

Manchester Geological Association

Saturday 14th January 2012 – The Fossil Hunters

Many of the fossil collections in British Museums were originally collected by enthusiastic fossil hunters. Darwin sent specimens of the giant ground sloth and giant armadillo that he had unearthed in the Pampas back to England; the Natural History Museum still has the invertebrate specimens that he collected in the Falkland Isles. Nearer home Manchester Museum has the mammal bones that Boyd Dawkins dug from the caves of Derbyshire. Some of the enthusiasts who built important collections were amateurs with no professional interest in geology. Today we will hear about some of these colourful characters.

13.30 – 14.30 The Work of Fossil Monster Hunters Mary Anning of Lyme Regis and Thomas Hawkins of Street
Professor Hugh Torrens, University of Keele

14.30 – 15.30 Fossil Collecting and Collectors in Scotland; 1826 to the present
Bob Davidson, Honorary Research Fellow, University of Aberdeen

15.30 – 16.00 Coffee Break

16.00 – 17.00 James Frederick Jackson (1894-1966): boy genius and extraordinary geologist
Dr Cindy Howells, National Museum of Wales

The Work of Fossil Monster Hunters Mary Anning of Lyme Regis and Thomas Hawkins of Street

Professor Hugh Torrens, University of Keele

Before 1800 fossils were mere curiosities. The scientific study of the earliest "fossil monsters" from England started with the Lyme Regis discoveries of the extraordinary Mary Anning (1799-1847). She there found the once-swimming ichthyosaurs and plesiosaurs, named between 1814 and 1824, thereby fascinating the nascent science of palaeontology.

This lecture recalls these exciting times and the role, from the 1830s to 1847, of another nearby fossil reptile hunter, the very different Thomas Hawkins (1810-1889), "eccentric", litigant, bad poet, and Street's own 'neighbour from hell', who had now also invaded Anning territory. The 1840s were to bring complex, and previously unrecorded, crises to both of them, and to Axminster-born William Buckland, Oxford's expert on such matters. These will also be explored.

Fossil Collecting and Collectors in Scotland; 1826 to the present

Bob Davidson, Honorary Research Fellow, University of Aberdeen

Scotland, despite its small size, boasts a comprehensive range of internationally important fossil localities which shed light on very early events in the evolution of life on Earth. The true importance of these sites is a more recent revelation but collecting from these sites has a long tradition dating back to the early 19th century and in some cases, before.

At a very early date, collecting was pioneered by the wealthy, the learned, or those with time on their hands. Their interest was fossil fishes and this played out against a backdrop of burgeoning interest in natural history across Victorian society. A network of enthusiasts developed and at a time when Darwin was working, effectively against creationism, the interpretations that these early workers produced could be surprising to us today. The individual characters could be knowledgeable and eccentric, and parallels can continue to be drawn between these pioneers and their modern counterparts. The fish, plant and arthropod specimens they were unearthing, remain interesting and relevant and, in most cases, their collections are preserved for the nation and continue to be augmented by modern collectors. However the conclusions that we are now reaching on the evolutionary relationships of these long known fishes and in some cases, tetrapods might bewilder our Victorian predecessors.

Today the tradition started by our Victorian counterparts continues although methods may have changed a little. Where a Laird may have had the wherewithal to employ a gang of labourers, nowadays we hire earth moving equipment, but most collecting remains a laborious process, still fuelled by the joy of discovery. It appears therefore that the collecting instinct has not changed.

James Frederick Jackson (1894-1966): boy genius and extraordinary geologist
Dr. Cindy Howells, National Museum of Wales

James Frederick Jackson (1894-1966) came from humble origins in North Wales, yet this poorly educated boy wrote a geological guidebook to Hunstanton, Norfolk, at the age of 15, and was hailed as a Boy Genius. His passion for geology and collecting was to rule his life thereafter. Unable to obtain a permanent scientific job in any institution, he spent his life collecting rocks and fossils from around the UK, over 20,000 of which were sent to the National Museum of Wales for just the cost of his expenses.

He was a truly extraordinary gentleman whose breadth of knowledge, and skill in interpretation and identification far surpassed many professionals today. He had an eye for unusual finds and was the first to discover fossil insects in the Lower Jurassic Flatstone nodules of Charmouth, Dorset, as well as finding an articulated juvenile dinosaur from Lyme Regis. In the 1920s he published two papers on the stratigraphy of the Lower Jurassic Junction Bed of Dorset, and later formed a major stratigraphic collection of Dorset fossils.

Despite his constant ill-health and poverty he managed to amass collections of significant scientific importance, and described his years of collecting as '*a labour of love*'. This talk will illustrate his background, his life and his collecting, and will help to ensure that his work is never forgotten.