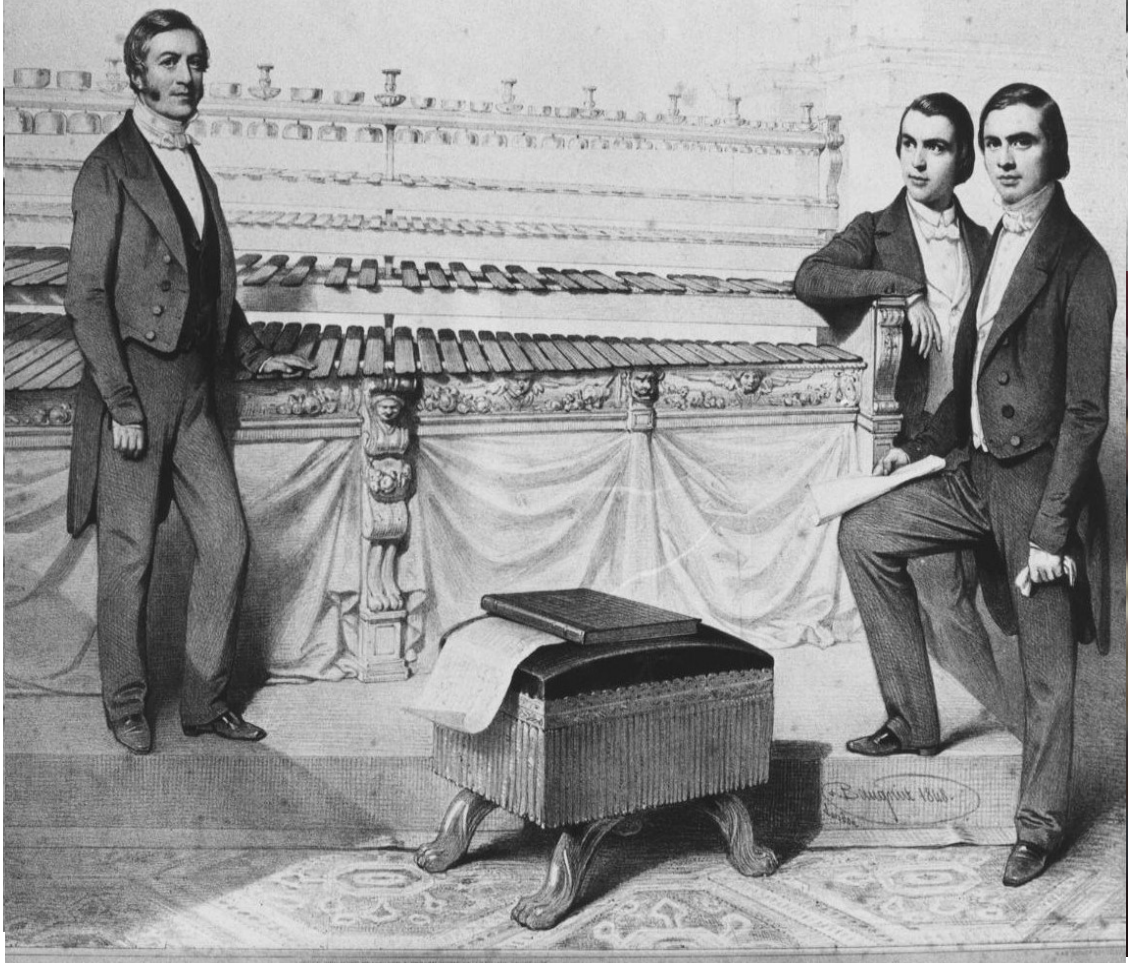


The Musical Stones of Skiddaw

**KESWICK
MUSEUM**

Information Booklet £1.50



The Remarkable 'Musical Stones of Skiddaw'

1. The Crosthwaite Musical Stones

On public display in Keswick Museum are two musical instruments. They look like xylophones, but the notes are not made of metal or wood, but from a local stone. These two objects represent a fascinating story full of obsession, changing fortunes, glory and international fame.

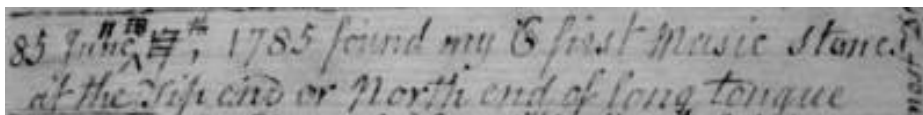
The first person to find music in the stones around Keswick was the incomparable Peter Crosthwaite (see 'Commander of Curiosities' booklet in this series). Born at Dale Head, Thirlmere in 1735, he became a naval commander, Master of the gun-boat Otter, protecting the East India Company's ships against Malay pirates. He returned to Keswick in 1779 and set up a museum there in 1780.

Crosthwaite was an incredible eccentric, and a keen inventor. His inventions included a fire-escaping machine, a portable bathing machine, a cure for smoking chimneys, a swinging machine for the benefit of health, a roasting machine and a cork bottomed lifeboat. He never patented any of his inventions however and, in the case of his lifeboat, someone else took the credit for the device.

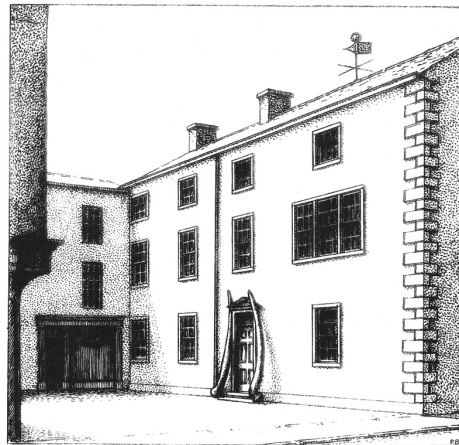
With his interest in invention, his love of novelty, and his eagerness to attract more people in to his museum, Crosthwaite's discovery of music within the stones around Skiddaw must have been met with great excitement. In his memorandum book he records the day of his discovery:

Extract from Crosthwaite's memorandum book. Image: Keswick Museum

The entry reads: 'June 11th, 1785 found my 6 first music stones at the Tip end or North end of long tongue.' Crosthwaite told people that first six notes he found that day were in perfect tune.



The remaining ten of the set took six months to find, with Crosthwaite working 12 hours a day to tune them, carefully chipping away at the stone until the desired note rang true. The result was a sort of xylophone, known as the Musical Stones. Within his museum, which was situated at Museum Square at the bottom of Keswick's Market Place, Crosthwaite set up a series of mirrors near the windows so that he could see whenever a carriage was approaching. When a carriage neared, he would bang out a rudimentary tune on his Musical Stones and his daughter and an old woman

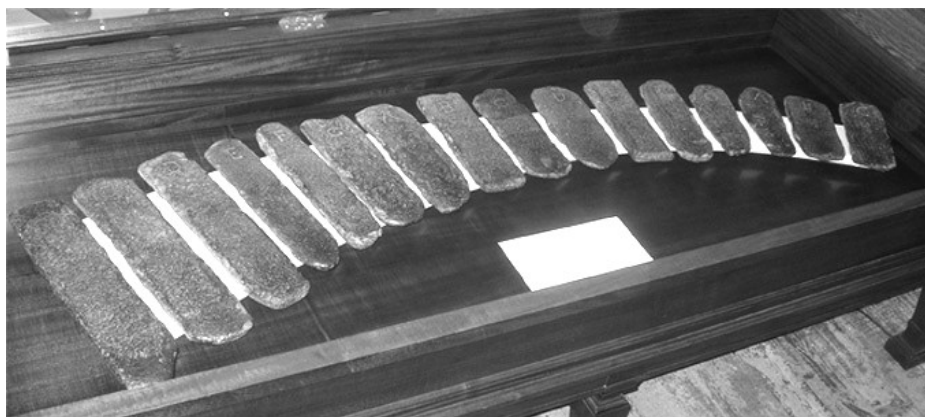


Crosthwaite's Museum by Peter Brears

banged a drum, rattled a Chinese gong and a played a barrel organ. This cacophony of noise pouring out of the museum was meant to attract the attention of the carriage passengers and any people passing on the street so they might come in and look round.

The Crosthwaite Musical Stones. Image: Keswick Museum

It is unlikely that Peter Crosthwaite could have predicted how, 55 years later, his initial discovery led to international fame and royal acclaim for the next exponent of the



Musical Stones: Mr Joseph Richardson.

2. Joseph Richardson & the Rock Bell & Steel Band

Joseph Richardson was born in 1790 and worked as a stonemason. He was also something of a musical genius and made numerous instruments in his youth. Joseph once took his mother's mahogany-topped table of which she was very proud and sawed it up to make a violin! As a child Joseph lived near Crosthwaite's Museum and would have been very familiar his Musical Stones. During his career as a stonemason Richardson noticed for himself the curious musical ring given out by some rocks when struck. Consequently he began to test the various rocks of the Lake District for their note and collected ones that gave a pure, resonant ring, forming them into a sequence.

In 1827, whilst building houses at Thornthwaite, he found that the rocks of Skiddaw had the best tone of all and, spurred on by this discovery, he endeavored to produce an instrument on a much larger scale than Crosthwaite's, which would have every musical note. The geological name for the rock both Crosthwaite and Richardson used for their instruments is hornfels; a metamorphic mudstone highly altered by volcanic heat. It took Richardson almost thirteen years to collect and shape enough individual notes of hornfels to make an eight-octave range. By day he would search the hillside looking for suitable stones then bring them the long distance home where he would work tirelessly to cut and shape them. It was a colossal task; Joseph experimented at length with each stone before accepting or rejecting it as worthy of the instrument. The massive task of assembling the instrument consumed Joseph absolutely, so much so that he and his family were reduced to poverty through this 13 year period. He found it hard to carry on at times but eventually in 1840 the instrument was finished

Richardson's Rock, Bell & Steel Band.
Image: Keswick Museum



Joseph enlisted his three sons and they began practicing with the instrument and giving concerts locally. He was able to use his musical abilities to get the most out of his Musical Stones and train his sons to assist him in building an impressive repertoire. They set off on a three-week tour of the major northern towns of England. Their reception and immediate success meant that they did not see their home again for three years. Their success encouraged them to head for London, where a commentator stated:

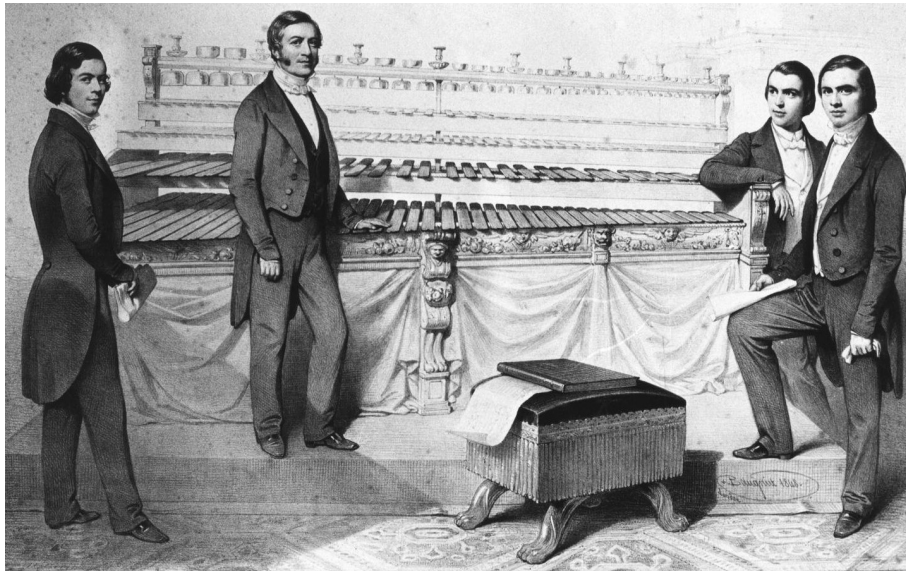
"The wonderful merits of your admirable instrument cannot fail to be well-received by the London public who are very musical people".

The repertoire included selections from Handel, Beethoven and Mozart and arrangements of waltzes, quadrilles, gallops and polkas. Considerable variation in tone was achieved by using different methods of striking the notes, creating a blend of organ, piano, harp and flute sounds, though the full power of the instrument had to be withheld because of the fear of shattering the concert hall windows. The concerts were immensely popular. In an 1846 newspaper advertisement for a Richardson's performance in Luton, it states that the range of the instrument went from the alleged warble of a lark to the deep bass of a funeral bell. For the Victorians, the Musical Stones represented an element of curiosity which they found both compelling and highly entertaining.

Concert poster. Image: Keswick Museum

To increase the musical range, the instrument was updated in the mid 1840s with octaves of steel bars, Alpine bells, and four bass drums and became 'Richardson & Sons, Rock, Bell and Steel Band'. On 23rd February 1848 the Richardson's played at Buckingham Palace, by command of Queen Victoria. Prince Albert was present, and a large assembly of English and foreign noblemen and women. The Band was well received; the audience even requested two encores. According to The Times, it proved one of the most extraordinary and novel performances of the Metropolis. However, although very impressed overall, it was noted that Queen Victoria was not amused by the sound of the Alpine bells.

Joseph Richardson & Sons, Buckingham Palace.



Over sixty concerts were given in London alone and the Band toured all over Britain and, subsequently, in France, Germany and Italy, being transported by train. A concert trip to America was planned, but Robert, the youngest son and the most talented player, became ill just before the date of departure and died of pneumonia. The tour was abandoned, and the instrument was packed away. Subsequently, the Stones were given to Keswick Museum in 1917 by the grandson of Joseph Richardson. They still stand there now, for all to play, as a symbol of the stonemason from Keswick, his natural

musical talent and his tremendous drive to achieve the goal of creating an instrument from rock which had every musical note.

Later sets of Musical Stones include the Till Family Rock Band, exhibited and performed upon by Daniel Till of Keswick and his two sons in 1881 at The Crystal Palace. It later toured America and one of the Till instruments is held in store at the Metropolitan Museum, New York. A small lithophone made by the Tills for John Ruskin is on display at The Ruskin Museum in Coniston. The Abraham Brothers of Keswick, famous for their mountaineering and photography, collected a set of fifty-eight stones in the late nineteenth century, which took them twelve years and which they exhibited in their photography emporium on Lake Road. But of all the Keswick lithophones, the Richardson & Sons Rock, Bell & Steel Band in Keswick Museum is the largest instrument still on public display.

3. The Story Continues

The Richardson's stopped touring with the Musical Stones 160 years ago. However, recent musical collaborations have meant that the Richardson Stones have gone out on tour once more. These include concerts at Coniston Water Festival in 2005 and the Liverpool Biennial in 2006 with Grizedale Arts, Grassington Festival in 2007 with Yorkshire Quarry Arts and the Royal Festival Hall in 2007 with Soundwave. In 2005 top percussionist Evelyn Glennie made a documentary about the stones for BBC Radio 4. The continued interest in the Keswick lithophones means the story is kept alive, and the wonderful collection at Keswick Museum is visited by people from around the world.

For more information see '*Keswick Characters: Volume 1*'. For the geology of the Musical Stones please see Alan Smith's booklet. Both publications are on sale at Keswick Museum

You can watch and hear The Musical Stones being played on their own You Tube channel at: www.youtube.com/musicalstonestv

All images courtesy of Keswick Museum.

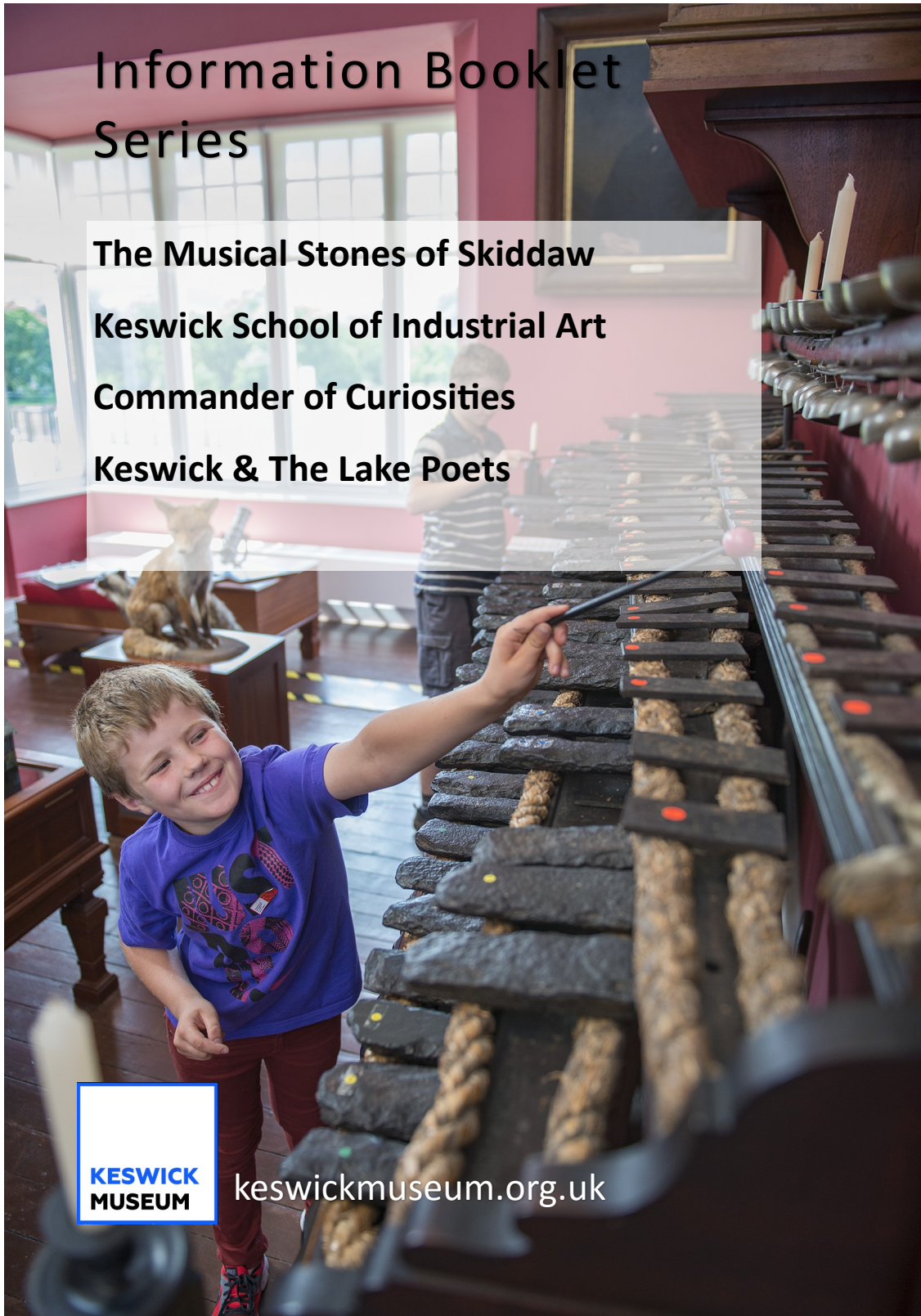
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