

The Great Auk Eggs



Image: FAM volunteer courtesy of Bristol Museums, Galleries & Archives

These are 2 Great Auk eggs originally owned by Greville Smyth. He kept them in his Museum (now the Music Room) at Ashton Court. They are currently owned by Bristol Museums where they are kept in a locked vault.

Greville originally had 4 eggs, the 4th egg being bought shortly before he died in 1901.

After his death Dame Emily sold 2 of his eggs and donated one egg (Aa3250 shown in the above image on the left) to the Bristol Museums. The last of Greville's eggs remained largely unknown until 1945 when Esme Smyth donated it to the Bristol Museums (AC/78/1945 shown in the above image on the right).

All of the Great Auk eggs known to exist are numbered and their individual histories are recorded.

An article in the journal *Science* of May 17th 1912 reported:

'Two eggs of the Great Auk, as we learn from the London Times, were sold on April 17 at Mr. J.C. Steven's rooms in King Street, Covent Garden, the property of Lady Smyth, of Ashton Court, Somerset, who inherited then from the late Sir J.H. Greville Smyth. The finer of the two was purchased at an auction in Kent, and resold at Steven's on April 24, 1894, for 180 guineas; it now brought 150 guineas. The second egg, which went for 140 guineas, was purchased with a number of sea-bird's eggs, many years ago, by the late owner, but nothing appears to be known about its earlier history.'

Both were bought by Mr. Ward. Sir J.H. Greville Smyth had another specimen of the egg (which was sold at Steven's in 1888 for £225). This was presented by Lady Greville Smyth to the Bristol Museum.

A "census" by Mr. Edward Bidwell, in connection with the Great Auk, shows that there are in existence and recorded 80 skins and 73 eggs.'

The eggs that Greville bought would have cost him the modern equivalent of £24-26000 at the time of purchase.

The "census" referred to was an article by Thomas Parkin published as an extra paper to part 6, of the volume 1 of the Hastings and East Sussex Naturalist 1911 entitled '*The Great Auk: a record of sales of birds and eggs by public auction in Great Britain, 1806 -1910, with historical and descriptive notes and five plates*'. In the article Parkin numbers all of the eggs and records the history of their purchase and sale. Greville's eggs were numbered '*Egg XI. A very fine example of the egg of a Great Auk*' and '*Egg XII. Egg of the Great Auk*'.

The egg on the left of the image, egg XI, is said to be the one that was rumoured to have been stolen from a Paris Museums during the troubles of 1848, it was sold a few years later to an Englishman, when he died it passed to his daughter who moved taking the egg with her and for a while all trace of it was lost. As their value increased the lady concerned was induced to offer it for sale from where it passed into the collection of Greville Smyth.

Of the two of Greville's eggs sold by Dame Emily to Mr. Ward via Stevens, one is now in the Museum of Harvard University and the other is thought to be the one donated by Harvard to the Iceland Museum.

What is a Great Auk?



Image: Great auk John Gerrard Keulemans, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

The great auk is a species of flightless alcid that became extinct in the mid-19th century. It was the only modern species in the genus *Pinguinus*. It was a large bird 75-85 cm tall and weighed about 5 kg. although agile in water it was clumsy on land which made it vulnerable to human predators.

With increasing rarity specimens of the great auk and its eggs became collectible and highly prized by rich Europeans. The last breeding pair were killed in 1844.

Today there are approximately 75 eggs in existence.

References

Science May 17th 1912 p 772-773. Accessed 2022 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i296230>

Record of Great Auk eggs. Accessed 2022. <https://archive.org/details/greataukrecordof00park>

Our viands by Anne Buckland. Chapter on Eggs.