



Left: Barrie Williams, who collects uranium glass, outside Sizewell B

It used to light up the nation's sideboards, and it made Queen Victoria think of sunsets in Burma. You probably know it better as something associated with nuclear power. Sarah Wise tells the unlikely tale of uranium glassware. Photographs by Luke Kirwan

Geiger counted glass

We think of uranium as the quintessentially 20th-century element — the substance of contemporary nightmares which, for the last 50 years, has had the potential to blow up the planet, cause a plague of radiation-linked cancer and create obscenely mutated life forms. But many a 19th-century sitting-room was once innocently aglow with the stuff, since uranium was among the most commonly used colouring agents in decorative glassware and ceramic glazes. At the Sizewell Visitor Centre on the Suffolk coast, a cabinet of uranium glass objects, dating from the 1830s to the Seventies, glimmers in a darkened corner. The pieces are owned by collector Barrie Williams who trawls salerooms with a Geiger counter to

detect the presence of uranium in pieces of glass. "Sometimes," says Williams, "all you need to do at the open-air fairs is stand looking around you as it starts to get dark and you can pick out the uranium pieces with the naked eye. They're the ones that are glowing." Uranium was first identified and given its name in 1789 by a Berlin apothecary, and by the late 1820s, the master glassmakers of Bohemia had found that by adding uranium oxide to a glass mix they could produce intense new shades of green, yellow, amber and turquoise. By the 1840s, British manufacturers were turning out all manner of uranium *objets*. For a banquet given in honour of the newly crowned Queen Victoria at London's Guildhall in 1837, London glassmakers Whitefriars supplied bright-yellow uranium cut-glass fingerbowls in which the royal digits could be cleansed (the Victoria and Albert museum



Left: an example of Webb's Sunshine Amber, date unknown. Above: the pattern on this turn-of-the-century vase was created by the use of two layers of glass, the inner one containing uranium. Right: a candlestick from the late 1880s. Below: a piece of 1890s Vaseline-coloured glass

