

Jet

by Sally Thornton

Black, forsooth; coal-black, as jet.



King Henry VI Part 2
Act 2 Scene 1
William Shakespeare

Last month I wrote about Amber and to continue on the theme of British gemstones this month I am going to write about Jet.

We are all familiar and may use the expression 'jet black' but probably never



even think about either the expression or its links to this beautiful gemstone. But jet has a history as old and as long as any other known gem and goes back to mankind's earliest use of decorative materials. Throughout its thousands of years of use as a gem it was known as a magical jewel, a bringer of good fortune and a protector against all evil. Worked pieces of jet have been found in Bronze Age burial mounds and during the Roman occupation of the British Isles worked pieces of jet were shipped to Rome.

If asked, I think that most people today would be hard pressed to tell you much about jet apart from that it is black and perhaps that it is associated with antique jewellery, but if we turn the clock back only 150 years we would find that in England jet jewellery was highly fashionable.

So what is jet? Jet is organic in origin and, like coal, it was formed from the remains of wood which has been compressed over millions of years. But jet differs from coal in as much as it started life as an araucaria or more commonly known as a monkey puzzle tree. After dying, these trees fell into swampy ground and floated towards the sea. Eventually, they became waterlogged and sank to the bottom where it was covered by silt. With the continual build up of silt and the resulting compression over millions of years what remained of them became jet. Because these monkey puzzle trees are very hard and became waterlogged jet, unlike coal, has very little oxygen; this is why it is much harder and can take a magnificent shine when polished.

In the Jurassic period, araucaria grew in extensive forests in what is now area around Whitby and north Yorkshire. As a result, layers of jet are found in the rocks which run in the cliffs for nine miles north and south of Whitby whilst in the historic fishing town itself the jet is found under the sea. North of Whitby, however, the jet layer comes back above the water and it was in these cliffs that the finest quality has been found. Today, you can still see jet seams exposed on the beach; however, it is easier and safer to search for jet washed up on the shore around the high tide mark or in small rock pools.

I have already mentioned that less than 150 years ago jet was highly fashionable. In these Victorian times mourning etiquette was strict and after the death of Queen Victoria's beloved Prince Albert in 1861 the Queen went into a 40 year period of

mourning: indeed, she wore black for the rest of her life. This led other women to following her example and, in turn, had a direct impact for the demand for jet, which shot up in price.

Whitby itself was at the centre of the remarkable period in the history of jet and this mining and fashioning of jet provided the town with much of its income; Whitby became prosperous because of it.

To retrieve this precious material, the Victorian miners would have to hang from the cliff tops on ropes and tunnel into the face of the cliff to find a large specimen. Some of these specimens would run several metres in to the cliff indicating a big tree. In 1873, with the industry at its height Whitby's jet industry employed approximately 1,500 men in some 200 manufacturing workshops. These manufacturing premises were known as jet shops and, until recently, a few old photographs were the only record of what a Victorian jet shop looked like. But in 1977, an exciting event took place by accident. In Whitby, a plumber was investigating a leak from his premises from the upper floors which led through to an attic and upon opening the attic door; the plumber discovered that he had stepped back in time to find a complete jet workshop intact with thick layers of jet dust!

As we see from Shakespeare, jet is normally described as black, but it also can be dark brown and contain pyrite inclusions which give it a brassy colour and metallic lustre. When polished, the lustre is sufficiently bright for pieces of jet to have been used as mirrors in medieval times. It is hard enough to be polished and yet soft enough to be turned in a lathe or cut with a knife. Jet is also pleasantly warm to the touch because it is a poor conductor of heat but it is a soft gem material and so is easily scratched or chipped.

The monks of Whitby Abbey used jet to make crosses and rosary beads. Although jet was made into brooches, buttons, bangles and pendants, beads were probably the most popular item of jet jewellery varying in lengths from 500mm to 1500mm long rows known as a 'guard' and were either plain, faceted or carved and could be combined into one necklace. It is not easy to date jet jewellery with any precision; however, a very rough guide of the date of a piece is given by its size. Very large pieces of jewellery were worn in the mid-19th century with the crinoline, and the size tended to decrease as the century progressed.

During jet's immensely popular period in the 19th century, stimulants such as vulcanite, bog oak 'French jet' (black glass) and later bakelite were introduced as a cheaper imitation, which made it very difficult to the untrained eye to distinguish which was real jet. However, an indication of true jet jewellery is that it is usually hand made whereas all manmade stimulants are moulded, showing round edges and mould marks.

Although I have talked about the history of jet, today there are some current designers who work jet into their jewellery, combining other materials such as silver or gold to contrast with the blackness of the jet and create stunning contemporary designs. For my part, it is refreshing to find British craftsmen who can use this jet in a unique and modern way. If you would like to see some jet jewellery or have something made to your own specification, please do call in to see us in the High Street Kettering.

