

DORSET THIMBLE SOCIETY

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AT YOUR FINGERTIPS



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- * 3 Newsletters a year
- * 3 Meetings a year
- * Membership Year runs from March
(but you may join anytime)

SAMPLE



A CHINESE PUZZLE BALL (money can no longer buy)

As long ago as 1388, the description of a Chinese Puzzle Ball appeared in the writings of one Cao Zhao, a Ming Scholar. Cao was describing amazing hand-carved orbs of ivory, beautifully decorated, carved from without in and *usually* formed from up to 12 concentric rings, free-floating, one inside the other. The holes in each layer were evenly distributed, revealing the artistry underneath. Their alternative title of ‘Devils Work Balls’ was attributed because it was believed, at that time, that they were not made by

human hand.

There are several in Museums around the world with one or more on show and, being an avid collector of unusual antiques, my husband Philip desperately wanted one. However, when they appeared in auctions, the price guides were always prohibitive.

There is a saying ‘everything comes to he who waits’ and that is what actually happened. When China banned the export of

ivory items in late 2017, we thought he had missed the boat. However, once a collector, always a collector! In the catalogue of a prominent Winchester Auction House, just after we moved to Hampshire in 2018, there was a genuine Ivory Puzzle Ball, but with minimal damage. Philip had one last chance to secure an example and we managed to place a successful bid, given the timing. Deciding the uneven Winchester pavements posed the threat, we elected to have it delivered by a specialist company. The thrill when we opened the box in which it had travelled was all mine – Philip wasn't so sure! However, four years later, he is now pleased!

They have become known as concentric balls. Generally, those around today are from the early 18th or maybe the 19th



centuries, but a few museums around the world have earlier examples. It is believed that ours is no later than early 18th century. It sits on it's own slender 8 inch ivory stand, in pride of place in what used to be my break-front sewing tools display cabinet.

A very clever Paget neighbour, one Alex Osman, offered to repair it and remarkably, he was able to improve the bottom two thirds of the stand, far more than we expected (should have known better, shouldn't we)! The top of the stand and the sphere are much too delicate to clean!

The Canton Puzzle Balls are the most exquisitely carved, fashioned from a single piece of ivory. The first examples had only 3 rings, but examples with 25 rings can be found in Chicago's Museum of Asian Art. While they are technically puzzles, which can be solved by aligning the holes, maybe with a toothpick, they are usually prized for their fragile decoration. They frequently "feature dragons, because of their auspicious meaning in Chinese Culture".

In 1876 Scottish Photographer John Thompson travelled around China, looking at the methods used to make them. Sadly of course, in those days, Puzzle Balls helped fuel the Ivory Trade, which no longer can legitimately function, but skilled craftsmen are now known to be using jade, wood and similar substances, using L shaped tools (as historically) to access the centre of a sphere and carve layer after layer.

Researchers from the Rijksmuseum and a Dutch Computer

Science Institute set up a partnership to scan a 3D-image of 2 of the museum's early 18th century examples and to discover the actual process used to make them – how many L shaped tools are needed to make the carvings and what the craftsmen could actually see as they carved deep into the balls. I believe they have reported back, but as yet we await the information. Meanwhile, ours is where we can appreciate it each and every day – count the rings? No way, much too complicated!

Whilst everyone is aware of the trafficking of ivory (and rhino horn) which very sadly still continues today, this poor elephant, who gave up his ivory some 200 plus years ago, enabled, at *that* time, the production of a very skilled piece of craftsmanship.

Elaine Gausson



An unusual needle packet, with a local connection, produced by Wm Allwood of Alcester.

LATEST AVERY QUADRUPLE “FIND”



During Terry Meinke’s visit to Dorset in October I mentioned that I had purchased an Avery quadruple needle case. The needle case is white metal with plain

sides, but it bears the name Evans & Owen, Bath. Terry feels that the plain surfaces would be perfect for personalizing the item, and with the cachet of the name of a prestigious store on the lid would have made a charming gift.



Terry has researched the store with her usual thoroughness and has unearthed some very interesting details about the company, which will appear in her next instalment of companies who dealt with William Avery. As yet untitled.

The company was set up on Bartlett Street, Bath as a draper’s shop by Samuel Evans in 1846. The company soon grew to be the largest in the area, and Samuel took his nephew Thomas Owen into the business as an apprentice circa 1853. Thomas’ brother Owen followed in 1862. Owen later moved to Liverpool where he put his skills to use by creating his own business. He became very successful too and for some years maintained a link to Evans & Owen as a director.

Evans & Owen developed other interests, including a paper making business. Eventually the company employed 650 people.

Following a carriage accident Samuel came to Bournemouth to recuperate and later stayed at Weymouth, but by 1885 Samuel had returned home and passed away. The company continued and Terry has so much more to tell us about the families that she has added a new chapter to her book.

Having recently bought the two volumes of Terry's writings on London Companies who worked with William Avery, I know how much research and effort Terry puts into her work. Many of the companies such as Copestake, Moore, Crampton & Co. are known to us through our sewing tools and the books are a wonderful tool when we are researching the history of our items. Both volumes are available from the online publisher Blurb.

Editor

One of several postcards with a sewing theme, by Mabel Lucie Attwell.

Postmarked September 1947.

