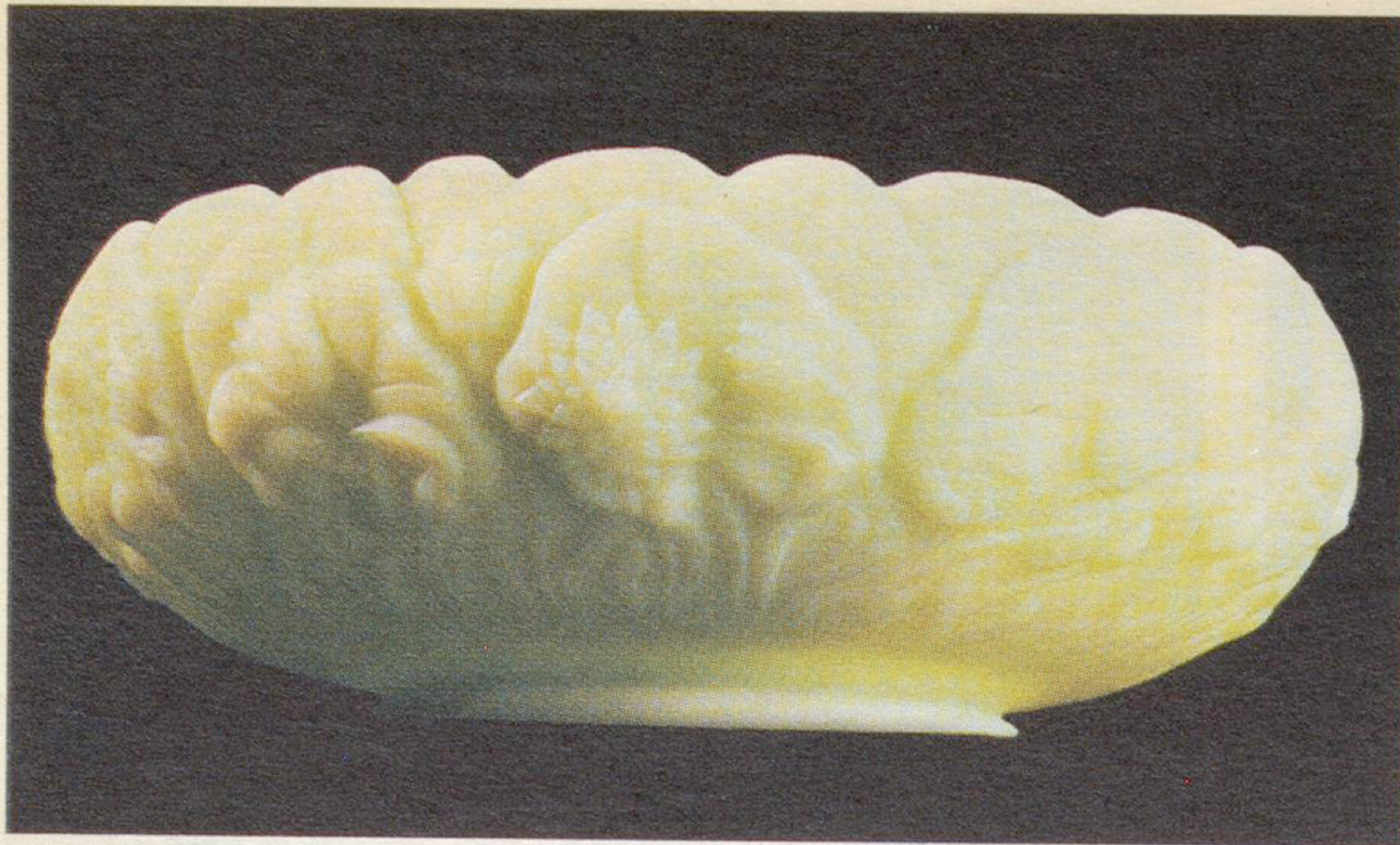
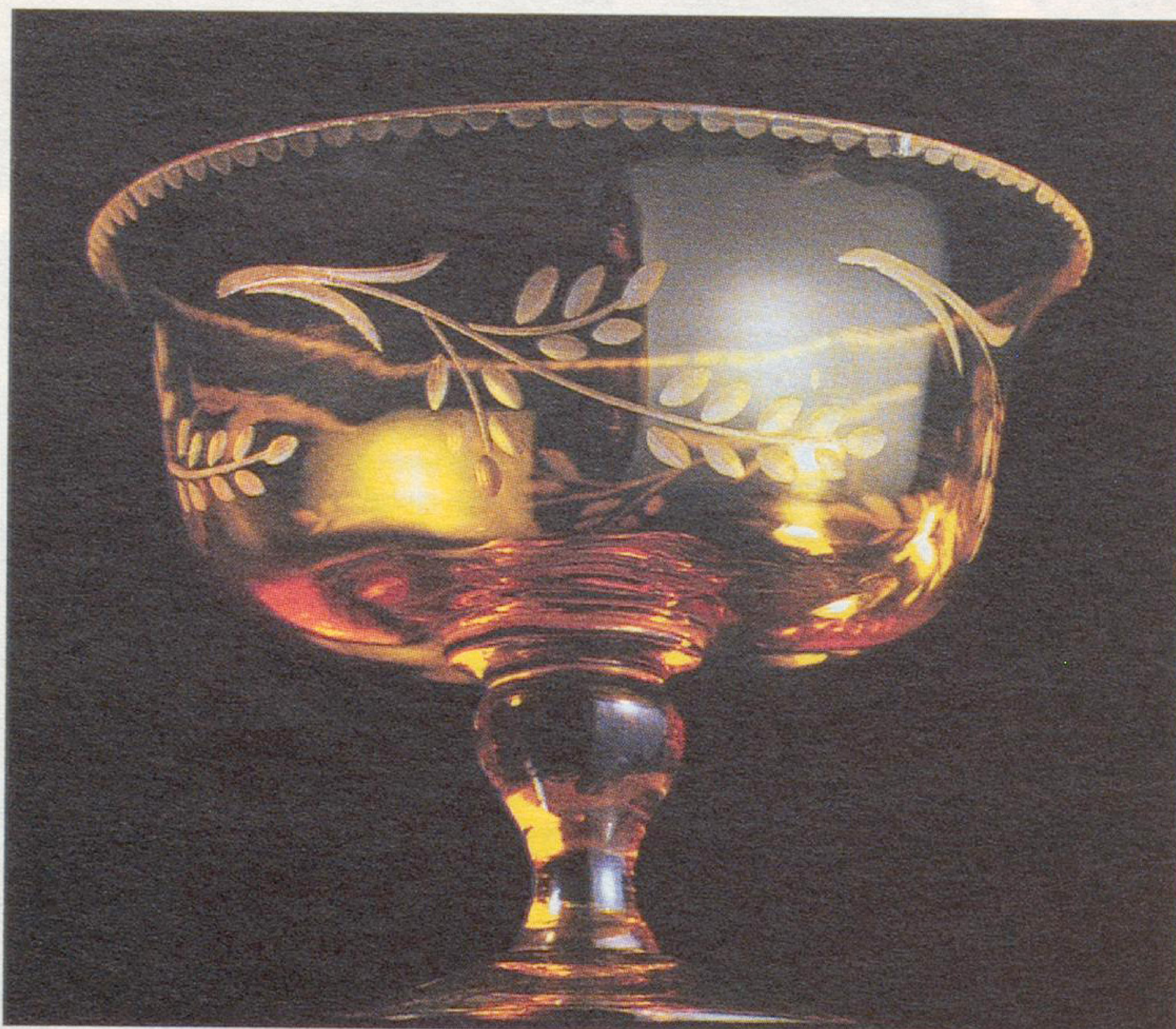


Above: a Seventies piece by American manufacturer Fenton. Far right: a late-19th-century Stevens & Williams vase; the uranium is in the white layer. Right: this Thirties vessel has a relatively high uranium level — three per cent



has one of these on display, in gallery 131).

In the mid and late 19th-century, brightly coloured glass was all the rage, as mass-manufacturing and the advance of pressed glass (as opposed to handblown) lowered its prices. Uranium was added to the glass mix for dinner platters, candlesticks, cake salvers, punch bowls, paperweights and cruet sets, and many of the ranges had jolly, happy-holidays names such as Sunshine Amber, Custard Glass and Canary Yellow. Uranium glass brought a welcome glow into many a gloomy, urban room — in bright sunlight, giving off fiery, jewel-like colours, and at dusk an eerie fluorescence.

One of the most popular late-Victorian ranges was Queen's Burmese. (When Queen Victoria was presented with an early piece, she is said to have cooed "Why, it's just like a Burmese sunset," before ordering a dinner service.) Now highly collectable, since every piece is unique, Queen's Burmese was manufactured in the 1880s and 1890s in America and in the UK by Thomas Webb & Sons of Stourbridge. Burmese colours fade from deep red to rose pink to peach to pale yellow, according to the time and position each piece has had in the furnace. The redness was achieved by adding gold to the mix, which also contained a toxic cocktail of lead, potassium and uranium.

The other highly sought-after uranium glass is known as "Vaseline glass", so-called because of its pale yellowy colour and oily texture. The Tyneside firm of George Davidson was one of the most prolific British producers of such glass, and its Lemon Pearline range remained popular until the first world war.

The Victorians were less likely to be made ill by their nuclear knick-knacks and unstable tableware than by the radioactive thorium in their gas mantle, the laudanum in their "pick-me-up" tonics, arsenic in their complexion treatments and god-knows-what in their drinking water. Most pieces of uranium glass contain between one per cent and three per cent uranium, although anything up to 25 per cent has been recorded. While it would be unwise to wear the bright-yellow bead necklace (three per cent), in the Sizewell display day in, day out against the skin, you could safely wear it to one party at a time.

Probably. Most uranium objects are not believed to be hazardous to human health since you do not ordinarily sit slap-bang up against your household ornaments, and the dangerous beta rays are short-range.

In the first half of this century, vivid uranium colours complemented the bold shapes of art deco, and uranium glass is often found in the form of dressing-table vanity sets, jewellery and cocktail glasses from the Twenties and Thirties. The death-knell for "domestic" uranium was sounded in 1939 when the atom was split for the first time and the subsequent discovery that with wars to be fought and mass destruction to be accomplished, uranium had a far more sinister part to play in human affairs than enlivening the sideboards of the nation. All UK and US stocks were requisitioned, and after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, uranium glassware production never reached its previous volume. We were all more brightly lit after 1945, no need for bogus bottled sunshine. Uranium items are still produced, though — primarily for the collectors' market. Barrie Williams owns an atomic Pernod ashtray from 1970, and a Lime Sherbet lily-patterned bowl by Fenton made in the late Seventies. Williams is quite sad that uranium is no longer such a staple ingredient of decorative glass: "You can get a decent green and amber with modern colouring agents, but it is virtually impossible to get a good yellow or Sunshine Amber nowadays."

The Sizewell Visitor Centre is near Leiston in Suffolk (01728 642139). In addition to Queen Victoria's fingerbowl, the V&A has a uranium-glass piano foot in the shape of a paw (1874) as well as examples of original Queen's Burmese.