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Beach Pebbles

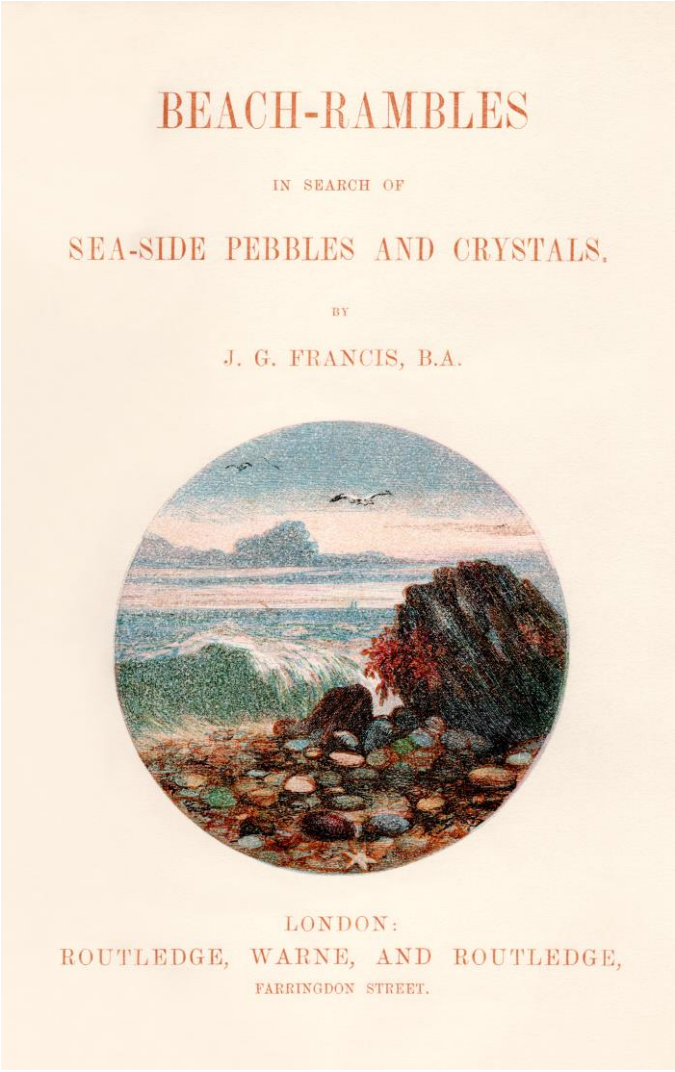
By James Evans, FGA

After reviewing two renowned works on beach pebbles, I follow the guidance (and footsteps) of the authors in the hunt for "semi-precious" stones along the British coast.

Beach-rambles in search of sea-side pebbles and crystals by John George Francis, 1859.

In writing the first popular work on beach pebbles, John George Francis affirmed his Victorian enthusiasm for connoisseurship and for collecting.

This was not a book of tables and schema, for Francis was *'convinced that to master anything, whether bodily or intellectually, the all-important point is to make a genuine effort of our own'*. The reader would instead flow through the writing, accompanying the author along tributary turns in the hunt for his quarry. His prey was not the diamond or sapphire, for the British coast was as alive with white elephants as it was with precious gems. Yet the pleasure to be found in the hunt for "transparencies" (chiefly agates), and especially fossils, was palpable.


BEACH-RAMBLES

IN SEARCH OF

SEA-SIDE PEBBLES AND CRYSTALS.

BY

J. G. FRANCIS, B.A.

LONDON:
ROUTLEDGE, WARNE, AND ROUTLEDGE,
FARRINGDON STREET.

The oriental gems, though they gleam as if "all air and fire," are but dead crystals, and have never stood higher than they stand now: whereas these pretty fossils from our wave-beaten coast tell each a wondrous tale, and form a kind of tangible link between the zoophyte of to-day and the far-removed ancestry in the earliest seas which washed the surface of our globe.

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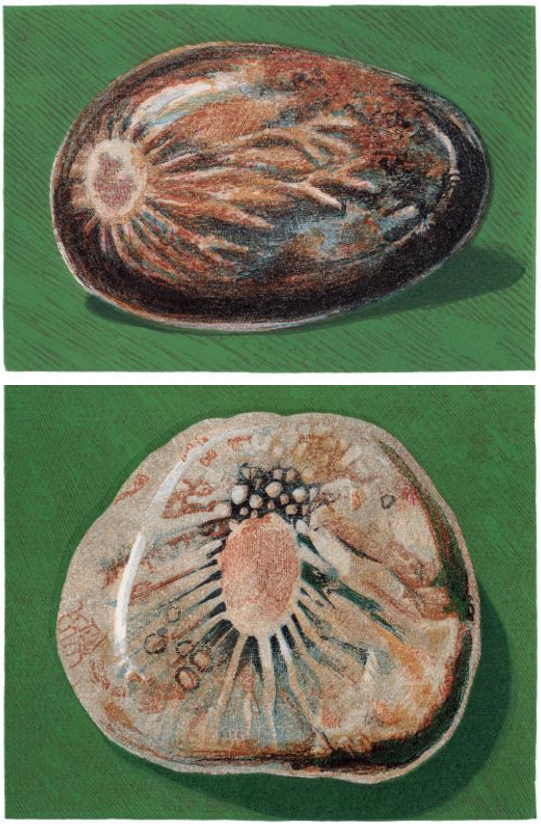
I know of few things more pleasant than to ramble for a mile along one of our southern beaches in the early days of autumn. We get the sniff of the sea-breeze; we see prismatic colours dappling the water, or curiously reflected from capes of wet sand; solemn, beetling cliffs, broken here and there by a green slope, rise on one side of us; while, on the other, we are enchanted by the wild music of the waves, as they dash noisily upon the shingle at our feet, and then trickle back with faint, lisping murmurs into the azure gulf.

Having been inspired by Francis' work, and being adequately qualified with *'good legs, good eyes, good judgement, and [...] a good temper'*, I set out to prise my own choice stones from the bosom of the coy beach. But which beach? Francis suggested three counties in which to search: South Devon, Sussex, and the Isle of Wight. Of these, I find South Devon to hold the greatest appeal; a county Francis described as follows:

> *I commence searching near the bright water-line, and what with the simple grandeur of the scene, and what with the balmy breath of the south, I insensibly stray onward for several miles, until the increasing weight in my pockets suggests a pause. Now I will sit down under the shadow of that mid-way rock, light a cigar, and inspect my treasures.*
>
> *No sooner said than done. What a calming sensation a whiff of good tobacco induces on these burning days! But what have I got? Above thirty globes of chalcedony, blue and white, as oval as bantams' eggs. I select half a dozen on account of some beauty or peculiarity, and fling the remainder into the sea, there to undergo a fresh impregnation. Next, sundry bits of the red and white conglomerate. Let me advise everybody who has the opportunity, to pick this up. When sliced and polished, the surface obtained beats the inlaid work of a cabinet-maker all to nothing. Next, a couple of choanites, one in the dark "rag," ribbed like sea-weed; the other in pretty light-brown moss-agate. These two go into my breast-pocket for safety. Lastly, what has never been out of my hand since I found it – a huge, knotted jasper-agate, of five pounds' weight.*



Two "choanites" (fossilised sponges), illustrated by M. W. S. Coleman.

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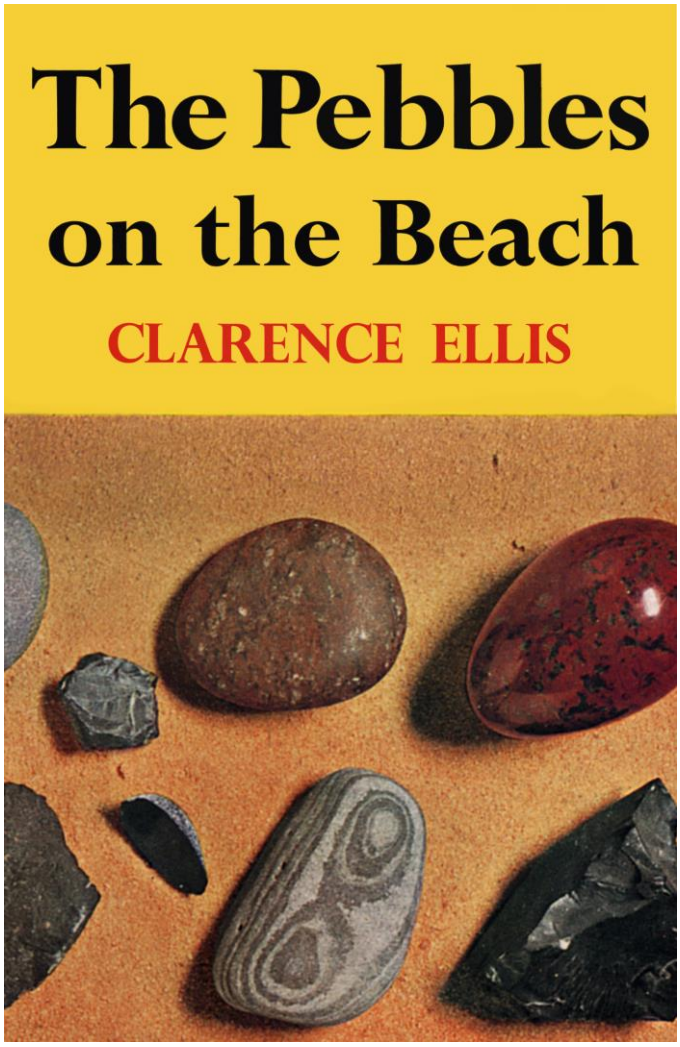
The pebbles on the beach
by Clarence Ellis, 1954

Before setting-out on my hunt I would first consult Ellis' 1954 work; described by The Economist as *'the Bible of pebble-picking'*.

This is a book which pulls the reader through a thick lagoon of theory. Its initial chapters cover the mechanics of a shingle beach and the life-cycle of a pebble, before reluctantly giving-way to an identification guide and hints on the *'exciting quest for semi-precious stones'*.

Some maintain that a pebble can vary in size from a maximum of six inches in its longest diameter to a minimum of ¼ inch, the breadth of a pea, while others would accept a much larger range: from a rounded boulder to a minute stone little larger than a grain of sand.

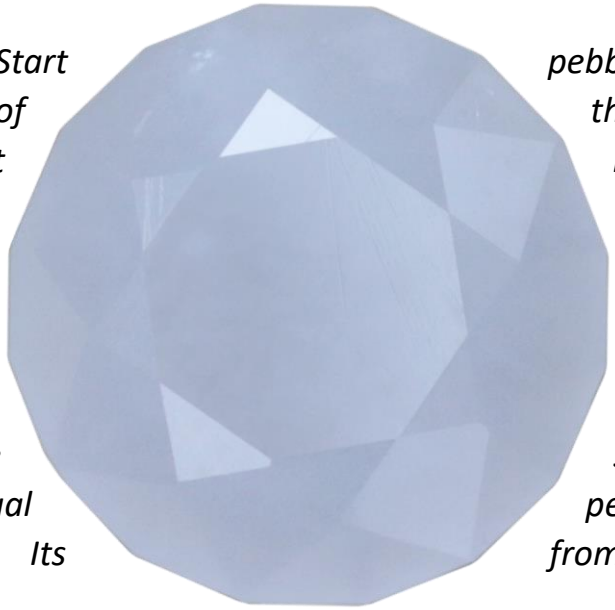


Aside from the author's appreciation of theory, a contrast can be made with Francis' attitude to collecting: the excesses of the Victorian age had now given way to a more socially-conscious approach. Ellis thus warns the reader that a discriminating pebble-collector must not become a pack animal!

Conglomerate pebbles: from Francis' book (Left); Ellis' book (Centre); & the Devon coast (as recommended by Francis) (Right).

In practical terms, perhaps the greatest benefit provided by Ellis is a virtual tour of the pebble-beaches of England and Wales. And in relation to South Devon, Ellis provides the following advice:

In the middle of Start Bay is a bed of shingle that must not be missed. This is the extensive bar at Torcross that encloses the lagoon called Slapton Ley. There is one very unusual feature about it. Its pebbles do not come from the rocks of the Bay. Many of them are flints, yet there is no chalk or other flint-bearing rock near to Torcross. The other pebbles are quartz, including very small ones that are pear-shaped, and granite from Dartmoor.



A previously pear-shaped quartz from Slapton Sands, cut by Janet and Eric Mitchell.

What then did I find at Slapton Sands? Hiding amongst the flints and quartzes, I discovered: a vibrant red jasper; a specimen of the local blue-green schist; a piece of the red and white conglomerate beloved by Francis; and a pebble of fossilised coral – with its hollow tubes of bright scarlet set against a burgundy matrix. And, with an enviable selection of pebbles in my pocket, I had found the experience greatly enjoyable... just as the authors had promised!

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The shingle beach of Slapton Sands.