

MARY ANNING

1799-1847



Mary Anning was born on 21st May 1799 in Lyme Regis, the first of ten children. Her father was a cabinet maker who supplemented his income by finding and selling fossils to tourists in the town. He often took Mary and her brother Joseph with him to search for fossils in the Blue Lias cliffs in Lyme Bay – one of the richest fossil locations in the country. Blue Lias is made from alternating layers of lime and shale laid down in the early Jurassic Period.



Drawing from an 1814 paper by Everard Home showing the Ichthyosaurus platyodon skull found by Joseph Anning in 1811

Mary's father died when she was eleven but her interest continued to grow after her brother Joseph found the skull of Ichthyosaurus. She then went on to excavate the rest of the skeleton – on display in the Natural History Museum in London. From this she went on to find more and more fossils along the coastline.

200 million years ago Lyme Regis was under water and after a storm Mary would go fossil hunting as bits of the cliff had fallen revealing even more fossils in the cliff face. She lived in the house built by her father to house his wife and 10 children but only Mary and Joseph survived. The house can still be seen on the bridge in Lyme but the blue plaque has been taken to Lyme Regis Museum. This house also served as her first fossil shop. By the late 18th Century Lyme Regis had become a popular seaside resort. She sold mostly "snake stones"(ammonites), "devils fingers" (belemnites) and "verteberries" (vertebrae) to tourists.



One of her most unusual finds was some fossilized faeces (coprolytes) and later she discovered that ink could be made from belemnite fossils very like the ink sacs found in modern cephalopods. In one of her trips she barely avoided being killed by a landslide that buried her black and white terrier, Tray, who had been her constant companion.



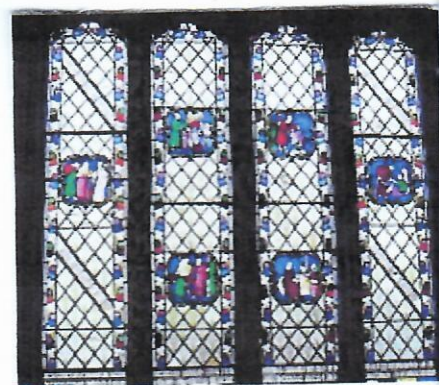
But she continued her work and in 1823 she found the first complete plesiosaur and in 1828 the first British example of the flying reptiles known as pterosaurs – “the flying dragon”. Many geologists and fossil collectors from Europe and America visited Anning in Lyme but she only left Lyme once to go to London and hated it.

Her fossil collecting as a pastime gave her some fame by gradually transforming the importance of fossils to geology and biology. However she was “a woman in a man’s England” and was considered an outsider to the scientific community as she was never mentioned by name for her finds.

One of her friends wrote that “the world has used her ill ... these men of learning have sucked her brains and made a great deal of publishing works, of which SHE furnished the contents, while she derived none of the advantages” – one of these was Charles Darwin.

Although relatively unknown she has been referenced in several historical novels, most notably “The French Lieutenants Woman.” In 1999 on the 200th anniversary of her birth an international meeting of historians, palaeontologists, fossil collectors etc was held in Lyme Regis and in 2005 the Natural History Museum added her name to their list of the ten British women who have most influenced the history of science. She has been hailed by the museum as “the greatest fossil hunter.”

Mary died from breast cancer aged only 47 and is buried in St Michael’s Church cemetery. There is a stained glass window in the church in her memory.



Mary Anning’s Window, St. Michael’s Church

Mary Anning was the basis of Terry Sullivan’s 1908 tongue twister:-

“She sells sea shells on the sea shore,
The shells she sells are sea shells I’m sure.
So, if she sells sea shells on the sea-shore,
Then I’m sure she sells sea shore shells.”