Mary ANNING

(1799 – 1847)

Mary Anning was a famous British fossil hunter. Mary Anning found the fossils of prehistoric animals. Fossils are the hard remains of animals that died long ago. Although she was not trained as a scientist, her discoveries changed science. Her work made important changes to the way people thought about prehistoric life and the history of the earth itself.

Mary's Childhood

Mary was born in Lyme Regis in Dorset, England on the 21st of May 1799.

The Jurassic Coast at Charmouth, Dorset

She was one of ten children, although only Mary and her brother Joseph survived to adulthood. When she was a baby, she was struck by lightning.

The family was poor and Mary didn't have much of an education. She went to Sunday school and this is where she learnt to read and write.

Mary's father was a carpenter and collected fossils as a hobby. He often took Mary and her brother Joseph on fossil hunting expeditions. He had a stall on the seafront and sold these finds to tourists who visited the area.

Mary's father died when she was 11. Mary took over the family business selling fossils to tourists. Mary continued to read and learn as much as she could about fossils.

Mary's discovery of the ichthyosaur

At the age of 12, a year after her father died, Mary made her first major discovery, along with her brother Joseph.

Joseph dug up the skull of an ichthyosaur. A few months later, Mary found the skeleton of the ichthyosaur.

The ichthyosaur skeleton looked like a big crocodile.

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

Other important discoveries

By her early 20's Mary had taken on the leading role in her family business. She mostly found ammonite and belemnite fossils, and sold these on her stall .

Mary was the inspiration behind the tongue twister "she sells sea shells by the sea shore". Over the next few years, Mary's reputation as a brave and intrepid fossil hunter grew as she made more and more impressive finds.

On 10 December 1823, she found the first complete Plesiosaurus . In 1828, she found the first British example of a pterosaur. This looked like a flying dragon.

Mary's Shop

By 1826 Mary had saved enough money to buy her own house. The house had a glass window front and Mary decided to use this for her own shop. She called her shop "Anning's Fossil Depot".

Lots of important people from all around the world, including America, visited Mary's shop.

Mary's dog 'Tray'

Hunting for fossils was often a dangerous and risky business as Mary had to climb the steep cliffs. She always took her dog, Tray, with her when she went on her fossil hunting expeditions.

Unfortunately, one day, there was a landslide on the cliff and Mary's dog Tray was buried underneath, and died. This made Mary sad as he had been her faithful and loyal companion throughout all her fossil hunting expeditions.

An unusual woman

It was a hard time for Mary, as she grew up in a time when women were not allowed to do things such as vote or attend University. She was unable to join the Geological Society of London despite the fact that she was very well known for her findings.

She was friends with many well-known men who were geologists. One of her friends was Henry de la Beche. Mary first knew him when she was a teenager, and he later became one of the most well- known geologists in Britain.

It took until 1829 for Mary to be properly praised for any of her findings.

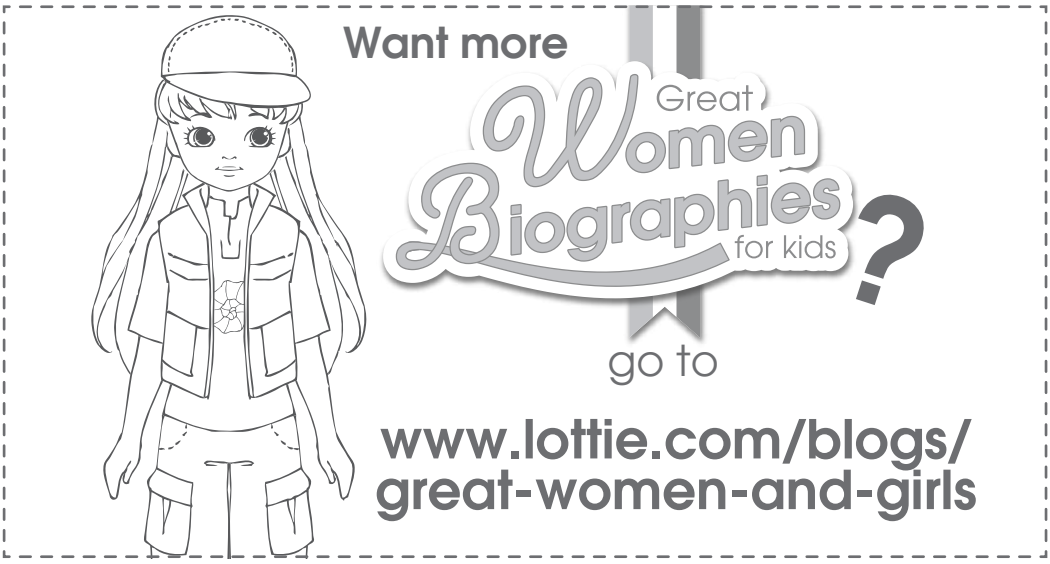
Later life

Mary stopped working when she became ill and it was too hard for her to do things.She died of breast cancer in 1847 at the age of 47.

Henry De La Beche, who was by then the President of the Geological Society, wrote a eulogy (expression of praise) for her after her death. This was the first one given for a woman, as usually they were only written for members of the society, which didn't let women join until many years later.

Mary's fossil hunting work was important. Her work supported the idea that there had been an `age of reptiles'.

The Mary Anning Museum has been built in the space where her house used to be.



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