

Isle of Wight Sand Bells and the mysterious Mr Carpenter

Phil James

In the early 1980s, in a shop window in the Northam Road antiques quarter in Southampton, I spotted a beautiful glass bell filled with coloured sands forming a picture. It didn't have a price, looked expensive, and the shop was, not untypically, closed. I never did go back; but the image stayed with me. Then, ten years later, during a family holiday on the Isle of Wight, we visited Alum Bay to see the cliffs made up of a whole range of coloured sands. In one of the local shops we bought small glass lighthouses which we filled with layers of coloured sand. Our efforts were but a pale reflection of the artistic object in my memory, but then, on a visit to the museum at Blackgang Chine, we saw some more, antique, examples of the craft—fabulous! I became determined, then and there, to find one of my own. Subsequently, over a period of several years, I managed, through eBay, to acquire a number of sand bells, each for just a few pounds. They were fairly basic, showing scenes of the Isle of Wight: The Needles, The Freshwater Arch, Carisbrooke Castle, and others.

Years passed, and then, in October last year, I was in the Salisbury Antiques Market, a treasure trove of antiques arranged over three floors. In one of the cabinets were two glorious sand bells.



Sand bells found at Salisbury Antiques Market (reverse side shown on right)

I could see that these were far superior to those I already had. One had a picture of Carisbrooke Castle, and the other, The Needles. Also, on the reverse, both had a tree depicted in tones of grey—a style, as I later discovered, known as 'grisaille'. They were priced at £33 and £39, and I managed to get both for £55: quite a bargain. One had a label underneath—'The natural coloured Sand of Alum Bay, so arranged as to represent Carisbrooke Castle, Isle of Wight, by W. Carpenter. Sold at (blank) by (blank).' The blanks are inked-in *WC* and an undecipherable signature.



Label on base of 'Carisbrook' sand bell

Despite the lack of a label on 'The Needles' bell, it was obvious to me that both were by the same maker. They really

are quite something, made with great skill and artistry, using just compacted coloured sand – no glue, no painting, just dry sand! And, of course, they were made upside down! The bases have the sands arranged in a 'marbling' style just like the marbled inside boards and end papers of old books. Above that a coloured band or two and then the picture window. Just look at the detail—'The Needles' bell shows textured chalk cliffs, white crests to the waves, and realistic looking clouds in the sky. Above the picture, one shows simple coloured bands, but the other a series of geometric bands of differing styles.

Late last year, as I searched the internet in preparation for a Zoom presentation on 'The Art of Sand' for the Southampton Mineral & Fossil Society (of which I am currently Chairman, having been a member for over 43 years), I found hundreds of examples of Isle of Wight sand bells, amongst which were a few clearly made by W. Carpenter, the maker of my own examples. Some of these Carpenter bells were plainly identified by a label, but all had that distinctive grisaille fir tree on the reverse. However, very little seemed to be known about this highly skillful artist and I was determined to find out more.

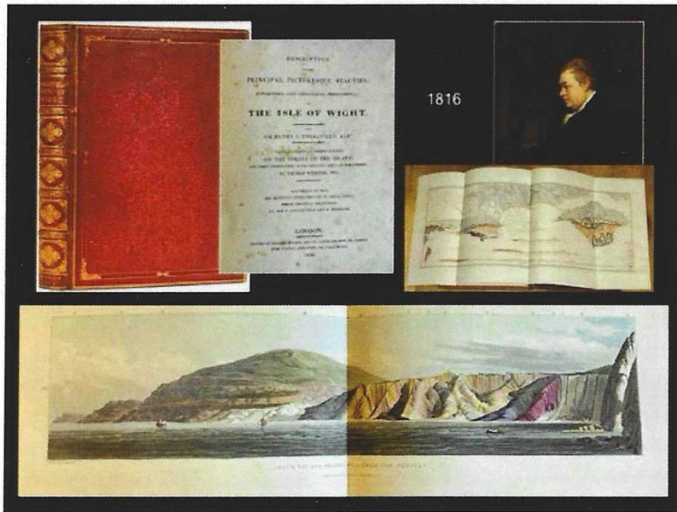
But first, why did this unique form of art first emerge on the Isle of Wight? Plainly, it was the island's geology that had provided Carpenter's raw materials. And for that we have the Alpine orogeny to thank! Without Africa crashing into Europe over millions of years, forming the Alps, and creating a massive ripple reaching 1000 miles to the north, the Isle of Wight would not be as it is today. In simple terms an anticline was formed through what is now the Isle of Wight from west to east. The southern facing dip side now has Cretaceous rocks at the surface, whilst the scarp consists of younger Tertiary strata, and the northern half of the island is covered with still younger beds. As a result, the beds exposed in Alum Bay on the west end of the island are now vertical, with over 1000 feet (305m) of beds, 42 to 56 million years in age.



Alum Bay with brightly coloured sands in the Bracklesham Beds and Bagshot Sands
Photo Roy Starkey

One of the earliest geological maps of the Isle of Wight is by Thomas Webster (1772-1844) in the magnificent 1816 work by Sir Henry C Englefield (1752-1822) *A Description*

of the *Principal Picturesque Beauties, Antiquities, and Geological Phenomena of the Isle of Wight*. Webster made a significant contribution with a series of 12 geological letters (chapters) making up well over half the book, plus 36 of the 50 plates including the important geological map—dated 1815, the same year as William Smith's map, but much more detailed. His double page hand coloured plate of Alum Bay is beautiful.



Sir Harry Englefield's lavishly illustrated volume publication, Thomas Webster's geological map and the coloured plate showing Alum Bay

Englefield and Webster both give descriptions of the coloured sands... 'The tints of these cliffs are so bright and varied, that they have not the appearance of anything natural. Deep purplish red, dusky blue, bright ochreous yellow, grey nearly approaching to white, and absolute black, succeed each other, as sharply defined as the stripes in silk', and... 'The number and variety of these vertical layers is quite endless, and I can compare them to nothing better than the stripes on the leaves (? flowers) of a tulip.' It is now generally accepted that there are no fewer than 21 different colours produced through the influence of various iron minerals and carbon.

Another important reason for the appearance of coloured sand souvenirs, both sand bells and pictures, was the increasing popularity of the Isle of Wight as a tourist destination. Queen Victoria moved into a completed Osborne House in 1851. Tennyson and Keats also established homes on the island and other famous visitors included Darwin, Dickens and Lewis Carroll. Substantial villas and hotels were built in towns such as Ventnor, Ryde and Shanklin to house an increasing influx of wealthy visitors, many of whom were keen to buy souvenirs.

So, who was W. Carpenter? By searching through records on Ancestry.com, I pieced together the life of a William Carpenter who first appears in Southampton, then moves sometime between 1844 and 1851 to the Isle of Wight. In Southampton his business is recorded as the 'Southampton Repository of Arts' in the High Street, but is also noted as a Bookseller. In further searches for images on the internet I soon came across this coloured engraving of Alum Bay.

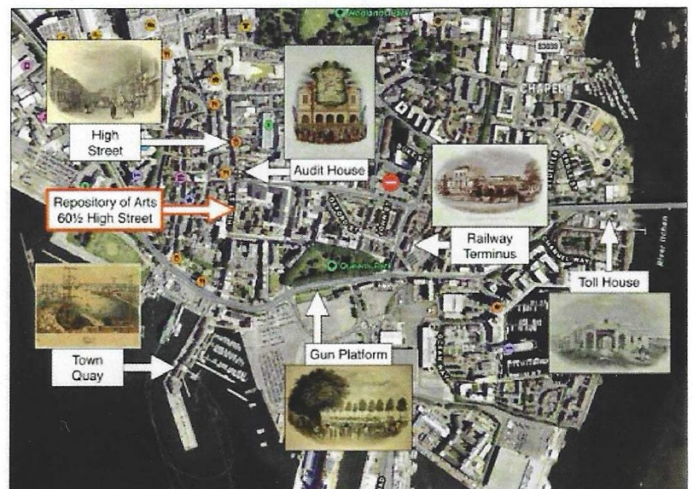


A print of Carpenter's drawing of Alum Bay

Public domain

Drawn by W. Carpenter and published by 'Carpenter, Repository of Arts, Southampton', the caption reads 'In this sublime scene, the vertical strata of many colored sands, the stupendous chalk cliff with its towering light house, and the far famed huge rocks rising boldly out of the sea complete the climax in the charming series of views that increasingly delight the Visitor of Vectian Scenery'.

It was pointed out to me that there was a London-based artist called William Carpenter who produced a fine portfolio of work in both oils and water colour based on travels in Egypt and India—but, although contemporary with 'our' Carpenter, his work was completely different in style. That they were two different people was confirmed when I found six more W. Carpenter engravings, produced around the early 1840s, all showing views and events in the lower part of Southampton near to the location of the Repository of Arts. Clearly Carpenter was a gifted artist and quite able to retail his work.



W. Carpenter's views of Southampton

Imagery ©2023 Google, Map data ©2023
Thumbnails: Public domain

The mysterious Mr Carpenter's Sand Bells

Phil James

I then discovered two further views of the Isle of Wight by W. Carpenter, one of Bonchurch, and another of Carisbrooke Castle which had details strikingly similar to those on the sand bell; both prints were labelled Repository of Arts, Southampton.

Then, finally, the 'eureka' print appeared!

While chatting on the phone last December to fellow HOGG member Martin Simpson—who has himself had a lifetime interest in sand bells—Martin sent across to me the far right hand portion of the following print.



View of Ryde by W. Carpenter

Public domain

I quickly found the whole thing, a splendid view of Ryde, probably dated just after 1846, the year Trinity Church in the view was completed. But, just look at the fir tree in the foreground on the right hand side! It almost looks out of place, but surely it is the very tree that is in Carpenter's sand bells! Like the others, it was drawn and published by W. Carpenter but now there was no mention of the Repository of Arts.



Detail of grisaille tree from 'The Needles' sand bell

Turning back to Ancestry we find that the 1851 Census shows a W. Carpenter, an Artist and Stationer, at 52 High Street, West Cowes together with four of his children, aged 14 to 22, shown as 'Father's Assistant'. Also, although barely legible, a cousin is listed as an 'Assistant in Plastic Art' (anything that could be moulded). Could this have indicated an involvement with the making of sand bells—perhaps fitting the plaster plug? 52 High Street is still a shop today.

By 1859 Carpenter had moved to Ventnor High Street where he is shown as 'Artist' on the 1861 Census. Again, the premises are still a shop today. By 1871 he had moved back to West Cowes and had become a Schoolmaster!

Record	Name	Address	Occupation	Age	Born
1839 Robson's Directory	Carpenter Wm.	60½ High St. Southampton Repository of Arts			
1841 Census	Carpenter, William (Wife Sarah 36)	High Street, Southampton Parish - Holy Rhoad	Bookseller	35	Therefore born c.1806
1844 Pigot's Directory	Carpenter, William	60 High St, Southampton	Bookseller & Stationer		
1851 Census	Carpenter, William (Eldest child 22, therefor married c. 1828)	52 High Street, West Cowes, Isle of Wight SHOP	Artist & Stationer	45	Chichester, Sussex
1859 White's Directory Ventnor Directory	Carpenter Wm.	High Street	Artist		
1859 White's Directory Ventnor Directory	Carpenter Wm.	High Street	Fancy Depot		
1861 Census	Carpenter, William	33 High Street, Ventnor, Isle of Wight SHOP	Artist	55	Brighton, Sussex
1871 Census	Carpenter, William	30 Victoria Road, West Cowes, Isle of Wight	Schoolmaster	65	Chichester, Sussex
1881 Census	Carpenter, William	"Bona Vista" 129 Mill Hill Road, West Cowes	Schoolmaster	75	Chichester, Sussex

So all this evidence, whilst not 100% proven, does point to William Carpenter the artist, being the same W. Carpenter who produced the beautiful sand bells. The fact that he was an accomplished artist confirms to me that he had the skill to create sand bells that were so much better than those of most other makers. The dates of his art, the periods when he was in West Cowes and Ventnor, all tie in with the times when the sand bells were made. Returning to the label on my Carpenter 'Carisbrooke' sand bell, the 'Sold at W C' is almost certainly West Cowes. It's just a pity that the signature is illegible—how wonderful it would be if it matched one of the family names on the 1851 Census!

Epilogue

During my research I also came across a video of the American version of the 'Antiques Roadshow' from Cincinnati, Ohio. Broadcast on 21 July 2012, it featured a huge and incredible Isle of Wight sand bell—nearly 18 inches (45cm) tall, this must surely have been an exhibition piece.

The presenter did not mention a maker, but I thought at once that it was almost certainly by W. Carpenter: similar marbled base and use of 'grisaille' style—though this time featuring Shanklin Chine—on the reverse. But then I had another 'eureka' moment! Just compare the Alum Bay/Needles sand image with the Carpenter engraving—it's the same boat in the bay, and the cliff profile at the end of the Alum Bay rocks is identical! The American presenter did go on to mention one Andrew Clemens, an incredible sand bottle artist from Iowa.



The large Isle of Wight sand bell, now in America

But that's another story altogether!

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