

Scientia

The legacy of Mary Anning, lifelong fossil hunter

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Mary Annings searched for fossils her entire life in order to support her family (Image: Painting of Annings by B. J. Donne in 1847 | Source: Geological Society/ NHMPL)

Mary Anning (1799-1847), the daughter of a carpenter, collected fossils her entire life and left her mark on the budding science of paleontology.

Mary was born into a family of fossil collectors. The cliffs around her home in Lyme Regis, on the southern shores of Great Britain, were rich in marine fossils of the Jurassic period (200 million to 140 million years ago). When her father, a cabinet-maker by trade, died in 1810, the family was left destitute. The Annings relied on charity and anything they could earn selling the fossils they excavated from the cliffs. By the time Mary was a teenager, her family had established a solid reputation as fossil hunters.

In 1817 the Annings met Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Birch, a wealthy fossil collector who was impressed with the family's scientific finds and moved by their poverty. He threw his support behind the Annings, attributing major discoveries in Lyme Regis to them and selling his own fossil collection to help support the family.

By this time, Mary had already taken charge of the family business and established herself as an accomplished anatomist. She is credited with finding the first specimen of Ichthyosaurus acknowledged by the London Geological Society when she was only 11 years old. She also

discovered the first nearly complete fossil of a Plesiosaurus, in 1823, as well as fossil fish and pterodactyls.

Mary had little formal education, but she was no mere collector of fossils. She was self-taught in anatomy, geology, paleontology, and scientific illustration. She possessed a keen scientific understanding of the fossils she discovered.

Most of Mary Anning's fossils were sold to museums and private collectors, where the majority were not credited to her, so it is impossible to know the true extent of her work. In a time when her gender and social status both worked against her reputation as a serious scientist, Mary Anning made a name for herself with discoveries that have contributed to our understanding of ancient life and extinction.