

The Whale-Bone Seat of Great Yarmouth

Raffaele d'Isa

Abstract - Monumental chairs and thrones have taken the most varied and artistic forms over the course of the ages. One of the most bizarre is the Whale-Bone Seat of Great Yarmouth, a maritime town in the County of Norfolk in England. This monumental chair, which over the course of the ages has intrigued historians, naturalists, journalists, and artists, was made from the skull of a sperm whale and kept at first outside and subsequently inside St. Nicholas' Church of Great Yarmouth. The oldest historical records mentioning it date back to 1606, when the Seat received a coat of paint. However, it appears that the Seat already existed before this decorative intervention and that it was created from the cranial bones of a whale washed on shore in the late 16th century. Traces of the Seat were lost after the Second World War, when the Nazi aviation dropped more than 1500 bombs over Great Yarmouth, destroying almost completely St. Nicholas' Church. In the present article, after having provided a description of the Seat, I investigate its possible origin, and I trace the history of this haunting and mysterious object from the 16th to the 20th century.

Key words: cetaceans, history of biology, history of natural science, whales, whale bone.

Riassunto - Il Whale-Bone Seat di Great Yarmouth.

I seggi e i troni monumentali hanno assunto le forme più varie e artistiche nel corso dei secoli. Uno dei più bizzarri è il Whale-Bone Seat di Great Yarmouth, una città marittima nella contea di Norfolk, in Inghilterra. Questa sedia monumentale, che nel corso dei secoli ha incuriosito storici, naturalisti, giornalisti e artisti, è stata ricavata dal cranio di un capodoglio e conservata prima all'esterno e poi all'interno della St. Nicholas' Church di Great Yarmouth. I più antichi documenti storici che ne parlano risalgono al 1606, quando il Seggio ricevette una mano di vernice. Tuttavia, sembra che il Seggio esistesse già prima di questo intervento decorativo e che sia stato ricavato dalle ossa craniche di una balena spiaggiata alla fine del XVI secolo. Del Seggio si persero le tracce dopo la Seconda Guerra Mondiale, quando l'aviazione nazista sganciò più di 1500 bombe su Great Yarmouth, distruggendo quasi completamente la St. Nicholas' Church. Nel presente articolo, dopo aver fornito una descrizione del Seggio, ne indago la possibile origine e ripercorro la storia di questo misterioso e affascinante oggetto dal XVI al XX secolo.

Parole chiave: balene, cetacei, ossa di balena, storia della biologia, storia delle scienze naturali.

Monumental chairs and thrones have taken the most varied and artistic forms over the course of the ages. One of the most bizarre is the Whale-Bone Seat of Great Yarmouth, a monumental chair made from the skull of a sperm whale, which was kept in the town of Great Yarmouth (County of Norfolk, England, United Kingdom), at first outside and subsequently inside the St. Nicholas' Church (Fig. 1), a cruciform Gothic-style church, dedicated to the patron saint of fishermen, established in 1101 by the first Bishop of Norwich Herbert de Losinga (c. 1094-1119)

and consecrated in 1119¹ (Lupson, 1881). In the present article, after having described the Seat, I will outline the origin and history of this unique monument.

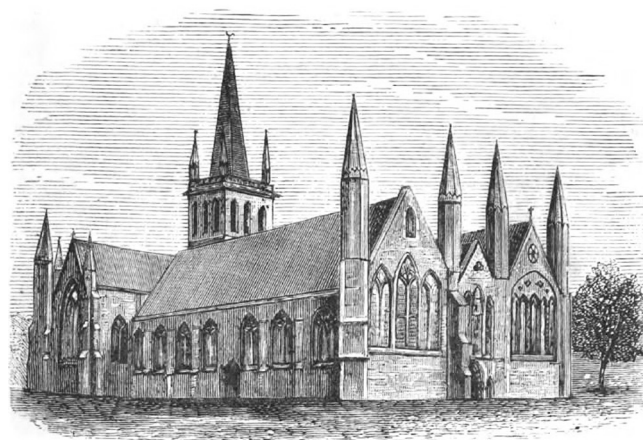


Fig. 1 - St. Nicholas' Church in Great Yarmouth (Norfolk, England, United Kingdom). From: Lupson, 1881. / La St. Nicholas' Church a Great Yarmouth (Norfolk, Inghilterra, Regno Unito). Da: Lupson, 1881.

Institute of Experimental Neurology, Division of Neuroscience,
IRCCS San Raffaele Scientific Institute, Via Olgettina 60, 20132
Milano, Italia.
E-mail: disa.raffaele@hsr.it

© 2026 Raffaele d'Isa

Received for publication: 9 May 2025
Accepted for publication: 30 June 2025
Online publication: 20 October 2025

Images of the Whale-Bone Seat are shown in Fig. 2. The image in the first row, showing a front view of the Seat, is by the artist Harry Fenn (1837-1911), who in the early 1880s produced for the American magazine *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* a series of 17 illustrations depicting the most picturesque attractions of Great Yarmouth (Rideing, 1882). On the other hand, the images in the second and third row of Fig. 2 are front and back views of the Seat drawn by the artist Cornelius Jansen Walter Winter (1817-1891), who, after getting married in St. Nicholas' Church in 1841, lived in Great Yarmouth for 20 years, becoming a local member of the Norwich and Norfolk Archaeological Society. Winter's images were published in books between 1875 and 1881 (Palmer, 1875; Southwell, 1881).

From the point of view of the functional design, the Whale-Bone Seat features a backrest, two chair-arms, a wide sitting support capable of hosting two sitting adults, and two solid chair-legs. On the other hand, from an anatomical point of view, the Seat is made of the basal part of the skull, worked after the removal of the maxillary bone. In particular, the occipital bone serves as backrest, while the left and right parietal bone serve as chair-arms and as lateral walls of the sitting space. As can be seen in the back view shown in Fig. 2, the back side of the Seat features a hole at its center, which corresponds to the foramen magnum, the oval-shaped opening in the occipital bone that allows the entry of the spinal cord into the cranium.

Regarding the species of origin of the bone, Thomas Southwell (1831-1909), Fellow of the Zoological Society of London² and one of the most important Norfolk naturalists of the time, who had wide knowledge of cetaceans³ and had visited St. Nicholas' Church, identified it as a sperm whale, reporting this piece of information first in an article (Southwell, 1878) and, within 3 years, in two other books. In particular, in 1879, Southwell edited the second edition of *Observations on the Fauna of Norfolk* by the parson naturalist Richard Lubbock (1798-1876), a work originally published in 1845 to which Southwell added an extensive set of notes with explanations and comments. In one of these notes, Southwell confirmed his species identification: "Mr. Arthur Bacon, of Yarmouth, writes to Sir Thomas Browne on 10th May, 1652, of the Sperm Whale cast on shore there. (i., p. 369.) In Saint Nicholas' Church, Great Yarmouth, is the basal portion of the skull of a whale of this species" (Lubbock & Southwell, 1879). Analogously, Southwell reported the species as being a sperm whale also in his book *The Seals and Whales of the British Seas* (Southwell, 1881). Other authors from the time of Southwell coherently reported the bone as belonging to a sperm whale (Palmer, 1875⁴; Lupson, 1881; Buckland, 1882; Patterson, 1898, 1905, 1912).

As for the anatomical interpretation of the bone, in the 18th century it was considered a jaw bone (Swinden, 1772). However, from the 1870s, the bone was correctly identified as a skull (Palmer, 1875; Southwell, 1878, 1881; Lubbock & Southwell, 1879). Also in the case of the anatomical interpretation, as for the species recognition, we owe the correct identification to Southwell (see note 3). Shortly after, the naturalist and Fellow of the Zoological Society

of London⁵ Francis Trevelyan Buckland (1826-1880), who in 1865 had founded the Museum of Economic Fish Culture in London (the United Kingdom's first fishery museum), provided support to Southwell's identification of the body part. In his last work *Notes and Jottings from Animal Life* (a collection of papers which he finished arranging in 1880, but was published posthumously 2 years later), Buckland confirmed the skull interpretation: "Behind the door of the church, at the west end, is an enormous bone, which looks exactly like a huge arm-chair. The parishioners of Yarmouth do not seem to know much about this bone; and at first it gave me some little trouble to find out what it really was. Ultimately, I made out quite suddenly that it is part of the skull – the occipital bone and part of the parietal – of a large sperm whale, probably washed ashore near Yarmouth, and converted into a relic for the church" (Buckland, 1882). Buckland commented on the erroneous anatomical interpretation of the 18th century: "Comparative anatomy was not understood then as it now is, or this would not have been mistaken for a jaw-bone. It is the portion of the skull upon which the lower part of the brain rests" (Buckland, 1882). Notably, in order to test his hypothesis regarding the skull interpretation, Buckland prepared a small-scale model of the Whale-Bone Seat from the skull of a porpoise, from which he understood that the bone of the Seat was indeed compatible with a skull portion: "I have cut up the skull of a common porpoise to represent this balaenarian chair in St. Nicholas's Church, and prove that my diagnosis of its nature is correct" (Buckland, 1882).

Notably, at the time of Southwell, detailed knowledge on the osteology of the sperm whale was already available, as had been extensively described by the naturalist William Henry Flower (1831-1899), Director of the Natural History Museum⁶ of London from 1884 to 1898. Indeed, on 14 November 1867, Flower read at the Zoological Society of London a lecture entitled *On the Osteology of the Cachalot or Sperm-Whale (Physeter macrocephalus)*, which was subsequently published as an article in the *Transactions of the Zoological Society of London* (Flower, 1868a), and as an independent book shortly after (Flower, 1868b). We know for sure that Southwell knew Flower's *Osteology*, as he explicitly cited it both in the journal article⁷ (Southwell, 1878) and in his book⁸ on marine mammals (Southwell, 1881). A comparison of the shape of the bone of the Whale-Bone Seat with the currently known osteology of the sperm whale (James & Soundararajan, 1981; Alam *et al.*, 2016; Huguenberg *et al.*, 2016) strongly supports Southwell's identification of the species of origin as a sperm whale. Where did the whale from which the Seat was created come from? The oldest record referring to the Whale-Bone Seat is a 1606 bill documenting the payment of 8 shillings to paint it, reported by the historian, antiquary and schoolmaster of Great Yarmouth Henry Swinden (1716-1772) in his *History and Antiquities of the Ancient Burgh of Great Yarmouth*, written between 1751 and 1771 and published in 1772⁹ (Swinden, 1772). Edward John Lupson (1828-1908), parish clerk of St. Nicholas' Church in Great Yarmouth for 45 years (from 1863 until his death), in his book on the history of St. Nicholas'

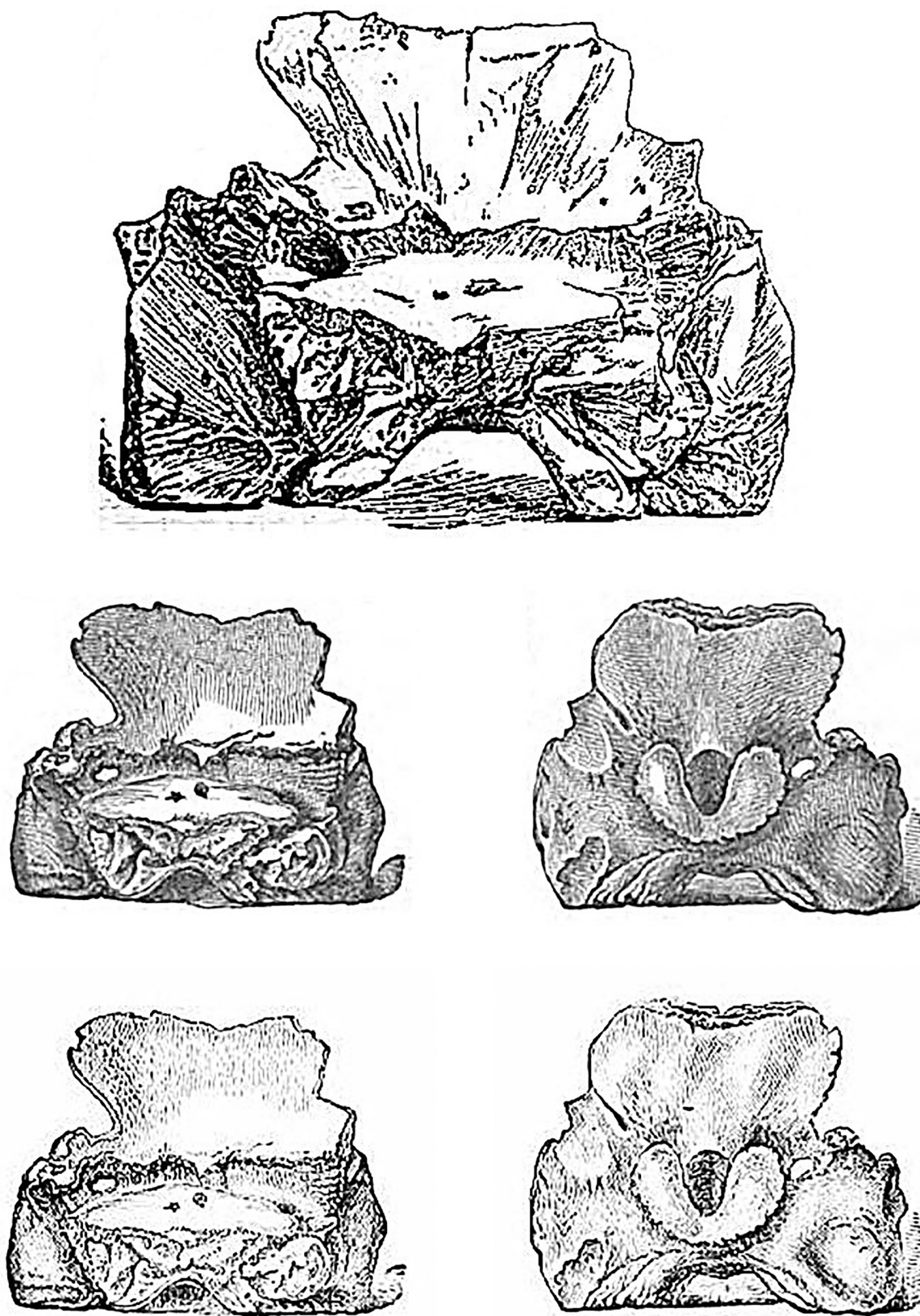


Fig. 2 - The Whale-Bone Seat. Top Row: frontal view of the Seat, from Rideing (1882). Middle Row: front and back view of the Seat, from Palmer (1875). Bottom Row: front and back view of the Seat, from Southwell (1881). The illustration in Rideing's article is by the artist Harry Fenn. The engravings shown in Palmer's and Southwell's works are from drawings by the artist Cornelius Jansen Walter Winter. / Il Whale-Bone Seat. In alto: vista frontale del Seggio, da Rideing (1882). Al centro: vista frontale e posteriore del Seggio, da Palmer (1875). In basso: vista frontale e posteriore del Seggio, da Southwell (1881). L'illustrazione nell'articolo di Rideing è dell'artista Harry Fenn. Le incisioni che compaiono nelle opere di Palmer e Southwell sono tratte da disegni dell'artista Cornelius Jansen Walter Winter.

Church, confirmed that in 1606 the churchwardens spent 8 shillings “in giving the seat a coat of paint” (Lupson, 1881).

However, in 1606 the Whale-Bone Seat already existed, and its creation has hence to be dated to even earlier. At that time, whale hunting by the local fishermen had not started yet and sperm whale strandings were extremely rare in the area. The British historian and lawyer Charles John Palmer (1805-1882) provides clues on the possible origin of the Seat. Indeed, according to Palmer’s list of whale strandings on the Norfolk coast (Manship & Palmer, 1854; Palmer, 1875), before 1606, there are only two known cases that could be compatible with the specimen from which the bones of the Seat were taken.

In his *Notes to Manford’s History*, annexed to the 1854 edition of the 1619 *History of Great Yarmouth* by Henry Manship¹⁰ (c. 1550-1625), Palmer relays that, after that the river which represented the boundary between Yarmouth and Caister-on-Sea dried up, a territorial controversy arose between the two towns, which were both claiming possession of the 400 acres of land of the dried river (Manship & Palmer, 1854). In 1546, a committee was established to evaluate the issue and resolve the dispute. Interestingly, in a deposition to this Committee, Henry Ilberd (born in 1479/80), who had been Bailiff of Great Yarmouth twice (in 1514 and 1522), declared that in 1475 a whale had stranded on the said land and, on the order of the Bailiff John Russe, the whale was loaded on carts and brought to Great Yarmouth for the use of the town: “a certeyn fyshe cald a whale, came on grounde betwyn the seid lympes, (that it is to say, betweyn the ston cros and Grubby’s havyn,) but lytell south from the seid Grubby’s havyn; and that one John Russe, then beyng Bayly of Yermouth, commaunded dyvers inhabitantys in Yarmouth, to gete cartys to goo with hym”, and they “braclyd and hewe the seid fyshe to pecys and leide it in cartys, and then brought it to Yermouth, to th’use of the seid town” (deposition quoted in: Swinden, 1772; Manship & Palmer, 1854).

The second case, reported by Palmer in his *History of Great Yarmouth, Designed as Continuation of Manship’s History* (Palmer, 1856), as well as in the third volume of his *The Perlustrations of Great Yarmouth* (Palmer, 1875), dates to more than a century later, when in 1582 the “sea brought a special gift” “in the shape of an enormous whale, which grounded on Caister Beach” in Caister-on-Sea (Palmer, 1875). This whale was 20 yards and a quarter long (18.5 m), and the jaw alone was 3 yards and a quarter (3 m). The specimen of the Whale-Bone Seat could be either the 1475 or the 1582 whale. However, considering that the first written record of the Seat dates to 1606, it is more probable that the Seat was created from the bones of the 1582 whale, stranded just 24 years earlier, as it seems unlikely that, in the case the 1475 whale hypothesis, there could have been no mention of such a remarkable Seat for 131 years. Several authors, from the 19th century to our time, embraced the hypothesis that the sperm whale of origin of the Whale-Bone Seat is the 1582 whale (Palmer, 1856; Lupson, 1881, 1882; Cox, 1911; Stephen, 1927; Porter, 1974; Mitchell, 2021; Riley, 2022; Doig, 2023). However, the 1582 whale cannot be the sperm whale of

the Whale-Bone Seat, as the old chronicler quoted by Palmer describes the animal as having two blow-holes: “It had two great holes about its eyes, through which it spouted up water” (Palmer, 1856). Only baleen whales have two blow-holes. Toothed whales, like the sperm whale, have only one. The sperm whale, in particular, has only the left blow-hole. In summary, the sperm whale of the Whale-Bone Seat was very likely a specimen washed ashore in the late 16th century or in the very first years of the 17th (between 1600 and 1606), but it cannot be the 1582 whale.

Sperm whales were actually extremely uncommon in Norfolk, to the point that, for the period 1500-1660, there are only four known cases of stranding (three being individual strandings and one being a group stranding), all reported in the writings of the physician and philosopher Thomas Browne (1605-1682). One case, mentioned in the correspondence between Thomas Browne and his friend Arthur Bacon of Yarmouth, is a single individual stranded on the beach of Yarmouth in 1652 (Browne & Southwell, 1902). The other three cases are mentioned by Browne in his posthumously published *An Account of Fishes, Etc. Found in Norfolk and on the Coast*: a “spermaceti whale, of sixty-two feet long, near Wells; another of the same kind, twenty years before, at Hunstanton; and, not far off, eight or nine came ashore, and two had young ones after they were forsaken by the water” (Browne, 1835). The oldest sperm whale stranding event reported by Browne is the Hunstanton case. When did this case occur exactly? We know that the whale of Wells came ashore around 1656, as in a letter dated 13 September 1668 Browne writes: “Among the whales you may very well put in the *spermacetus*, or that remarkably peculiar whale which so aboundeth in spermaceti. About twelve years ago we had one cast up on our shore near Wells” (Browne, 1852). In the passage from *An Account of Fishes, &c. Found in Norfolk and on the Coast* quoted above, Browne states that the Hunstanton stranding occurred “twenty years before” the Wells stranding. Moreover, in the 1658 edition of his *Pseudodoxia epidemica*, in which Browne first published a mention of the Hunstanton and Wells strandings¹¹, Browne claims that the Wells stranding occurred “not many years since” “near Wells”, while the Hunstanton stranding had occurred “above twenty years ago” “near Hunstanton” (Browne, 1658). However, an independent source provides a more precise dating. Browne’s original source of information for the Hunstanton stranding was Sir Hamon le Strange (1583-1654), to whom Browne wrote a letter dated 11 June 1653 asking: “I pray you at your leisure doe mee the honor to informe mee how long agoe the Spermaceti Whale was cast upon your shoare” (Browne & Southwell, 1902). Luckily, from the private writings of Sir Hamon le Strange we can learn the exact date of the stranding: 6 December 1626¹².

Indeed, in the estate diary of the le Strange family, which owned the Manor of Holme (in Holme-next-the-Sea, near Hunstanton), on the beach of which the sperm whale stranded, Sir Hamon le Strange reported a precise description of the event, as could be ascertained by Thomas Southwell, who wrote the notes of the 1902

edition of Browne's *Notes and Letters on the Natural History of Norfolk* and stated: "In the muniment room at Hunstanton Hall there exists a book of MSS. notes relating to their estates, kept by Sir Hamon and Sir Nicholas le Strange, between the years 1612 and 1723¹³. From this book Mr. Hamon le Strange¹⁴ has been good enough to send me an extract containing the full particulars of the stranding and disposal of a Sperm Whale 57 feet long, which came ashore on their Manor of Holme, on the 6th December, 1626, the skull of which is still in the courtyard at Hunstanton Hall" (Browne & Southwell, 1902). The historian, antiquarian and clergyman Charles Parkin (1689-1765), Rector of the Parish of Oxborough in the County of Norfolk, in the fifth volume of *The History and Antiquities of the County of Norfolk*, confirms that this whale stranding occurred in December 1626: "In December, 1626, a great whale was cast on the shore here [in Holme-next-the-Sea], the wind blowing strong at north west, 57 feet long, the breadth of the nose end, 8 feet, from nose end to the eye, 15 feet and a half, the eyes about the same bigness as those of an ox, the lower chap closed, and shut about 4 feet short of that of the upper; this lower chap narrow towards the end, and therein were 46 teeth, like the tusks of an elephant, the upper one had no teeth, but sockets of bones to receive the teeth; 2 small fins only, one on each side, and a short small fin on the back; it was a male, had a pizzle about 6 feet long, and about a foot in diameter near its body; the breadth of the tail from one outward tip to the other, was 13 feet and a half" (Parkin, 1775). Hence, the first record of a Norfolk stranding of a whale explicitly defined as a sperm whale is a case from 1626. Nevertheless, the Whale-Bone Seat already existed in 1606, 20 years before. Therefore, we must suppose that the sperm whale of the Seat was a beached individual that simply left no written trace. The most reliable position regarding the establishment of the specimen of origin of the Seat appears to be the one of the naturalist Arthur Henry Patterson (1857-1935), who accepted the idea that the whale of the Seat was from the late 16th century, but refused the 1582 case as possible: "There remains little doubt, although the exact date is uncertain, that this example was killed in the latter part of the sixteenth century" (Patterson, 1898).

Sperm whales remained rare on the Norfolk coast also in the following centuries. On 29 November 1986, when a sperm whale was washed ashore on the coast of Norfolk, "the first in Norfolk for over two centuries" (Goldsmith, 1987), it caused such a sensation that, in the Norfolk Mammal Report for 1986, the naturalist Rex Clifford Hancy, at that time President of the Norfolk & Norwich Naturalists' Society, defined it "the mammal of the year" (Hancy, 1987). John Goldsmith, from the Natural History Department of Norwich Castle Museum, devoted to the case an article, where he mentioned a series of historical appearances of sperm whales in Norfolk, reporting the whale of Great Yarmouth's Whale-Bone Seat as the first (Goldsmith, 1987).

The Whale-Bone Seat originally stood at the left of the entrance gate of St. Nicholas' Church, at the base of the neighboring Guildhall, which was the house of the Merchants' Guild (Swinden, 1772; Preston, 1819; Palmer,

1856, 1875; Diboll, 1857; Southwell, 1878, 1881; Porter, 1974). Subsequently, probably after the demolition of the old Guildhall in 1723 (Palmer, 1856), the Whale-Bone Seat was moved inside the church, in a niche next to the west door (Swinden, 1772; Preston, 1819; Palmer, 1856, 1875; Diboll, 1857; Southwell, 1878, 1881; Lubbock & Southwell, 1879; Buckland, 1882; Rideing, 1882, 1896; Patterson, 1898, 1905, 1912; Dutt, 1900, 1901; Cox, 1911; Stephen, 1927; Porter, 1974). In Swinden's book, which was completed in 1771, the Seat is already reported as being kept inside the church: "Near this door [the west door], under a niche, stands a large old jawbone of a whale. It formerly was used for a seat at the church grate under the old Guild hall" (Swinden, 1772). The same is relayed by Palmer in the middle of the following century: "Probably on the demolition of the old guild hall, it was brought into the church, where it now remains near the great west door" (Palmer, 1856). The Whale-Bone Seat could be admired inside the church also by the Prince of Wales Albert Edward (1841-1910), the future Edward VII King of the United Kingdom from 1901 to 1910, when he came to Great Yarmouth and visited St. Nicholas' Church on 7 June 1872 (Palmer, 1875) and on 11 June 1881 (Lupson, 1881).

By the early 1830s, as relayed by the writer and bookseller William Hone (1780-1842), the Seat had acquired a sinister notoriety and had received the name of Devil's Seat (Hone, 1832). Indeed, according to Hone, at his time it was believed that anybody sitting on the Seat would have become "particularly liable to misfortunes ever afterwards" (Hone, 1832). It should not be surprising that such devil-associated folkloristic belief was still surviving well into the era of organized science. As highlighted by the historian Sarah Bartels, who in her book *The Devil and the Victorians: Supernatural Evil in Nineteenth-Century English Culture* examined the significance of the Devil in the Victorian culture, in the 19th century many places and public objects in the United Kingdom were still associated with a devilish allure and contained references to the devil in their names, among which Great Yarmouth's Devil's Seat (Bartels, 2021). Often, diabolical names were associated with danger. For instance, a dangerous stretch of sea off Cromer in Norfolk was known as the Devil's Throat, the Devil's Parrock¹⁵ in Wiltshire was believed to terrify horses and consequently cause accidents to horse riders or horse-drawn carriages, and the Devil's Punch Bowl in Hampshire featured a "wild and dreary tract" (Bartels, 2021). Analogously, Great Yarmouth's Devil's Seat had a reputation for bringing bad luck (Bartels, 2021).

In his book on handedness, the physician Ira Solomon Wile (1877-1943) suggested that possibly this sinister fame of the Seat could have originated from the fact that it was initially placed at the left of the entrance gate of the church, a position that has often been associated with evil (Wile, 1934). More likely, this folkloristic belief may have arisen from the psychological association of bones with death and because at that time whales were seen mostly as fearful "monsters of the deep" (for a history of the views of the whale in the early 19th century, see d'Isa & Abramson, 2025). According to the aforementioned

naturalist Thomas Southwell, the Seat was considered an “object of wonder” “relegated to the powers of darkness” (Southwell, 1881). The belief in the misfortune-bringing power of the Seat was long-lasting, as in the late 1930s the journalist and novelist Charles James Hankinson (1866–1959), better known by his pen name Clive Holland, still wrote about it in *Chambers’s Journal*, in an article evocatively entitled *Memorials of the Devil*: “How the Devil’s Seat, in Great Yarmouth Church, made out of the jawbone of a whale, got its name no one knows, but it is believed that misfortune always follows anyone who sits in it” (Holland, 1939).

According to a parallel folk belief, after a wedding ceremony, the first of the couple to sit on the Seat would obtain the dominant role in the marriage (Riley, 2022). Curiously, it appears that an opposite superstition was spread by the men as a countermeasure. The essayist Thomas Firminger Thiselton-Dyer¹⁶ (1848–1923), in his *Folk-Lore of Women* relays: “in past years every precaution was taken to prevent a bride sitting down on the left seat at the gateway of the entrance to Great Yarmouth Parish Church popularly designated the ‘Devil’s Seat,’ as such an act, it was said, would in days to follow render her specially liable to misfortune” (Thiselton-Dyer, 1905).

The Whale-Bone Seat reached transoceanic fame in 1882, through the American journalist William Henry Rideing (1953–1918). Indeed, after that Rideing had travelled to England and visited Yarmouth, he decided to write an article devoted to this town, which he defined as “quaint old Yarmouth”, for the popular American magazine *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* (Rideing, 1882). In this article, Rideing made a special mention of St. Nicholas’ Church and of the Whale-Bone Seat, for which an evocative illustration was also presented (see Fig. 2, Top Row).

Unfortunately, the Second World War brought an end to the public life of this multicentenary monument. On 25 June 1942, more than 1500 bombs were dropped by the Nazi aviation on Great Yarmouth. The Church of St. Nicholas was almost completely destroyed (Bowyer, 1986). After the bombing, the Whale-Bone Seat never appeared in public again. Consequently, many thought that on that day the Seat had also been destroyed (Porter, 1974; Redman, 2004; Scammell *et al.*, 2005). However, intriguingly, the botanist Philip Ernest Rumbelow (1879–1954), in a communication dated by the author 18 November 1942 and published the following year in the journal *Transactions of the Suffolk Naturalists’ Society*, reported that, after the bombing, the parish clerk had managed to find the Whale-Bone Seat under the debris and that, although “somewhat burnt”, the Seat had survived the explosions and the fire: “The old Yarmouth Whale-skull chair was somewhat burnt when German planes destroyed St. Nicholas church, and had been thrown out among rubbish, but has been rescued by the parish clerk” (Rumbelow, 1943). From then on, the traces of the Seat have been lost. The church was rebuilt, but the Whale-Bone Seat was no longer present inside it. At present, we can only formulate hypotheses regarding the fate of the Seat. Most likely, the Seat has been saved and is now kept in a private collection. Its current location is unknown and could be in any place in the world.

NOTES

- ¹ The church was enlarged and restored multiple times over the course of its history. The last restoration, completed in 1961, is by the Gothic Revival architect Stephen Ernest Dykes Bower (1903–1994).
- ² Thomas Southwell was elected Fellow of the Zoological Society of London on 22 February 1872, having as proposer the zoologist and explorer Alfred Newton (1829–1907), Professor of Comparative Anatomy at the University of Cambridge (Hooper, 1912).
- ³ For an analysis of the cetology of Thomas Southwell, see d’Isa & Abramson (2025).
- ⁴ As can be seen, Palmer reported the bone’s species (sperm whale) 3 years before Southwell. However, it appears that his source for this piece of information was Southwell. Palmer was a historian, while Southwell was a naturalist with knowledge of cetology. As a pure historian, Palmer needed a consultation from a cetology expert in order to be able to identify the species. In 1856, Palmer described the Seat generically as being “formed by the bone of a whale” (Palmer, 1856). On the other hand, in 1875 Palmer provided species and anatomical identification: “Before quicing the church by the great west door, let us pause a moment to look at a seat standing there formed by the skull of a northern sperm whale” (Palmer, 1875). Interestingly, Palmer and Southwell both lived in the County of Norfolk and knew each other. Likely in the period 1870–1875, Palmer and Southwell had an exchange of ideas about the Whale-Bone Seat. It appears that Southwell provided to Palmer cetological expertise, while Palmer provided to Southwell historical expertise. In one of his notes to Lubbock’s *Observations on the Fauna of Norfolk*, Southwell explicitly credits Palmer for providing to him information regarding historical documents: “Mr. C. J. Palmer, of Yarmouth, informs me that in the churchwardens’ accounts for 1606, there is a charge of eight shillings for painting this skull, which fully establishes its great antiquity” (Lubbock & Southwell, 1879). On the other hand, Palmer does not credit his source of information regarding the species and body part identification. However, it is highly likely that his source was Southwell.
- ⁵ Francis Trevelyan Buckland, better known as Frank Buckland, was the son of the paleontologists Mary Morland (1797–1857) and William Buckland (1784–1856), who was one of the co-founders of the Zoological Society of London in 1826. He was elected Fellow of the Zoological Society of London in 1862, six years after the death of his father (Zoological Society of London, 1877).
- ⁶ At that time Natural History Departments of the British Museum in South Kensington, which included the four Departments of Zoology, Botany, Mineralogy and Geology.
- ⁷ “Of the osteology of the Sperm Whale, Professor Flower has given an exhaustive account in a paper published in the ‘Transactions of the Zoological Society,’ vol. vi.” (Southwell, 1878).
- ⁸ “Of the osteology of the Sperm Whale, Professor Flower has given an exhaustive description in a paper published in the ‘Transactions’ of the Zoological Society, vol. vi.” (Southwell, 1881).
- ⁹ After 20 years of historical research and writing, Henry Swinden completed the *History and Antiquities of the Ancient Burgh of Great Yarmouth* in late 1771 and gave it to the printers. Unfortunately, Swinden was never able to see his lifework published, as he died on 11 January 1772, while “the last sheet was in the press”, as relayed in the Preface of the book by Swinden’s friend John Ives (Swinden, 1772; Fell Smith, 1898). However, thanks to Ives, who received this task directly from the dying Swinden, the work was published posthumously just a few months after Swinden’s death, to the financial benefit of his widow (Fell Smith, 1898). To further honor Swinden’s memory, Ives erected a commemorative mural tablet dedicated to him in St. Nicholas’ Church (Fell Smith, 1898).
- ¹⁰ Town clerk of Great Yarmouth from 4 November 1579 to 2 July 1585 and historian of the town (Goodwin, 1893).
- ¹¹ Browne first published a mention of these cases of sperm whale stranding in the book chapter *On Sperma-Ceti and the Sperma-Ceti Whale*, first appeared in the third edition of his *Pseudodoxia epidemica* (Browne, 1658).
- ¹² There is hence a mistake in Browne’s claim from *An Account of Fishes, &c. Found in Norfolk and on the Coast* that the Hunstanton

stranding occurred “twenty years before” the Wells stranding, as it was actually 30 years before.

¹³ The Lords of Hunstanton Hall, the ancestral mansion of the le Strange family, during this period were, in chronological order: Sir Hamon le Strange (1583-1654), Sir Nicholas le Strange (1604-1655), Sir Hamon le Strange (1631-1656), Sir Nicholas le Strange (1632-1669) and Sir Nicholas le Strange (1661-1724).

¹⁴ The antiquarian Hamon le Strange (1840-1918).

¹⁵ Parrock is a dialectical word for paddock.

¹⁶ Brother of the botanist William Turner Thiselton-Dyer (1843-1928), third director of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew.

REFERENCES

- Alam P., Amini S., Tadayon M., Miserez A. & Chinsamy A., 2016 – Properties and architecture of the sperm whale skull amphitheatre. *Zoology*, 119 (1): 42-51. <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.zool.2015.12.001>>
- Bartels S., 2021 – The Devil and the Victorians: Supernatural Evil in Nineteenth-Century English Culture. *Routledge*, New York.
- Bowyer M.J.F., 1986 – Air Raid! The Enemy Air Offensive Against East Anglia 1939-45. *P. Stephens*, Wellingborough.
- Browne T., 1658 – Pseudodoxia Epidemica: Or, Enquiries Into Very Many Received Tenents, and Commonly Presumed Truths. The Third Edition, Corrected and Enlarged by the Author. *Nathaniel Ekins*, London.
- Browne T., 1835 – Sir Thomas Browne's Works, Volume the Fourth, Containing: Repertorium, Letter to a Friend, Christian Morals, Miscellany Tracts and Unpublished Papers. *William Pickering*, London.
- Browne T., 1852 – The Works of Sir Thomas Browne. Volume III. Containing: Urn-Burial, Christian Morals, Miscellanies, Correspondence, Etc. *Henry G. Bohn*, London.
- Browne T. & Southwell T., 1902 – Notes and Letters on the Natural History of Norfolk, More Especially on the Birds and Fishes From the MSS. Of Sir Thomas Browne, M.D. (1605-1682) in the Sloane Collection in the Library of the British Museum and in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. With Notes by Thomas Southwell. *Jarrold & Sons*, London.
- Buckland F., 1882 – Notes and Jottings from Animal Life. *Smith, Elder, & Company*, London.
- Cox J.C., 1911 – Norfolk. Vol. I: Northern Division. *George Allen & Company*, London.
- Diboll J.W., 1857 – Devil's Seat, Yarmouth. *Notes and Queries* (2nd series), 3: 257-258.
- d'Isa R. & Abramson C.I., 2025 – Behavioral cetology in the 19th century: Thomas Beale, Henry Cheever, Thomas Southwell and their role in awakening a cetacean protection consciousness. *Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences*, 61 (1), e70005. <<https://doi.org/10.1002/jhbs.70005>>
- Doig S.E., 2023 – The A-Z of Curious Norfolk: Strange Stories of Mysteries, Crimes and Eccentrics. *The History Press*, Cheltenham.
- Dutt W.A., 1900 – Norfolk. *J. M. Dent and Company*, London.
- Dutt W.A., 1901 – Norfolk. *E. P. Dutton and Company*, New York.
- Fell Smith C., 1898 – Swinden, Henry (1716-1772). In: Dictionary of National Biography. Vol. LV. Stow-Taylor. Lee S. (ed.). *Smith, Elder, & Company*, London: 231.
- Flower W.H., 1868a – On the Osteology of the Cachalot or Sperm-Whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*). *The Transactions of the Zoological Society of London*, 6: 309-372. <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1096-3642.1868.tb00580.x>>
- Flower W.H., 1868b – On the Osteology of the Cachalot or Sperm-Whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*). *Taylor and Francis*, London.
- Goldsmith J., 1987 – The Great Sperm Whale. In: Norfolk Bird & Mammal Report 1986. Seago M.J. & Hancy R. (eds.). *The Norfolk & Norwich Naturalists Society*, Norwich: 465-466.
- Goodwin G., 1893 – Manship, Henry. In: Dictionary of National Biography. Vol. XXXVI: Malthus-Mason. Lee S. (ed.). *Smith, Elder, & Company*, London: 94-95.
- Hancy R., 1987 – Editorial. In: Norfolk Bird & Mammal Report 1986. Seago M.J. & Hancy R. (eds.). *The Norfolk & Norwich Naturalists Society*, Norwich: 463-464.
- Holland C., 1939 – Memorials of the Devil. *Chambers's Journal*, 8: 705-707.
- Hone W., 1832 – The Year Book of Daily Recreation and Information, Concerning Remarkable Men and Manners, Times and Seasons, Solemnities and Merry-Makings, Antiquities and Novelties; On the Plan of the Every-Day Book and Table Book, or Everlasting Calendar of Popular Amusements, Sports, Pastimes, Ceremonies, Customs, and Events, Incident to Each of the Three Hundred and Sixty-Five Days In Past and Present Times; Forming a Complete History of The Year; And a Perpetual Key to the Almanac. *Thomas Tegg*, London.
- Hooper J., 1912 – Southwell, Thomas (1831-1909). In: Dictionary of National Biography. Second Supplement. Vol. III: Neil-Young. Lee S. (ed.). *Smith, Elder, & Company*, London: 359-360.
- Huggenberger S., André M. & Oelschläger, H.H.A., 2016 – The nose of the sperm whale: overviews of functional design, structural homologies and evolution. *Journal of the Marine Biological Association of the United Kingdom*, 96 (4): 783-806. <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025315414001118>>
- James P.S.B.R. & Soundararajan R., 1981 – An osteological study on the sperm whale *Physeter macrocephalus* Linnaeus from Indian Ocean. *Indian Journal of Fisheries*, 28 (1&2): 217-232.
- Lubbock R. & Southwell T., 1879 – Observations on the Fauna of Norfolk, and More Particularly on the District of the Broads. New Edition, With Additions From Unpublished Manuscripts of the Author, and Notes by Thomas Southwell. *Jarrold & Sons*, Norwich.
- Lupson E.J., 1881 – St. Nicholas' Church, Great Yarmouth: Its History, Organ, Pulpit, Library, Etc. *Edward J. Lupson*, Yarmouth.
- Lupson E.J., 1882 – A Guide to S. Nicolas Church, Great Yarmouth, Being a Description of the Largest Parish Church of England. *A. & W. Huke*, Great Yarmouth.

- Manship H. & Palmer C.J., 1854 – The History of Great Yarmouth. *Louis Alfred Meall*, Great Yarmouth.
- Mitchell L., 2021 – Westering: Footways and Folkways from Norfolk to the Welsh Coast. *Saraband*, Salford.
- Palmer C.J., 1856 – The History of Great Yarmouth, designed as a Continuation of Manship's History of That Town. *Louis Alfred Meall*, Great Yarmouth.
- Palmer C.J., 1875 – The Perustration of Great Yarmouth, with Gorleston and Southtown. Volume III. *George Nall*, Great Yarmouth.
- Parkin C., 1775 – An Essay Towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk. Volume V. *W. Whittingham and R. Baldwin*, Lynn.
- Patterson A., 1898 – The Mammalia of Great Yarmouth and Its Immediate Neighbourhood. *The Zoologist*, 2: 299-310.
- Patterson A.H., 1905 – Nature in Eastern Norfolk. *Methuen and Company*, London.
- Patterson A.H., 1912 – Notes on the Whales of Norfolk. *Transactions of the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society*, 9 (3): 300-207.
- Porter E., 1974 – The Folklore of East Anglia. *B. T. Batsford*, London.
- Preston J., 1819 – The Picture of Yarmouth: Being a Compendious History and Description of All the Public Establishments Within That Borough; Together With a Concise Topographical Account of Ancient and Modern Yarmouth, Including Its Fisheries. *John Preston*, Yarmouth.
- Redman N., 2004 – Whales' Bones of the British Isles. *Redman Publishing*, Teddington.
- Rideing W.H., 1882 – Quaint Old Yarmouth. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 65: 1-19.
- Rideing W.H., 1896 – At Hawarden With Mr. Gladstone and Other Transatlantic Experiences. *Thomas Y. Crowell & Company*, New York.
- Riley P., 2022 – Strandings: Confessions of a Whale Scavenger. *Profile Books*, London.
- Rumbelow P.E., 1943 – Southtown whalebones. *Transactions of the Suffolk Naturalists' Society*, 5 (2): 131-132.
- Scammell G., Papalas A.J., Haywood C., Schokkenbroek J.C.A., Janzen O.U., Fowler W.M., Haycox S., Cock R., Tracy N., Weski T., Lambert A., Herwig H.H., McLean D., Channon R.F., Greene J., Thomson P., Credland A.G., Crowhurst P., Harland J. & Kane T.M., 2005 – Reviews. *The Mariner's Mirror*, 91 (3): 481-511. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00253359.2005.10656966>>
- Southwell T., 1878 – The Seal and the Whales of the British Seas. Part VI. *Hardwicke's Science-Gossip*, 14: 7-9.
- Southwell T., 1881 – The Seal and the Whales of the British Seas. *Jarrold and Sons*, London.
- Stephen G.A., 1927 – 100 Pictures of the Norfolk Broads: Picturesque Waterways of East Anglia. *Jarrold and Sons*, Norwich.
- Swinden H., 1772 – The History and Antiquities of the Ancient Burgh of Great Yarmouth in the County of Norfolk. Collected From the Corporation Charters, Records, and Evidences; and Other the Most Authentic Materials. *Henry Swinden*, Norwich.
- Thiselton-Dyer T.F., 1905 – Folk-Lore of Women as Illustrated by Legendary and Traditionary Tales, Folk-Rhymes, Proverbial Sayings, Superstitions, Etc. *Elliot Stock*, London.
- Wile I.S., 1934 – Handedness, Right and Left. *Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Company*, Boston.
- Zoological Society of London, 1877 – A List of the Fellows and Honorary, Foreign, and Corresponding Members and Medallists of the Zoological Society of London. Corrected to May 1st, 1877. *W. Clowes and Sons*, London.