria's apparel impact on the ladies of the country?
5. How many jet workshops were there in Whitby during the 1870's?
6. How do you feel about children being employed in jet workshops? Would children of your age be in jobs today? Explain your answer.
7. What sorts of tools were used and what was produced?
8. Where is jet found?
9. What is jet?
10. If jet is from a tree that doesn't grow naturally in Britain now, why do you think we can find jet here?
11. How do you know if you have found jet?

Find out more:

- Visit Whitby Museum, Pannett Park, Whitby YO21 1RE to view a fantastic collection of Victorian jet jewellery, a model of Whitby Abbey, and a superb chess-board with cut and polished ammonites representing the white squares - <https://whitbymuseum.org.uk/>
- The Whitby Jet Heritage Centre, 123b Church Street, Whitby YO22 4DE, <http://www.whitbyjet.co.uk/>
- 'Whitby Jet' by Helen & Katy Muller (2009)