

# THE LARGEST BLUE JOHN VASES EVER MADE

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**Abstract:** Some details of the contenders for the title of the largest Blue John vase are discussed. The Chatsworth Tazza is the largest one-piece ornament; the Shore urn of 1815 is the largest of its type and is also in Chatsworth House; the Vallance Grecian-style vase of 1842 is thought to be the largest vase and is now in the Geological Museum. A reputed even bigger vase is unlikely ever to have been made.

The nature of the veins of Blue John fluorspar in the caverns and mines of Treak Cliff at Castleton is such that the extraction of big slabs suitable for turning into large vases is uncommon. The Blue John deposits which occur in voids in the Boulder Bed and in ancient caves in the underlying Carboniferous Limestone are not often more than four inches (10 cms) thick but sometimes the linings meet and fuse so creating nodules or "double stones" up to eight inches (20 cms) thick. In the *Matlock Tourist*, Henricus (1843) implies that even "double double stones" are found very occasionally. Even with double stones, careful mining techniques must be employed to obtain undamaged slabs a foot (30 cms) in diameter, suitable for large ornaments. Following mining even more careful cutting and turning must take place in the workshop if breakage of the brittle crystalline variety of fluorspar is to be avoided.

With the above provisos, which were the largest Blue John vases ever made? Who made them and where? Where are they now? For a start in our detective story we must turn to the various editions of William Adam's book *Gem of the Peak*. William Adam took over when his employer John Mawe died in 1829; he ran the museum-cum-shop in Matlock Bath which was the centre of Derbyshire's ornamental stone trade in the early 19th century. At times Mawe and later Adam had some competition from other nearby museum-cum-shops. James Shore competed to some extent in Mawe's time, whilst John Vallance competed with Adam in the 1840s.

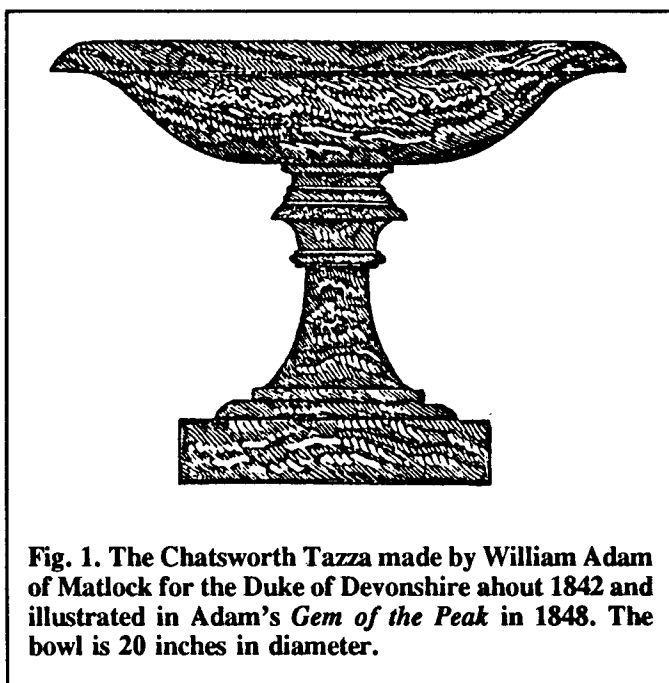


Fig. 1. The Chatsworth Tazza made by William Adam of Matlock for the Duke of Devonshire about 1842 and illustrated in Adam's *Gem of the Peak* in 1848. The bowl is 20 inches in diameter.

William Adam made the Chatsworth Tazza in about 1842 for the Duke of Devonshire. It was and still is the largest one-piece ornament and is still on view in Chatsworth House. Its shallow bowl is twenty inches (50cms) in diameter and was turned from a single piece of the Bull Beef vein of Blue John, mounted on a separate Blue John stem and base. It was illustrated by woodcut engravings in Adam's *Gem of the Peak* 4th (1848) and 5th editions (1851). No other tazza has challenged its supremacy.

A large vase modelled on antique Grecian urns was made by James Shore in 1815 and was purchased by John Mawe for the "Museum" which passed to Adam in 1829. The vase was built-up out a series of rings of Blue John from the Bull Beef vein, and mounted on a black marble plinth in which was engraved "The largest Blue Fluorspar or Blue John vase in the World made in 1815". It is illustrated in Adam's *Gem of the Peak* 3rd (1843) and 4th editions (1848). And this is where the problem starts, for the woodcut engravings are different. They are identical from the base up to the shoulder and indeed the printer's block appears to be the same, but above the shoulder the 1848 version has a slightly narrower neck and there are larger scrolls to the handles. The 1848 version gives the height as 24 inches (60 cms) but doesn't make it clear whether this includes the handles or the black marble plinth or not. In the 1848 illustration it seems that a new engraving of the upper part of the vase was grafted on to the existing lower part. In view of the changes in neck and handles one cannot help wondering if the original version was broken and refitted, or simply redesigned. Henricus (1843) is rather scathing about its "extreme clumsiness of form" as the neck was almost as wide as the body of the vase (or more accurately "urn") and it is certainly less attractive than Vallance's vase noted below. No clues as to who refitted it have been found but Tunmer (1942) said the that rebuilding was done in 1844 without citing any sources as to how he got this information. Oddly, Tunmer's (1942) reproduction of Adam's woodcut engravings has the 3rd edition Shore Vase - without its plinth - on the same page as Adam's Chatsworth Tazza from the 4th edition of 1848! Soon afterwards, the Old Royal Museum (Mawe's and later Adam's) closed and the stock was auctioned on December 23rd 1849 . . . "the star of the establishment (apparently Shore's vase) for which 200 guineas had been offered and refused . . . still remains" (DM. 26/12/1849). Two years later "The splendid Blue John vase lately put up to be disposed of by lottery . . . was won by Mr. Jepson of Edensor Inn, who showed "a Blue John vase of extraordinary proportions" at the Great Exhibition of 1851 describing himself as a "producer". A contemporary newspaper described it as "the largest of its kind in the World; it is capable of holding 10 gallons and is a beautiful object when lighted within" (DM. 3/1851). It seems certain that the vase referred to was Shore's 1815 urn and that it went to the Edensor Inn just outside Chatsworth Park (W.

Jepson was the landlord). This ceased to be a hotel in 1912 and became the Edensor Institute, later the Cavendish Club for recreational use of Chatsworth Estate staff; from 1958 it incorporated the Estate Offices. Although there is no direct proof, documentary or otherwise, it seems highly unlikely that it was anything else besides the Shore urn that was moved to Chatsworth House at some stage where it still stands today in the Private Dining Room (not on the public tour route). Although said by Adam to be two feet tall, the Shore urn is in fact twenty-one inches (53cms) to the top of the handles (to which can be added an inch for a black marble slab and another inch for a wooden base on which it stands). It is twelve inches (30 cms) wide at the shoulder and twelve inches wide across the handles and looks somewhat more plump than Adam's engravings, but the slimmer character is probably artist's licence. The engraved plinth illustrated by Adam is no longer present and it is not known when it was removed or by whom. Although neither contemporary descriptions or Adam's engravings indicate anything other than Blue John handles, those now present are engraved Ashford Black Marble handles, so there may have been further damage and repair at some stage. So far as is known the James Shore 1815 Blue John urn remains the largest of its type ever made. However, Vallance's tall slender Grecian Vase(s) contrasts in design and size.

The tall slender Grecian style Blue John vase in the Geological Museum in London offers the second problem. It is a much more attractive shape with a narrower neck and large double scroll handles. It is 2 feet 7 inches high (80 cms) and is again clearly built-up out of a series of Blue John rings. According to the Geological Museum's records it was made by Vallance between 1840 and 1843. It was presented to the Museum in 1868 by S. Addington, though who he was is unknown; nor is it known how he came to have the vase or

why he should present it to the Museum. According to the 1942 article by E. Tunmer (an expert on Blue John and its history) a vase of this height, 41 inches (80 cms) was cut and built up from three nodules of the Cliff Blue vein, but the Geological Museum's vase is not from the Cliff Blue vein and is from a variant of the Five Vein. It may be that Tunmer was confusing it with another vase he had seen elsewhere which was cut from the Cliff Blue vein, though it seems unlikely that Tunmer would make such a mistake!

The problem is compounded because Henricus's *Matlock Tourist* (1843 edition) has a rather crude engraving of a very similar, but not identical, Grecian vase which he said was made by Vallance in 1842. Henricus gave the height as 3 feet 5 inches (104 cms) from the base to the top of the handles, and 40 inches (101 cms) in circumference. The difference in design is minor - the *Matlock Tourist* engraving has a more prominent extra ring round the collar and stronger rings round the equator and near the base than the Geological Museum's vase, but these differences could be no more than artist's licence: otherwise the shape is the same. The engraving is too crude to tell which vein yielded the stone. But Henricus said that it was nearly ten inches taller than the Geological Museum's vase. It is possible that Henricus was exaggerating, or that there was once a ten inches high plinth, or that someone (Henricus?) made a mistake in measurement - 41 inches might easily be an error for the Geological Museum vase at 31 inches! However, if we take the other view and assume that the *Matlock Tourist* vase was not the Geological Museum's vase, where is it today? On the face of it John Vallance may have made two large vases to the same design at about the same time, around 1842. No contemporary account in Derbyshire newspapers mentions Vallance having made two large vases though there is a newspaper report confusing the Shore and Vallance vases

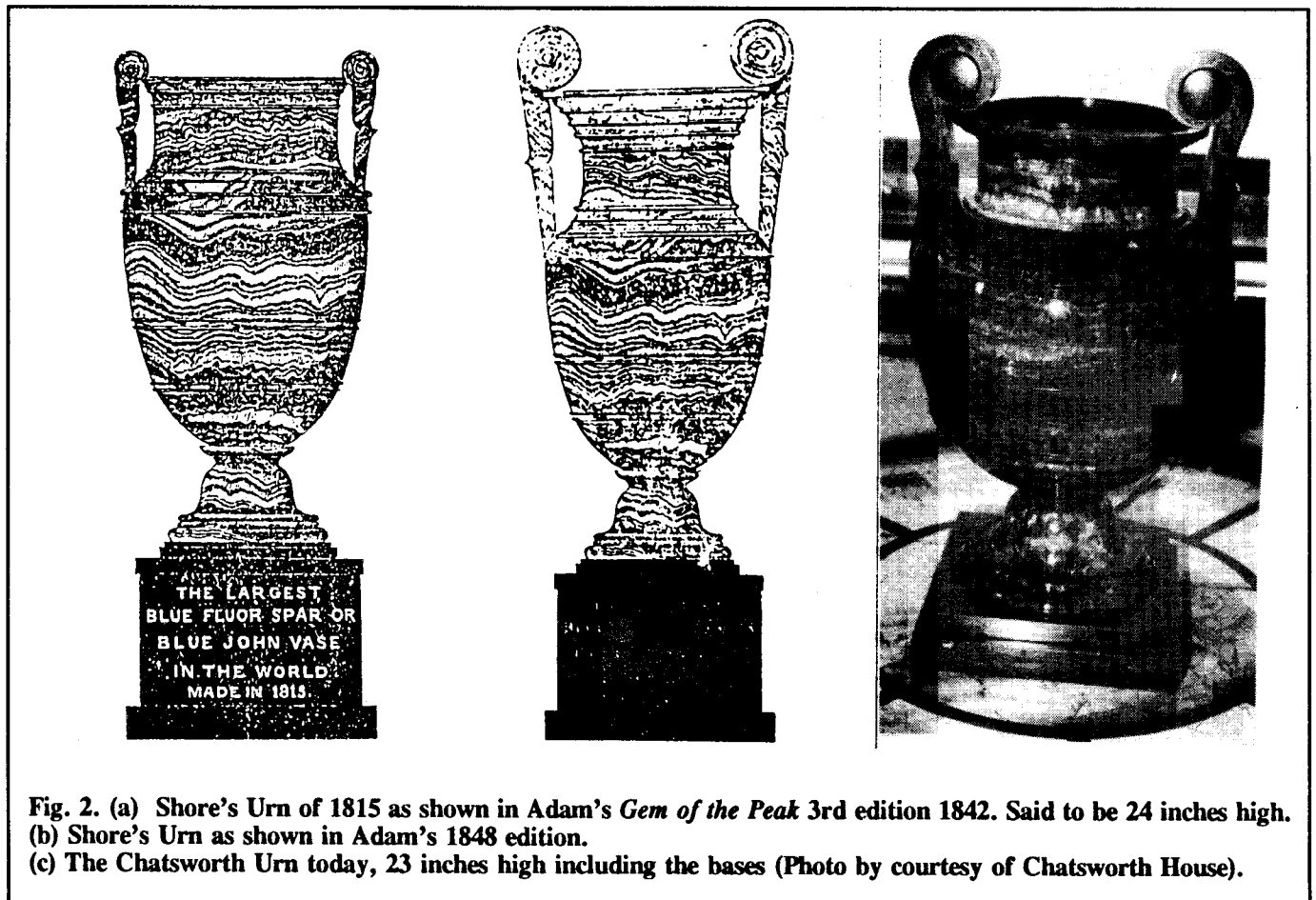


Fig. 2. (a) Shore's Urn of 1815 as shown in Adam's *Gem of the Peak* 3rd edition 1842. Said to be 24 inches high. (b) Shore's Urn as shown in Adam's 1848 edition. (c) The Chatsworth Urn today, 23 inches high including the bases (Photo by courtesy of Chatsworth House).

(DCR 7/4/1843) which was corrected two weeks later by a correspondent signing himself "A lover of fair play" - possibly Adam? (DCR 21/4/1843). Later Vallance exhibited one large vase at the Great Exhibition of 1851, unfortunately the catalogue (Volume II Page 766) similarly refers to "a Grecian-formed vase of fluorspar or fluat of lime commonly called Blue John" and gives no details of size, design or which vein. He also exhibited "purple fluorspar vases or bowls of the tazza and Grecian shape, all on black marble bases". It seems likely that Vallance chose his biggest and best and if there were indeed two large vases it is surprising that nobody mentioned the fact. Unfortunately contemporary reports on the Great Exhibition do not give enough detail, though if there ever was a vase ten inches taller than that in the Geological Museum one would have thought that it would have drawn some comment. Although Vallance's and other manufacturer's Black Marble vases and tables were illustrated in the Art Journal's *Illustrated Catalogue*, and won awards, there is no specific mention of giant Blue John vases. The problem remains - did Vallance make one or two giant Blue John vases, and is the Geological Museum the largest? If not, where is the even taller vase? My opinion (supported by Mike Stanley) is that there never was a supergiant vase and that Henricus was wrong in his measurements - unless you know differently!

Other large Blue John urns approaching the size of the Shore urn are in the Royal Scottish Museum and in the University Museum at Princeton, Pennsylvania. A brief report in the Derby Mercury (9/11/1887) refers to "the largest piece of Blue John ever worked . . . 16 3/4 inches in diameter" made by R.G. Lomas, marble worker of Derby. No other details are known, and the whereabouts of such a vase are unknown.

Several large inverted-bell-shaped vases were made about the same period in the mid 19th century though none have been

claimed as the largest Blue John vase ever made. Fine examples are in the Geological Museum at South Kensington and at Kedleston Hall near Derby; another with a curious perforated brass rim, is in the collection of Blue John vases and other ornaments at Lauriston Castle near Edinburgh.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Any further information from readers could be useful.

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- DCR = Derby and Chesterfield Reporter 7/4/1843; 21/4/1843 & 10/11/1843.  
 DM = Derby Mercury 10/11/1841; 26/12/1846 & 5/3/1851.

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Fig. 3. (a) Vallance's Grecian Vase as shown in the *Matlock Tourist* of 1843. Said to be 41 inches tall. (b) The Geological Museum vase, said to have been made by Vallance about 1842, and 31 inches high (Geological Museum photo).