

# COLLECTING DERBYSHIRE BLUE JOHN & ASHFORD MARBLE

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**Works of art originating from the Derbyshire Blue John caverns have become increasingly sought after in today's salerooms by collectors, as large pieces have become increasingly difficult to find and large deposits are no longer mined. This can only mean good news for collectors of Blue John as the rarity factor is the main element that will force prices to increase.**

**D**ERBYSHIRE BLUE JOHN is a variety of fluorite unique to Castleton, which became very popular in the 18th century. It has a distinctive amethyst purple colour, with striations of mottling in lilac, cream and white.

Deposits of the stone are now all but depleted and pieces made from the fluorite and originating from Castleton are sought after by collectors. It is worth mentioning that the fluorite can also be found on the continent and modern pieces do occasionally turn up. A recent piece brought to me for a sale valuation turned out to have been of German origin had been sent to China to be carved expertly by the

craftsmen into a pair of exotic birds. This piece although quite large was only made a few years ago. It does look very similar to the Derbyshire blue John we have here, however it is really the type of objects and quality of carving which gives it away as a continental piece. How many cranes do you see in Hope Valley? As prices can vary tremendously it is advisable to contact an independent valuer in order to identify the origins of pieces.

It is quite rare today to find pieces dating from the 18th century going through the salerooms, and these pieces are usually of a classical form. For example classical urns are quite common, also pairs of obelisks. Bowls made from the fluorite and which are

very often raised on pedestals are usually 19th century or later, as hollowing out pieces presented many difficulties and was not perfected until then.

Examples of Derbyshire Blue John made by local craftsmen in Castleton and Bakewell can still be found. However to be able to attribute a piece of 18th century Blue John to a particular craftsman is quite unusual, the example here shows a late 18th century Derbyshire Blue John neoclassical urn, (illustrated) that is attributed to Richard Brown a Derby craftsman, it dates from the 1790s, and measures 26 cm high. It is worth noting that it has an Ashford marble square plinth. It made £2,950 in a recent specialist sale.

Examples of Derbyshire Ashford marble are also very popular with collectors, the example here shows a 19th century octagonal pedestal occasional table, (illustrated) the top is decorated with a ring of spring flowers. One of the most attractive aspects of Ashford marble is that the colours don't fade and the flowers are as fresh as the day it was carved and inlaid.

This example of an Ashford marble table was very popular when sold recently at auction for £4,200 as it is unusual to find such a large piece.

Ashford marble has been known for hundreds of years but it wasn't until the 18th century that White Watson, and his uncle Henry realised the commercial potential.

In 1751 Henry Watson set up a cutting, grinding and polishing workshop to produce objects in the black marble, which is actually limestone impregnated with bitumen and into which the colour pieces are worked using things like spar, flag, Blue John and before 1851 green it is often depicted using malachite.

Smaller, more affordable items of Ashford marble can regularly be found, and this example of a tabletop thermometer (illustrated) inlaid with a band of geometric hard stones will make on the open market £250/450.

Items of jewellery are also regularly seen and these are often mistaken for Italian versions of a similar type of inlaid marble, known as a *Pietre dure*. As prices can vary tremendously it is advisable to contact an independent valuer in order to identify the origins of pieces.

The success of selling items at auction is entering them in an appropriate sale. If you have items that you think might be valuable, or require a valuation for sale, probate or insurance purposes, whether it be a single item or a complete house contents, Vivienne would be happy to advise you.

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**Right: Tabletop thermometer would make £250/450 on the open market. Far right: 19th century octagonal pedestal occasional table**



Neoclassical urn attributed to Derbyshire craftsman Richard Brown

