

SYLVIA LOCKYER: MARY ANNING

Mary Anning (21 May 1799 – 9 March 1847) was an English [fossil collector](#), [dealer](#), and [palaeontologist](#) who became known around the world for finds she made in [Jurassic](#) marine [fossil](#) beds in the cliffs along the [English Channel](#) at [Lyme Regis](#). Anning's findings contributed to changes in scientific thinking about [prehistoric life](#) and the [history of the Earth](#).

Anning searched for fossils in the area's [Blue Lias](#) and [Charmouth Mudstone](#) cliffs, particularly during the winter months when landslides exposed new fossils that had to be collected quickly before they were lost to the sea. Her discoveries included the first correctly identified [ichthyosaur](#) skeleton; the first two nearly complete [plesiosaur](#) skeletons; the first [pterosaur](#) skeleton located outside Germany; and fish fossils. Her observations played a key role in the discovery that [coprolites](#), known as [bezoar](#) stones at the time, were fossilised [faeces](#), and she also discovered that [belemnite](#) fossils contained fossilised [ink sacs](#) like those of modern [cephalopods](#).

On 19 August 1800, when Anning was 15 months old, an event occurred that became part of local lore. She was being held by a neighbour, Elizabeth Haskings, who was standing with two other women under an elm tree watching an equestrian show being put on by a travelling company of horsemen, when lightning struck the tree – killing all three women below.^[9] Onlookers rushed the infant home where she was revived in a bath of hot water.^[8] A local doctor declared her survival miraculous. Anning's family said she had been a sickly baby before the event but afterwards she seemed to blossom. For years afterward members of her community would attribute the child's curiosity, intelligence and lively personality to the incident.^[10]

The first well-known find was in 1811, when Mary Anning was 12; her brother Joseph dug up a 4-foot [ichthyosaur](#) skull, and a few months later Anning herself found the rest of the skeleton.

In 1826, at the age of 27, Anning managed to save enough money to purchase a home with a glass store-front window for her shop, *Anning's Fossil Depot*. Many geologists and fossil collectors from Europe and America visited her at Lyme, including the geologist [George William Featherstonhaugh](#), who called Anning a "very clever funny Creature."^[28] He purchased fossils from Anning for the newly opened [New York Lyceum of Natural History](#) in 1827. King [Frederick Augustus II of Saxony](#) visited her shop in 1844 and purchased an ichthyosaur skeleton for his extensive natural history collection.

As a [Dissenter](#) and a woman, Anning was not able to fully participate in the [scientific community](#) of 19th-century Britain, who were mostly [Anglican gentlemen](#), and she struggled financially for much of her life. As a woman, she was not eligible to join the [Geological Society of London](#) and she did not always receive full credit for her scientific contributions. **English Dissenters** or **English Separatists** were [Protestant Christians](#) who separated from the [Church of England](#) in the 17th and 18th centuries.^[1]

*[A [dissenter](#) (from the Latin *dissentire*, "to disagree") is one who disagrees in opinion, belief and other matters. English Dissenters [opposed state interference in religious matters](#), and founded their own churches, [educational establishments](#)^[2] and communities]*

As a woman, Anning was treated as an outsider to the scientific community. At the time in Britain women were not allowed to vote, hold public office, or attend university. The newly formed, but increasingly influential [Geological Society of London](#) did not allow women to become members, or even to attend meetings as guests.^[34]

Although Anning knew more about fossils and geology than many of the wealthy fossilists to whom she sold, it was always the gentlemen geologists who published the scientific descriptions of the specimens she found, often neglecting to mention Anning's name. She became resentful of this.

Along with purchasing specimens, many geologists visited Anning to collect fossils or discuss anatomy and classification.

Major Discoveries :

Ichthyosaurs, *Plesiosaurus* Fossil fish, pterosaur Invertebrates and trace fossils

Anning's discoveries became key pieces of evidence for [extinction](#).

Another book entitled Remarkable Creatures by Tracy Chevalier – fictional but based on Mary and her family.

Recent film starring Kate Winslet