

# SPAR ORNAMENT VIEWS: THE HISTORY OF THE PEEP EGG

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IN 2007 THE MAGIC LANTERN SOCIETY'S NEWSLETTER 88 contained an article by Alexia Lazou about her Brighton 'Peep Egg', and the next issue contained a letter from Bill Barnes on the same subject.<sup>1</sup> From the article and correspondence it became obvious that our level of knowledge about 'Peep Eggs' has been quite limited. There are lots of aspects that are not generally known, such as where and when they were made, who made them, who sold them, where they were sold and how much they were sold for. Even what they were originally called is not known, because, as reported in the *Newsletter* correspondence, the widespread name 'Peep Egg' is a modern invention by Bill Barnes.

From sheer curiosity I decided to do a bit of research to try and answer some of these questions. There seemed to be two possible approaches:

- start with the raw materials and work forward to follow the production process through to the finished item
- start with a tourist attraction where Peep Eggs were likely to be sold, and try to work backwards to find where they originated.

The first of these two approaches has proved to be reasonably successful. The second approach has been less successful so far, but might in time yield some interesting results. The history presented here is not complete, and there are other avenues to follow. My research to date has found relatively few sources of information, particularly for some aspects of the production process, but there may be more available to consult that would give a different picture.

1. A typical Peep Egg, 'A present from Matlock' (Martin Gilbert collection)



2. The view inside a typical Peep Egg, showing Clifton Downs and Suspension Bridge, Bristol (Ken and Jean Scott collection, photo Ken Scott)



## WHAT IS A PEEP EGG?

As Alexia Lazou said in her article, a Peep Egg is a 'cylinder with a lens through which the viewer could glimpse pictures housed within the "egg"'. The subjects shown in Peep Eggs seem to suggest that they were a relatively early (mid nineteenth century) form of optical toy and that they were sold as souvenirs.

The main raw material for the typical Peep Egg is alabaster. Alabaster is named from the Arabic, 'al batstraton', meaning 'whitish stone'. There are four pieces of alabaster in the Peep Egg: the top, the bottom and two knobs to turn the images (Fig. 1). From the shape of these pieces it is clear that all four were produced by turning on a lathe. The top part of the egg is turned until thin, to allow light to permeate the alabaster and illuminate the images inside. Typically there is a shaft passing through the middle of the egg, with three images (or two images and a 'grotto') mounted on the shaft. The shaft can be rotated to show the different images (Fig. 2). A 'grotto' in this case is a collection of pieces of sand and small pieces of shell, sometimes mounted on a mirror, to give the impression that the viewer is looking at a rock pool (Fig. 3). This perhaps relates to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fashion for creating artificial



3. A typical Peep Egg 'grotto' (Ken and Jean Scott collection, photo Ken Scott)

caves and rock pools in parks and formal gardens. There is also a second, smaller form of Peep Egg, which has only one image inside (Fig. 4) and no shaft for rotating the images.

A lens is mounted in the top of the egg to allow the viewer to see the images inside. The outside of the egg is often varnished and then painted to show an attractive design, and sometimes the name of the tourist attraction is also included in the design. On a typical Peep Egg found today, much of the varnish and painting has often worn away in the years since manufacture.

Alexia Lazou's Brighton egg (Fig. 5) is a typical example of the main type of egg, containing images of Brighton including the Pavilion (Fig. 6). From examples in various collections it is obvious that many different shapes and sizes of Peep Egg were produced. They appear to have been manufactured by a cottage industry, with many small businesses or individuals making the eggs, and so it is unusual to find two that are very similar. The varying sizes may also reflect the size of the lumps of alabaster available to the turner.

## ALABASTER

Alabaster is a form of gypsum. There are four forms of gypsum that can be mined or quarried: gypsum ( $\text{CaSO}_4 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ); anhydrite ( $\text{CaSO}_4$ ); alabaster, which is gypsum with water permeated through it; and a crystalline form. It is mined in many places throughout the world, and in at least seven places in the UK. The most common use for gypsum is in the plaster and plasterboard industries, and so it is extensively mined for the building industry.

Alabaster is formed when a stratum of gypsum runs close to the surface and water penetrates the gypsum and converts it. Alabaster mining still seems to be a wonderfully hit-or-miss process. If an area is thought to contain alabaster, a mine or a quarry will be dug. If the miners are very lucky the alabaster will be in large pieces which can be used for statues and other sculpture. If they are less lucky the alabaster will be in smaller pieces which can only be used for ornaments. If they are even less lucky the alabaster will not have formed, and the gypsum in the mine can only be used for plaster. If the miners are completely out of luck, the area will have been dug out by previous miners and backfilled.

In Britain, the mines in Cumbria, Wales, Devon and Sussex do not seem to have ever produced much alabaster. There are three areas in the East Midlands where gypsum was mined, and in two of them the process continues to this day. Newark in Nottinghamshire and Fauld in Staffordshire seem to have always concentrated on gypsum for plaster, while the main production area of alabaster for ornaments was Chellaston in Derbyshire.

Chellaston is now a southern suburb of Derby. Alabaster has been mined here from medieval times, initially for tombs and statues in churches. Alabaster is an easy material to work, but it does not survive contact with water. It cannot therefore be used for outdoor



4. A smaller Peep Egg containing a single view, 'A present from Buxton' (Martin Gilbert collection)



5. Alexia Lazou's Peep Egg, 'Present from Brighton' (photo Brighton Museum)



6. The Brighton Pavilion seen inside Alexia Lazou's Peep Egg (photo Brighton Museum)

## NOTES

1. See Alexia Lazou, 'A peep into the past: a Brighton optical toy,' *MLS Newsletter* 88 (April 2007), 6-7, and Dr William Barnes, 'The Peep Egg', *MLS Newsletter* 89 (June 2007), 5.



7. A typical 'bauble' in turned alabaster (Leicestershire Archive Collection)



8. Alabaster candlesticks, watch stand and mustard pot (Leicestershire Archive Collection)



9. Alabaster candlestick, spill holder and watch stand (Leicestershire Archive Collection)

statues, but it can be used for anything inside a church. In the medieval period Chellaston alabaster was exported to the continent for use in churches there. This early period of alabaster working seems to have come to a halt with the Reformation.

Most of my information on alabaster mining in the Chellaston area is from a book on the subject by John Young.<sup>2</sup> The earliest reference to the use of alabaster for ornaments mentioned by Young is from *The Natural History of Staffordshire* by Dr Robert Plot, dated 1686: '... they tourne it into Candlesticks, Plates and Fruit dishes ...'. The last reference in Young's book to alabaster being used in this way is in the form of a postcard dated 3 October 1922, sent to The Gotham Company of Chellaston from Messrs Shanks & Co. Ltd, Denmark Street, Birmingham, suppliers of electric light fittings: 'We are obliged for yours of the 2nd Inst. [...] enclosing prices of Alabaster Bowls. We regret the market for these is very quiet at present and we are not in a position to order.' By this time turned alabaster was being used as shades for electric lights, but the first plastics were also beginning to be used for this purpose. So there was at least a 250-year history of manufacturing ornaments from Chellaston alabaster.

Alabaster varies in colour: pure alabaster is white, but often iron oxide or other impurities form veins of colour in the mineral. Although these veined pieces of alabaster were of no use for translucent Peep Eggs, they were highly prized for other ornaments.

#### BAUBLE MAKING

Having found pieces of alabaster which are suitable to be used for ornaments, the next stage of the process is to manufacture the Peep Egg.

Whitwick is a small town that lies about ten miles (16km) south-east of Chellaston, across the county boundary in Leicestershire. Whitwick was once the centre of a cottage industry that was known as 'bauble making', sometimes spelt 'bawble'. Small pieces of alabaster were shipped to Whitwick, where they were manufactured into a variety of what were locally called 'bawbles', but which were officially known as 'Spar Ornaments'. 'Spar' is a general term for several types of crystalline mineral, including gypsum and alabaster.

Items such as candlesticks and watch stands were manufactured on a semi-organised basis, generally by people turning pieces of alabaster on a treadle lathe. Groups of turners would work together in firms, quite often in an out-building behind a pub. Much of the assembly and finishing work was done as a home-based industry, often by relatives of the alabaster turners. Supporting the people turning and assembling the items were other people who would decorate them.

There is evidence of spar ornament manufacturers working in other surrounding towns and villages as well: records show spar ornament manufacturers in Thringstone, Coleorton, Loughborough and Chellaston itself. However the main focus of this cottage industry seems to have been Whitwick.<sup>3</sup>

The reason for this concentration of manufacture is unclear, but there is one possible explanation. Whitwick suffered badly from the Enclosure Acts at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Charnwood Forest (just to the north-east of Whitwick) was enclosed. The people who had previously grazed animals in Charnwood Forest had to find other occupations, and many of them became outworkers for the local hosiery industry. This outworking in Whitwick continued for some 40 years. In the 1840s, as the industrial revolution reached its height, outworkers were no longer required for the hosiery industry as manufacture was increasingly transferred to large factories. At this time the spar ornament

industry was growing, and so people who had been used to outworking in the hosiery industry became outworkers in the spar ornament industry.

At the same time the coal mines in the area to the south-west of Whitwick were being developed. This area eventually became the modern town of Coalville. It is possible that the influx of workers for the mines may also have had a positive effect on the availability of labour for spar ornament manufacture.

J.A. Daniell's paper includes a list of items manufactured by the

10. Combination watch stand and double candlestick (Leicestershire Archive Collection)



11. Alabaster photograph frame, showing a picture of Haddon Hall (Leicestershire Archive Collection)



bauble making industry. It includes candlesticks, ink stands, jugs with brass lids, tobacco jars, vases, spill holders, mugs, draughtboards with squares inlaid with coloured stone, pepper, mustard and salt pots, watch and ring stands, whistles, egg cups, egg timers, thermometers, tumblers with metal rims, ewers, grottos and views. Some of these other items can be seen in the illustrations (Figs 7-11).

It seems likely that the Views – our Peep Eggs – were among the highest status items that the bauble makers could produce. The top piece of alabaster has to be turned until it is quite thin, to allow light to penetrate the body of the egg and illuminate the scene inside. Turning the top half of a Peep Egg was probably a tricky operation compared to, for example, turning a candlestick. It would also have required a high-quality piece of alabaster.

Having turned the alabaster pieces, the individual components would be passed to someone else for assembly. The top part of the Peep Egg had a lens glued into its central hole. The bottom part of the Peep Egg had a shaft inserted, carrying a number of copperplate illustrations and sometimes a 'grotto'. The copperplate illustrations were often coloured with watercolour paints. Two small turned alabaster knobs were stuck on to the ends of the shaft, and the top and bottom pieces were glued together.

The egg was then passed to someone else who varnished and then decorated the egg, usually with a floral motif, and the wording was also painted on the completed egg. In 1955 one of the last of the bauble painters was interviewed by Mac Cherry for the Leicester Evening Mail. Mrs Sally Clark, then aged 87, was a niece of Joseph Ashton, who was one of the major figures in the bauble-making trade. It was her job to paint on the baubles 'A Present from Blackpool' or 'A Present from Weston-super-Mare', according to the resort to which they were being exported.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE NAME OF THE PEEP EGG

So what were Peep Eggs known as, to those who made and bought them? The reference I have found names them quite clearly as 'Views'. Therefore the full contemporary title of a Peep Egg would have been a 'Spar Ornament View', though to a modern ear Bill Barnes's title seems rather more attractive.

2. My information on alabaster mining in the Chellaston area is mainly from John Young, *Alabaster* (Derby: Derbyshire Museums Service, 1990). Some further information has also come from Reverend R. Lethbridge Farmer, 'Chellaston Alabaster', in *Journal of the Derbyshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, January 1916.

3. My main source for this information is a paper by J.A. Daniell entitled

'Bauble making'. This was originally produced for the Leicestershire Archaeological and History Society in about 1960, but a revised version is available on the internet at [www.geocities.com/oliveshark53/bauble](http://www.geocities.com/oliveshark53/bauble) (address correct at time of going to press). A further source is Sheila Smith, *A Brief History of Whitwick* (Leicester: Leicestershire Libraries, 1984).

4. *Leicester Evening Mail*, 21 January 1955

## SELLING THE SPAR ORNAMENTS

It seems that the trusted members of the firms were given the summer job of visiting spas and other places of interest to sell the ornaments. There is a reference in the literature to a photograph of a member of one of the firms selling spar ornaments in Weston-super-Mare, but unfortunately the photograph cannot be found in the Leicestershire Archives.

The prices have been reported as follows:-

Egg cups	6d	(Today's 2.5p)
Watch Stands	3s to 3/6	(15p)
Ink Stands	3/6	(17.5p)
Small Painted Candlesticks	8d	(3.3p)
Tumblers with Metal Rims	1s	(5p)
Tobacco Jars	2/6	(12.5p)
Views	3/6	(17.5p)

One thing that is not certain is whether the Views were sold only in the location shown on them. It is not clear whether a spar ornament seller at the Thames Tunnel would sell only Thames Tunnel Views, or if he or she would sell Views of, say, Chatsworth as well. Further research may uncover more information about this.

## WHEN WERE VIEWS MADE?

To answer this question we have to follow Alexia Lazou's approach and date the Views from their images. Alexia was quite clear in her dating of her own View: because it shows King William and Queen Charlotte outside the Brighton Pavilion it can be presumed that it was first produced before Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837, although individual copies may have continued to be sold after this date.

Many Views show the Thames Tunnel. The tunnel opened for pedestrians in 1843, and became a tourist attraction for a short period. From this it would seem that Views showing the Thames Tunnel would date from 1843 to 1845.

Another popular subject was Niagara Falls. Of the Niagara Views, many show the suspension bridge, which was opened in 1848, and so these Views will date from after this.

Other Views show the Crystal Palace. The fact that they are generally titled Crystal Palace and not Great Exhibition makes it likely that they were produced for the opening of the Crystal Palace in Sydenham, south London, in 1854, when the building had been moved from Hyde Park, reconstructed and reopened as a permanent attraction.

Gail Petri has a collection of Peep Eggs, and one very interesting example in her collection shows three images of Scarborough. The titles of the images are 'Museum Scarboro', 'Scarboro' and 'Spa Scarboro'. Because of the spelling it was thought that this was the Canadian town of Scarboro, rather than the seaside resort in Yorkshire in England. However the Scarborough Museum in Yorkshire was designed by Paxton (architect of the Crystal Palace), and was noted as a particularly early example of a municipal museum, so this is what is being shown. The Scarborough Museum opened in 1858.

There are many existing Peep Eggs that show the Clifton Suspension bridge, which opened in 1864. Another surviving egg contains images of New Brighton, including one of 'New Brighton Pier' which is probably the Promenade Pier, opened in 1867. As a 'reality check' this egg does not show the New Brighton Tower, which was opened in 1900.

The above are Views that can be dated easily, but there are others that cannot be dated so well. Views of the Houses of Parliament in London could date from almost any time after the completion of the design of the building. The previous building burned down in 1834, and the new building was completed only in 1860, but the Views could date from well after the completion of the building.

So we can summarise that Peep Eggs seem to have been produced from some date in the 1830s through to some date in the 1860s or 1870s. Possibly one factor in the decline of the Peep Egg was the growth and greater availability of photographic representations and stereocards, together with photographic novelties such as Stanhopes.

## THE SECOND APPROACH

As mentioned earlier, an alternative approach to researching the Peep Egg would be to start with a nineteenth-century tourist attraction and work backwards to the souvenir. In this article this approach has not been followed to any great extent, but the work which has been done has given us an interesting connection between the manufacture and the marketing of Spar Ornament Views.

The tourist attraction that would seem to be the logical choice for this work is Niagara Falls. Niagara is probably the most researched and best-documented tourist attraction of the nineteenth century. It would also be possible to compare Views that show the Falls with the different bridges which were constructed in different periods. This would give some further dating evidence.

J.A. Daniell, in the paper mentioned earlier, states that 'There was also an overseas market, several crates being exported annually to the USA and every spring a "hogshead of baubles" was dispatched from Whitwick to the Niagara Falls'. It seems that this is underestimating the market for Niagara Falls Views, as they seem to be among the most popular of the surviving examples.

In 1846 a John Tugby (c.1797–c.1877) was the landlord of the New Inn in Pegg's Green near Whitwick. In 1855 he was selling beer and making baubles. By 1863 he was a Spar Ornament manufacturer only, and the New Inn was in other hands. His son Thomas Tugby (born 1826) emigrated to the USA at some stage in the 1850s, and was running Tugby and Walker's souvenir shop at Niagara Falls by 1859. The shop continued to sell souvenirs for many years: in 1882 it was known as 'Tugby's Mammoth Bazaar' and run by Thomas Tugby's brother William. Several photographs survive of Tugby's shop, at least one of which shows the earlier Tugby and Walker shop (Figs 12 and 13).



12. Tugby and Walker's souvenir shop at Niagara Falls, advertising 'Rock ornaments'



13. A stereo card view of Thomas Tugby's Niagara shop

## SPAR ORNAMENT VIEWS TODAY

Although only a little information about the manufacture of Spar Ornaments exists today, many of the Views themselves are still in collections throughout the world. There are also good collections of the other Spar Ornaments in public collections in Leicestershire and Derby.

One amazing survival from the manufacturing period is in the Leicestershire Archive Collection. Two of the original copper plates that were used to print the View images survive: one shows Derbyshire Houses and the other shows Ramsgate Harbour (Figs 14 and 15).



14. Original copper printing plate: 'Derbyshire houses' (Leicestershire Archive Collection)



15. Original copper printing plate: 'Ramsgate harbour' (Leicestershire Archive Collection)

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The author would like to thank the following people and organisations for their help in the research and illustrations for this paper: Alexia Lazou, Bill Barnes, Whitwick Study Group, Leicestershire Museums Archive Service, Derby Museums and Art Galleries, Ken Scott, Martin Gilbert, Gail Petri and Brighton Museums.

This article is an extended version of a talk given to the Magic Lantern Society in January 2009.