

An Important and extremely rare Queensland Opal Table Top with a detailed provenance and a most interesting history.

In 1870 the first paying Queensland opal field was discovered by the partners Berkelman and Lambert on their large cattle and sheep station at Listowel on the Barcoo River. This opal find attracted considerable interest in London when shown in the Queensland Annexe to the London International Exhibition of 1873.

From 1875 a new discovery at nearby Cooper's Creek was pegged by a former drover now opal miner, leaseholder and future showman, Herbert William Bond, who exhibited a collection of opals from his Queensland leases at the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London. The following year while still in London, Bond floated his opal finds into a new company, *Opal Mines of Queensland* with an issued capital of hundred thousand pounds. The company was wound up after the international bank crash in 1892.

There may well be a connection between Herbert Bond and his company *Opal Mines of Queensland* and Frederick James Biggs as evidenced by a court case over an opal table top the subject of litigation as reported in all the London major papers in November 1894.¹

The Daily Telegraph notes: *The plaintiff stated that some time ago he was engaged in floating an opal mine in Queensland and in that way became possessed of a quantity of opal matrix on very favourable terms. He had the top of a table made out of it, and the material and the labour cost him about 287 pounds.*²

The table was therefore an object of considerable contemporary value. In 1893 Biggs entrusted the table top for sale to Mr Geddes of Great Marlborough Street on the following terms: *I will entrust you with the sale of my opal table top. The table top shall not be sold to any person nor at any price without my authorisation is first obtained that such sale shall be effected. In the event of the table top remaining unsold by you on June 30th it shall be returned to me.*

Biggs then confirmed before the court that he had not authorised the sale of the table top to the defendants for 200 pounds. The judge Mr Justice Wills authorised the return of the table to Biggs in a landmark case over the transfer of title still quoted as a legal precedent to this day.

The defendants were the Hatton Garden Jeweller Mr Thomas Evans and the famous dealer and self-promoter Edwin Streeter - the Harry Winston of the 19th century. A writer of authoritative books, the creator of the now Broome Western Australia pearling industry and a specialist in the sale of rare and substantial precious stones.

Streeter advertised himself as: *Mr Edwin Streeter F.R.G.S. pearl fisher, diamond miner, importer of diamonds and all other precious stones direct from the principal mines of the world, gem merchant, goldsmith jeweller and lapidarist, 18 New Bond Street, London.*

The table was still owned by Biggs when it was stolen from Queensland House in the Strand in 1914 where it had been on exhibition since 1910. It was damaged and some of the opal parts were brought in for sale to Samuel Henson the famous mineralogist in Regent Street. Henson recognised the parts for he had in some way been involved in the original manufacture as a result he made contact with Mr Biggs who was present the following day when the man returned and he was duly arrested.

Samuel's father Robert Henson was born in England (probably London) in 1814. As a young man he worked as an assistant to James Tennant, who was at that time the manager of Sarah Mawe's mineral and shell shop in the Strand, London. When Tennant bought out Mawe's shop in 1840 Henson left to open his own company at 103 Strand, dealing in marble works and stone.

By 1855 Henson had broadened his scope to include mineral specimen dealing which he had learned under Tennant, and was referring to himself as a mineralogist. He dealt in mineral, rock and fossil collections of various sizes, mineralogy and geology books, and very large-size geological diagrams which he would sell or rent for classroom use, while continuing to carry items carved from marble (candlesticks, obelisks, vases, inkstands, watch stands etc.) He moved his shop to 113 Strand in London in 1852. The address was 113A from 1855 until his death in 1864.

Robert's son, Samuel Henson, was born in London on September 22, 1848. Samuel took over the family mineral business following his mother's death, moving it to 277 Strand in 1878-1888. From 1888 to 1914 his shop was at 97 Regent Street and from 1915-1917 he was at 185 Norwood Road. His last known address (1918-1920) was at No. 4 Elliott House in Thornton Heath.

Henson and his sister gave private lessons and evening classes in mineralogy. He was elected a member of the Mineralogical Society in 1879 and of the Geologists Association in 1880. Henson never kept a large stock of minerals on hand, preferring instead to concentrate on a limited number of showy, high-value specimens and semi-precious stones. The most important collections he acquired for resale were those of Dublin collector Sir Maziere Brady (1796-1871) (mostly Irish minerals) the Chilean mining engineer Theodor Hohmann (1843-1897) and the British collector Isaac Walker.

Samuel Henson's wife, Fanny (ca. 1838-1926) also had a good knowledge of minerals and assisted him in the business, she was also a member of the Mineralogical Society (1910-1917).

Samuel Henson gave up the lease on his shop in 1915 but continued dealing privately in a small way thereafter. He had built a small private collection of his own, which was purchased from his trustees following his death on June 9, 1930, by Sir Arthur Russell. His business and remaining stock were acquired by Gregory Bottley & Company.

The table must have subsequently been repaired probably at the cost of the insurers to the Queensland Government and finally finally set in a table probably made by Waring and Gillow with a Chippendale Revival mahogany base. It was then sold to Wartski, circa 1920, remaining in their possession for nearly 100 years until purchased by J.B. Hawkins Antiques.

The illustration shows some of the Imperial Russian Treasure purchased by Wartski from the Bolsheviks during the Depression of the 1930's on the table in the basement of their Regent Street premises.

¹ The most detailed account is to be found in the Daily Telegraph 8 November 1894

² The conversion rate to pounds in today's money is US\$38,906 Eric Nye Pounds sterling to US dollars. Historical conversion of currency 9 August 2008 or A\$52307



The Wartski shop no later than 1930, with their recently acquired Russian treasures recently unpacked. The tail of the Tyrannosaurus Rex to be seen sticking out from behind the box on the opal table the edge of which is just visible.