

Count Dracula's Mining Connection

by Steve Roberts



Anyone who has read Bram Stoker's 'Lair of the White Worm' will be aware of the story's reference to the town of Whitby on the North Yorkshire coast, for this is where Count Dracula supposedly landed in England. Whitby was also the home town of the author, and with the sinister ruins of Whitby Abbey gazing down upon this once busy fishing port, one can well understand how Stoker's mind came up with the classic story that kept Bela Lugosi, Peter Cushing and others in work for so many years!

Whitby, however, has other connotations for jewellers and mineral collectors, being the centre of a thriving jet producing industry during the Victorian era. When Victoria's husband Prince Albert died, her mourning was such as the country had never seen before, both in depth and duration. Her daily dress was black in every detail – right down to the jewelry she wore – and what better black jewelry was there than the semi-precious stone jet? The wearing of jet by her subjects was initially an expression of sympathy for Victoria, but

later became a fashion statement in its own right, and Whitby was well placed to take advantage of the trend.

(above) The author Steve Roberts stands outside a tiled Victorian shop front, still in use as a jeweler's.



Margaret using a high-tech piece of equipment (i.e. a stick!) to search for jet under the sea weed on the beach at Runswick Bay.

Large parts of the coast of North East England bear carboniferous deposits, and from early times 'sea-coal' has been collected from the beaches, thanks to the erosive action of the stormy North Sea. With coal and jet both being black substances, it is easy to think of the two as similar and to imagine that any black stone turning up on a Yorkshire beach must be jet, but the two have very different origins. Coal was formed in the presence of air (i.e. aerobically) whereas jet was formed in its absence (anaerobically). Jet was also formed specifically from the wood of an an-

cient tree similar to today's Araucaria, or monkey puzzle tree. Only when the two are compared side by side is the difference apparent. A fist-sized lump of coal is very definitely 'a chunk of rock' in colloquial terms. Pick up a similarly sized lump of jet, however, and you don't feel that you're holding a chunk of rock, more like a chunk of plastic, on account of its lower density, texture and the fact that the apparent coldness of rock isn't there. Besides being collected from the beaches, jet was mined via small adits driven into the cliffs and also more conventionally inland.

In a visit to Whitby during August 2000, I wasn't lucky enough to find a fist-sized piece of jet, but did get to handle some found by one of the few remaining jet polishers. Whitby is an intriguing and beautiful place to visit just because of its situation, its cobbled lanes, its fishing history and numerous small shops that just demand to be inspected. Many of these shops still sell jet jewellery, some of which is obtained and produced locally. At the base of the steps leading up to the ruined abbey is a particularly interesting one.

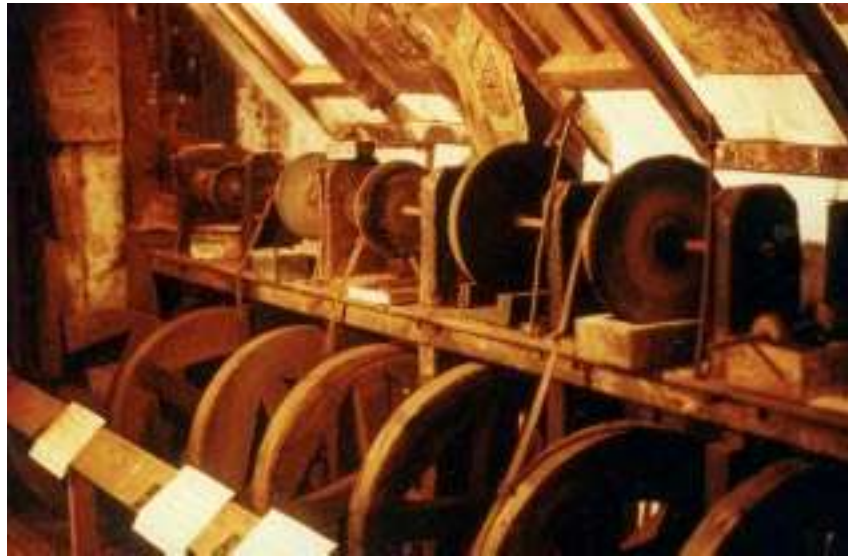


Sign outside the Whitby jet workshop where the Victorian equipment may be seen.

Some years ago, a builder was engaged to make extensive alterations to an old house in Whitby. The attic had been effectively sealed off for many years, but on breaking through the brick partition, the builder found that it concealed a complete Victorian jet workshop. All the equipment for cutting, grinding and polishing the material was there, as were a couple of period advertisements and even an old coat! The alterations to the building necessitated the removal of the old equipment, but it was carefully dismantled and reassembled in its present location, using even part of the old attic woodwork and timbers. The present

owners make and sell jet jewellery and also have a display area. When viewing the old workshop, visitors are given a Walkman that tells them all about the equipment and processes involved.

What is particularly noticeable is that the dust produced (of which there is plenty) is not black, but brown, and herein lies the key to discriminating between jet and sea coal. One of the owners of the enterprise told us of a place on the coast where we might find jet. He then advised us to find a white quartz pebble. Any potential specimens should then be rubbed on the stone – coal would leave a black



The old equipment and original timbering.

mark, but jet would be brown. This is, of course, a crude form of the mineralogist's streak test, using an unglazed porcelain tile instead of the pebble.

Off we went to Runswick Bay (obviously not the BEST place for jet – that would have been a closely guarded secret!), found a couple of white pebbles and began a careful search of the beach. After half an hour precisely nothing had turned up, when a beachcomber advised us to look under the piles of stinking seaweed. This we did, and were soon finding fingernail-sized pieces of jet, well rounded and semi-polished by the sea's action.

Nightfall got the better of us, and we were forced to call a halt with about a matchbox full of specimens. It certainly was a fascinating day out. Just wish I knew how I came to get these two red marks on my neck

Pieces of Jet from Runswick Bay.

