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A VICTORIAN CAST IRON COAL-HOLE COVER: AN "OPERCULUM"

removed from Pembroke Street, Oxford,
the circular disk cast in relief with stars and circles, set within its original circular frame,

DIMENSIONS: 6cm (2³/₄"") High, 41cm (16¹/₄"") Wide, 35.5cm (14") in Diameter, the plate = 14" diameter

STOCK CODE: 45719



HISTORY

Whilst Opercula may seem to be the most utilitarian of objects, and anachronistic at that, they have developed quite an enthusiastic following in the last fifty years. Opercularists, past and present, include Sir John Betjeman, Jeremy Corbyn and many others. Exhibitions of Coal-hole covers have appeared in Mayfair art galleries; enthusiasts can be seen taking rubbings of the surviving examples on British and Irish pavements. We get asked for them both by collectors and by those merely wishing to replace their broken ones.

The coal-hole cover was part of the repeated format of Georgian and Victorian terraces and, rather neatly, enabled the coal delivery cart to send coal through the opercula into a chute to the coal bunker in the basement level – the coal cellar either backing onto or underneath the pavement or entrance path – without traipsing coal dust through the house. Being on the pavement, the iron lid needed to be flat but with grip and needed to stay in place to prevent injury (the hasp on the underside would have had a chain preventing the lid being lifted other than on delivery day). The inventive geometric designs were amazing in their design and complexity – the different designs presumably helped the coal-man differentiate between clients as he went on his round. The coal-hole cover was ubiquitous – so it was a big market for

local foundries vying to get the attention of both householders and builder-speculators with their wide range of eye-catching designs.

We are prepared to be corrected but this example looks to be a “Hayward Brothers” example. Many bear the founders’ name, but not all. Haywards – a vast operation in Southwark – styled theirs “The Hayward’s Patent Non-slip Coal Plate” and their range was split into three types: “Solid” (as here), “Ventilating” (with holes) and “Illuminating” (with prismatic glass lenses inset – allowing some light into the coal cellar) and each in three different sizes 12”, 14” (as here) and 16”.

More on the subject is explained in a piece by Bethan Bell for the BBC in May 2021 – [click here](#)

And an entertaining podcast on the subject – Number 49 of “The Boring Talks” – one of a series of podcasts by self-confessed nerds expanding on their passions.