

Largest Scottish freshwater pearl to be sold in Edinburgh

A famous Scottish freshwater pearl, the largest in living memory, discovered nearly 60 years ago, is to be offered for sale live online and in Edinburgh by auctioneers, Lyon & Turnbull, on 21 August.

Discovered in 1967, the Abernethy Pearl, was named after its finder, William (Bill) Abernethy, who was famously known as Scotland's last pearl fisherman. Pearl fishing was banned in Scotland completely in 1998.

The pearl, estimated to fetch between £40,000 and £60,000, is part of [The Cairncross Collection](#) auction featuring pieces from renowned Scottish jewellers, Cairncross of Perth, which closed in 2023.

Weighing 43.6 grains, the size and quality of the Abernethy Pearl is remarkable. Bill Abernethy, who died in 2021 aged 96, never disclosed exactly where in Scotland he made the rare find.

It is believed that only one in every 5,000 mussels found in Scottish rivers contains a pearl, and generally they are smaller than their saltwater cousins.

During the 1970s, award-winning wildlife cameraman Doug Allan worked with Bill as a pearl diver. In an obituary published following Bill's death in 2021, Doug noted how Bill was able to discern from the size and shape of the mussel if it

contained a pearl. This enabled him to pick carefully and leave other mussels undisturbed.

Doug explains: "Bill was a unique man and it was a privilege to have known him.

"I recall watched Bill fishing with his glass and stick and then he gave me a go. It didn't take long to appreciate just how much hard graft it was.

"Bill, of course, made it look effortless. Which it wasn't. He'd be there, bent over the glass, peering down at the river bed, picking out the small lips of the shells that were buried in the sand.

"I loved learning something of the old craft from Bill. The old words that only the real pearl fishers would use. We'd walk sometimes for miles over the fields until we reached the 'the spot'. He'd point out the specific part of the river that he knew would be best for pearls."

It is believed the Abernethy Pearl, affectionately known as *Little Willie*, could have been quietly growing in its mussel for over 80 years before Bill found it, meaning it was created during the reign of Queen Victoria.

Trained to fish for pearls by his father, Robert, Bill had a rare understanding of the mussels and the rivers in which they could be found. It is believed Bill wrapped the famous pearl in a dock leaf to keep it from scratching before he took it to jewellers, *Cairncross of Perth*, where it remained.

Cairncross of Perth was established in 1869 by brothers Alexander and George Cairncross, becoming a fixture of the city's St John Street during its 154 year history.

The company quickly gained an impressive reputation, dealing in fine quality jewellery and bespoke commissions and developing a loyal clientele throughout generations of the

same family.

The jewellers championed Scottish pearls as a scarce natural wonder and became particularly famous for its pearl jewellery as a result. Over the years, Cairncross sourced an unparalleled collection and the company was the market leader for decades.

Such was the firm's reputation for Scottish river pearls, local pearl fishers offered them first choice of their finds, safe in the knowledge that they would offer a fair price and use the pearls well, preserving the legacy of the rivers and the dying art of the river-pearl fisherman in their designs.

Alistair Cairncross, together with his brother Jimmy, was the last generation of the family to own the shop. Joining the company in 1951 and with a keen artistic eye, Alistair enjoyed painting before he turned his hand to jewellery design.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Alistair designed the now famous collection of floral brooches which are beloved additions to many a jewellery box across Scotland, and further afield.

The brooches represented flora native to Scotland, often found on the banks of the rivers where the pearl mussels grew. Designs include well-known sprays of heather and ferns, or clusters of snowdrops or blaeberreries.

They were made by manufacturing jeweller, *Cropp & Farr*, in London's Hatton Garden, before the pearls were hand mounted back at Cairncross.

At the time, Alistair Cairncross explained: "As the shapes and qualities of the pearls which are found vary very subtly, we design the pieces of jewellery in an asymmetrical form so that their differences are featured rather than hidden.

"Being unusual, we feel that they deserve a treatment which is different, so we have created a series of designs atmospheric

of the background in which they were found.”

At the higher end of the market, they could also offer carefully curated stands of graduated Scottish freshwater pearls, a fine example of which could take decades to source. The company’s jewellery features in the newly opened Perth Museum, and the national collection at the National Museum of Scotland.

When Scottish businesswoman, Flora Rennie, took over the shop in the late 1980s, she took a keen interest in sourcing the pieces they offered to their discerning clients. She regularly travelled, often abroad, to source the best quality pieces, while maintaining the jeweller’s position as the home of Scottish pearls.

When Cairncross closed its doors for the final time in July 2023 it was the end of an era.

Ruth Davis, Head of Jewellery at Lyon & Turnbull, said: “The Cairncross Collection offers a final opportunity to obtain a piece of Perthshire history.

“As well as antique jewellery, including a beautiful pair diamond stud earrings, weighing over 4.00cts, the collection also includes more contemporary pieces, from high-end designers such as Picchiotti and enamelled jewels by Victor Mayer, as well as a selection of Scottish river pearls.

“The Abernethy Pearl is, of course, the star of the sale and we’re excited to see the interest the auction will undoubtedly generate.”

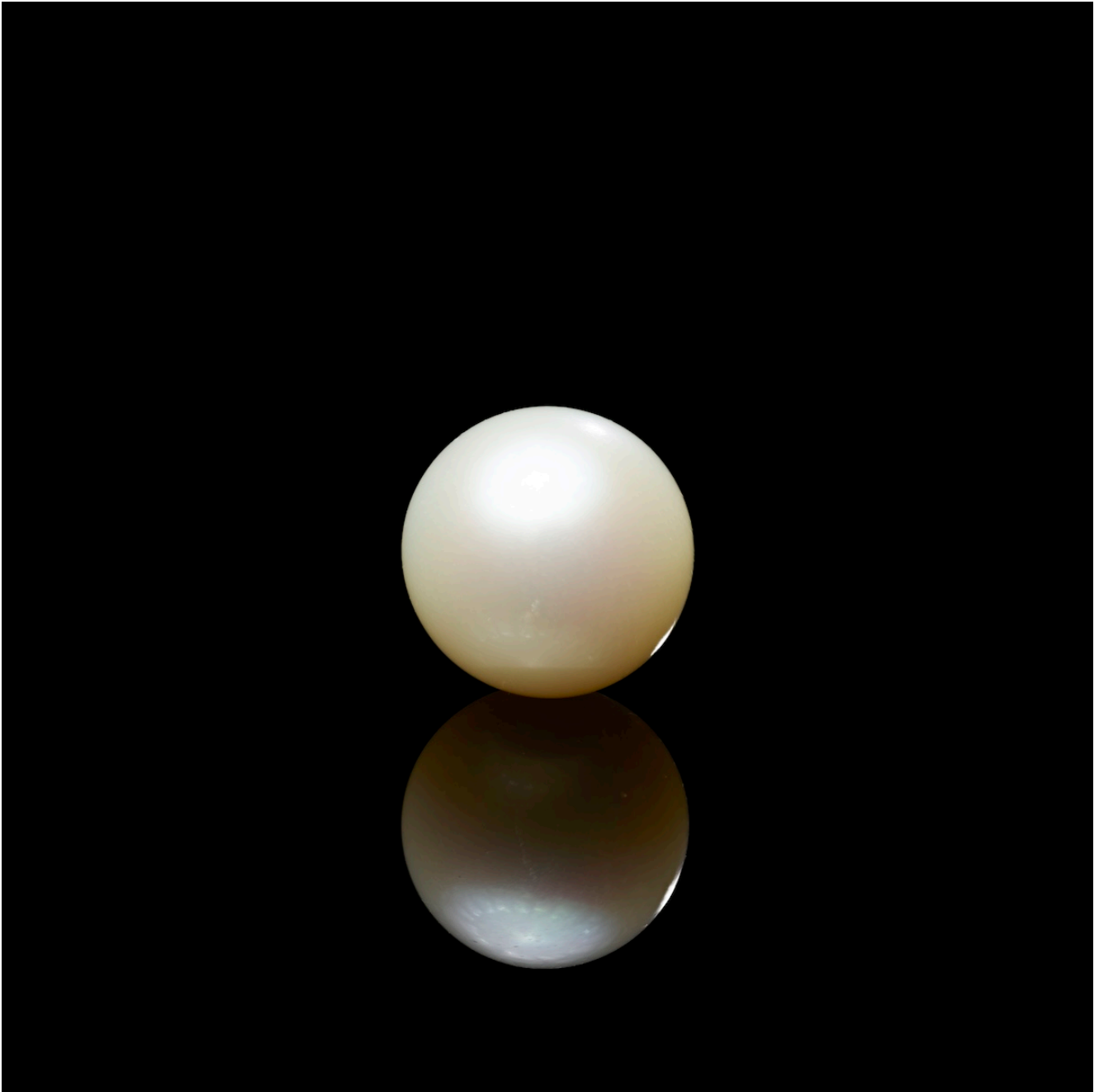


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