



Queen Victoria and the Whitby Jet industry

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The death in 1861 of Prince Albert, Consort to Queen Victoria, not only shattered Victoria's world but brought about a surge of interest in jet jewellery.

The Queen had been married to Albert for 22 years and had come to rely on him for advice on the political questions of the day. She was also devoted to him, and his unexpected death at the early age of 42 sent her into deep mourning which was to last for over 40 years. Wearing widow's weeds for the rest of her long life, Queen Victoria complemented her dress with jet jewellery, thus bringing about a fashion in mourning apparel that lasted until after her own death in 1901.

But the history of jet goes back centuries before Victoria brought it into prominence. Writing in the first century AD, Pliny described some of the supposed uses of this dense black material found in several places around the ancient world, including in northeast Yorkshire: "the fumes of it, burnt, keep serpents at a distance and dispel hysterical affections: they detect a tendency also to epilepsy and act as a test of virginity. A decoction of this stone in wine is curative of toothache; and in combination with wax it is good for scrofula". Over time however all these uses for jet have been found wanting, and its only

true value has been in the jewellery and ornament trades.

Light, dense and capable of taking a high polish, jet is a specialised form of fossil wood derived from a tree similar to the monkey puzzle (of the genus *Araucaria*). Whitby jet, arguably the best in the world, comes from the local Jurassic rocks where it has been preserved for up to 200 million years. It was mined extensively throughout the northern moors and coast for hundreds of years, using simple hand tools and crude mining techniques.

Unlike the local alum and ironstone industries, which had a huge impact upon the landscape, jet mining was relatively small-scale and evidence on the ground usually has to be searched for. Horizontal passages, or 'adits', were driven into the hillsides or coastal cliffs just below the strata from which alum was quarried. Waste was simply tipped out below the adit and due to its high oil content would sometimes spontaneously combust, burning the black shale to a strong red colour similar to burnt alum shale. Anyone travelling along the A172 between Stokesley and Swainby when the setting sun is striking the Cleveland escarpment will notice a clearly visible necklace of small red waste-tips, accurately marking the line of old jet workings along the contour.

Although worked in Britain since at least Bronze

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Age times, it was not until the late 19th century that a jet industry evolved, based in Whitby. In its heyday, during the 1870s, there were no fewer than 200 jet workshops in the town employing over 1500 men, women and children. The jet workers' tools were simple lathes, drills, knives, files and polishing wheels. With these, a skilled worker was able to produce the most intricate of designs. But by the late 1800s jet was rapidly going out of fashion and this, coupled with imitations and cheap imports, led to the gradual collapse of the industry. A revival of interest in recent years supported by innovative new designs has led to jet once again being carved and sold in the town, albeit on a much smaller scale than yesteryear.

Walk along the shore after a high tide and you may be lucky enough to find some small pieces of Whitby jet, but beware, there is a lot of sea-coal around as well. Chemically the two are very similar so how do you tell the difference? You could try one of Pliny's tests but they are not to be recommended! It is said that if you crunch a bit of your find between your teeth and spit out black bits then you have sea-coal - while if you spit out white bits, that's your teeth and you have found Whitby jet! A much safer method is to look for the conchoidal fracture lines (like broken bottle glass) or rub a piece on dry sandstone – if the streak is black you have sea-coal, if it's brown you're in luck.



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)



Hamond's jet workshop and shop, Whitby



Jet necklace, Whitby Museum



Queen Victoria



Monkey puzzle tree