



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.

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

## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. When did Prince Albert die?

**1861**

2. How did this affect Queen Victoria?

**She went into deep mourning until she died in 1901.**

3. What did Queen Victoria do as a mark of respect for Prince Albert?

**She chose to wear black, including jewellery made of jet.**

4. How did Queen Victoria's apparel impact on the ladies of the country?

**It became very fashionable.**

5. How many jet workshops were there in Whitby during the 1870's?

**200**

6. How do you feel about children being employed in jet workshops? Would children of your age be in jobs today? Explain your answer.

**Own feelings. Discuss why children of age 9-11 are not in jobs today, because it would be cruel and against the law.**

7. What sorts of tools were used and what was produced?

**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.**

8. Where is jet found?

**Northern moors, coast and sea cliffs.**

9. What is jet?

**Fossilised monkey-puzzle tree.**

10. If jet is from a tree that doesn't grow naturally here now, why do you think we can find jet here?

**Land-masses have moved around over millions of years because of Tectonic shifts, and the climate of the places where the monkey-puzzle trees grew was different from what we find today in the North York Moors.**

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11. How do you know if you have found jet?

There are many black-looking pieces on the beach but it is only jet that will show brown when it is scratched with a sharp point. This is the test for 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 & Katv Muller (2009)

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