



Touch of the toadstone

A pair of unusual rings, one found in a field, and a collection of stuffed fish are among interesting recent sales



I HAVE a soft spot for toads—with the exception of the gigantic cane variety that plagues northern Australia—indeed, amphibians of all kinds, so do not understand how they could have been so mistreated as to acquire the entirely imaginary stone believed to be encased in their heads. As the toad does have poison glands in its skin, it was supposed that it would carry an antidote and, from the 14th to at least the 18th centuries, people maintained that the touch of such a 'toadstone' was sovereign against poisoning and similar disorders.

In his 1608 *History of Serpents*, Edward Topsell tells us: 'There be many that weare these stones in Ringes, being verily perswaded that they keepe them from all manner of grypings and paines of the belly and the small guttes. But the Art (as they terme it) is in taking of it out, for they say it must be taken out of the head alive, before the Toad be dead, with a peece of cloth of the colour of red Skarlet, where-withall they [toads] are much delighted, so that they stretch out themselves as it were in sport upon that cloth, they cast out the stone of their head...'

Oh dear. It is tempting to hope that in this murdering hecatombs of innocent toads a law of unintended consequences was triggered and many more of their persecutors than normal perished from agues and insect bites.

Naturally, there were plenty of quacks happy to supply the market, even if the toads

Fig 1: A gold ring set with a 16th- or 17th-century toadstone, made from the tooth of a long-extinct Jurassic fish. £16,250

themselves could not, and the substitutes they found are apparently something almost as magical: the fossilised teeth of a 175-million-year-old, long-extinct Jurassic fish. These polish very well.

Recently, a 16th- or 17th-century gold ring set with a toadstone (*Fig 1*) was brought amid a box of miscellaneous jewellery into Swords of Stansted Mountfitchet, where it was recognised by the specialist Catriona Smith. The mount is pierced to allow contact with the skin for better efficacy. Last month, this ring, which was in good condition, went for a healthy £16,250 to a bidder from Guernsey, underbid from Scotland.

Another ring, this time medieval (*Fig 2*), made headlines at the Mayfair coin, jewel and medal specialists Noonans. This had been discovered in Dorset by David Board, a metal-detectorist, and is believed to have been the wedding ring given by Sir Thomas Brook, or Brooke (about 1355–1418), to his wife, Joan Cheddar, née Hanham, for their marriage in 1388.

This alliance brought the Brook family great wealth and status, but also considerable danger, as it involved them with the heretic Lollards led by Sir John Oldcastle, who was hanged and burned despite being



Fig 2: A medieval double gold twist ring set with a diamond, found in a Dorset field. It is believed to be a wedding ring given by Thomas Brook to his wife, Joan. £48,944

the former friend of Prince Hal. Shakespeare gave Falstaff a less gruesome end.

Lady Brook's first husband, Robert Cheddar (d.1384), MP and twice Mayor of Bristol, had left 17 manors, five advowsons and extensive properties throughout Devon, Dorset, Somerset and Gloucestershire, together with 21 shops, four cellars and 160 tenements in Bristol. These went to their young son, but he passed them to his mother and stepfather for life. Sir Thomas wanted a plain memorial for himself, but his widow had other ideas and, eventually, they came to lie under a magnificent ledger stone and monumental brass.